# The Millennium Blues

*James Gunn*

An [*e - reads* ] Book

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# Author Biography

James Gunn has worked as an editor of paperback reprints, as managing editor of K.U. alumni publications, as director of K.U. public relations, as a professor of English, and now is professor emeritus of English and director of the Center for the Study of Science Fiction. He won national awards for his work as an editor and a director of public relations. He was awarded the Byron Caldwell Smith Award in recognition of literary achievement and the Edward Grier Award for excellence in teaching, was president of the Science Fiction Writers of America for 1971-72 and president of the Science Fiction Research Association from 1980-82, was guest of honor at many regional SF conventions, including SFeracon in Zagreb, Yugoslavia, and Polcon, the Polish National SF convention, in Katowice; was presented the Pilgrim Award of SFRA in 1976, a special award from the 1976 World SF Convention for Alternate Worlds, a Science Fiction Achievement Award (Hugo) by the 1983 World SF Convention for Isaac Asimov: The Foundations of Science Fiction, and the Eaton Award in 1992 for lifetime achievement; was a K.U. Mellon Fellow in 1981 and 1984; and served from 1978-80 and 1985-present as chairman of the Campbell Award jury to select the best science-fiction novel of the year. He has lectured in Denmark, China, Iceland, Japan, Poland, Romania, Singapore, Sweden, Taiwan, Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union for the U.S. Information Agency.

# Postscript in the Form of a Preface

**December 31, 2000**

Midnight. This is the way the world ended.…

Barbara Shepherd was testing her faith that Judgment Day had arrived.

Murray Smith-Ng was clinging to his belief that catastrophes were predictable.

Paul Gentry was facing the possibility that his profitable warnings of impending catastrophe might come true.

Elois Hays, having acted out her own fears, was trying to cope with the impersonal terrors of final cataclysm.

William Landis was trying to remain the cool recorder of a world caught up in a paroxysm of suicidal guilt but at last had something to lose.

Sally Krebs was transmitting to viewers everywhere the last moments of the second millennium and recording its glitter and decadence for posterity.

If any.

They all were there, at the End-of-the-World Ball, on top of the second-tallest building in the world, at the final second of the final year of the second millennium.

This is how they get there.

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## *Millennium Blues*

# Chapter One

**January 1, 2000**
**William S. Landis**

The invitation was printed in red and framed in gold on his computer monitor:

THE TWENTY-FIRST CORPORATION
cordially invites William S. Landis
to attend a conference on the Twenty-First Century
December 28-3l, 2000
at the World Trade Center, New York City
concluding from 8 p.m. to midnight on New Millennia's Eve
with The-End-of-the-World Ball*
*A masquerade: Come dressed as your favorite catastrophe.

William S. Landis looked at the invitation with suspicion. The party was a ghoulish idea; even the conference had a taint of the macabre, coming as it did too late to help the world through this fateful year, perhaps too late even to speculate about the century ahead, the nature of whose early years, at least, had already been established by the beginning of the 1990s.

His first thought was to turn it down. That always was his first thought. In fact, above his computer he had put a sign he had found at a garage sale: Say No! But then he noticed that the computer message had a second page. The second page said that the Twenty-First Corporation would pay him an honorarium of $5,000 plus expenses to make a presentation at the conference, and to participate as a panelist in responses to two other presentations.

That was as much as he made off some of his books. Apparently, as he had heard, the Twenty-First Corporation was loaded with cash in preparation for the uncertainties of the century from which it had taken its name.

He could attend the conference and not stay for the ball. The invitation did not include a significant other, but then he had no significant other. If one measures life in terms of meaningful relationships, life had passed him by. He had been a mere spectator, observing the parade of existence, content to comment on the marvelous way the jugglers performed, the surprising shapes of the animals, and the curious passions of the marchers. Sometimes he wondered what he had missed, but most of the time, calculating the amount of misery compared to the quantity of bliss, he was satisfied with his choice. He had not experienced a great many things, but he knew a lot. He knew that it was Horace Walpole who had written, "The world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel," and he would rather think than feel.

He had even declined several New Year's Eve invitations. This year's New Year's Eve had been celebrated by hundreds of millions, and dreaded by hundreds of millions more, who had the mistaken idea that 1999 was the end of the millennium. As a consequence, the rest of the world was suffering from a giant hangover. The nearly worldwide sigh of relief when midnight passed without catastrophe would soon change into a gasp of dismay when bleary-eyed revelers turned on television or picked up their newspapers and were informed that the second millennium really ended on December 31, 2000. The hangover was just beginning; they would have to relive for an entire additional year the agonies of their past year's concerns. But Landis felt as fresh and clear-of-mind as he ever did.

If he decided to attend the conference, he could postpone his decision about the Ball, maybe even until the last moment. It was certain to be a lavish affair jammed with important people—or at least with

celebrities, people who had mastered the art of seeming important. And the end of the second millennium— the real end—deserved some kind of commemoration.

If the world managed to blunder its way through another year before it self-destructed.

But what would he say? He was writing a non-fiction book about the year 2000 and how people had survived it, staggering from crisis to crisis, until they toppled, almost in spite of themselves, into the third millennium.

Since the year 2000 was just beginning, the manuscript would be more of a journal in which he would enter material as the year progressed. In between he would work on other articles and books. But he could write an introduction now that would shape the rest of the entries.

If he were lucky, the book would be completed on New Year's Day, a year from today, and be ready to download into his publisher's computer. Copies could be made available almost instantly for the new computerbooks, a database of manuscripts to which people who were in a great hurry could subscribe. With more luck, the printed book might be available a couple of weeks later.

And, with still more luck, people might even be around to buy it.

Some of the people he had heard on talk radio last night would have said, "What's the use of working as if it matters when the world is going to end?" But that was no way to live. He had to continue as if the world were not going to end, and if it ended, what did it matter? He would have spent his last year feeling good about himself. And if it didn't end, he was a book ahead.

He thought he would call it*The End of the World?* Or*What Rough Beast?* Or maybe just*Catastrophe!* Maybe he would see if he could find some magazine to publish the journal entries month by month.

But what he needed for the conference and his book was a governing idea, something to organize his material, like a piece of junk around which a reef forms by accreting coral. He didn't push that image too far; the polyps had to die to make the reef grow. The only clue he had now was a feeling. That feeling was fear. He could smell it wherever he went. And when people realized that the end of the millennium was still ahead, it would surge back stronger than ever.

People were afraid. That's what talk radio was all about— fear and powerlessness and hatred and envy and paranoia. But it all boiled down to fear. He was afraid, too, and he didn't know what he was afraid of. Maybe it was fear of the end of the world. Everybody had their own end-of-the-world nightmare. Could the Twenty-First Corporation be onto something? Everybody had a favorite catastrophe, some particular way they were afraid the world would end, and to dress up in that fashion at the end of the millennium might be a way to face those fears, even to face them down.

But that was not his fear. The end of the world would find him watching curiously, not with terror like the UFO abductees. In the unlikely even that UFOs abducted him, he would ask them where they came from and what they were doing in this backwoods community of the universe, and why they never revealed themselves to astronomers or physiologists or other scientists, or political leaders who could organize exchanges of information that could be of mutual benefit, or even simply curious people like himself.

He could face the end of the world, like his own end, with regret but without dread. But he could use the smell of fear, the concept that everyone had a different version of catastrophe, a favorite fear they nursed in the dark, silent moments of the night, for his first chapter and the search for the focus of his own fear as an organizing principle. Maybe before the year was over he would discover what it was.

He wasn't sure, however, that he wanted to spend the last days of the millennium with strangers at a conference.

The new year had started like any other day. He had a solitary breakfast with his newspaper, studying the world parade. As he had expected, the front page was filled with reports of celebrations and accidents, and an ominous reminder that the millennial year was not over but was just beginning.

A story had announced a new dietary discovery that was more healthful than the last one. He ate healthfully now. Many people did, even those who thought Judgment Day was at hand and those who thought the world was bent on self-destruction before the year was out. But he had remembered when he was a child: His mother had cooked him a hearty breakfast, in the old kitchen with the linoleum that curled at the corners and the oak table with the placemats that looked like woven straw but were really plastic. Then he had eaten bacon and scrambled eggs and toast, and he had never felt the nasty cholesterols crawling through his veins.

When you were eight, your body was indestructible, your parents were immortal, and the world was a fairyland that went on forever, waiting to be explored. When you were fifty, your body gave you constant reminders of its fragility, your parents were old, and the world was gritty, cold, and circumscribed.

Last night as he listened to the radio, gathering material for his book, a man had called in to say, "I still lay awake thinking that a nuclear bomb might go off."

The host had replied, "How about the rest of you out there? On the final night of the twentieth century, do you worry about things you can't do anything about."

A woman had replied. "You can't just decide what to worry about.…"

And the original worrier had called back to say. "I keep thinking 'the missiles may be launched already.' We would never know. At this very moment they may explode nearby, and everything will be over. Or the next moment, or the next."

And so it had gone throughout the night until midnight, when he had switched to the wild celebration on the television screen, something between a riot and a massacre, with fireworks in the sky that could have been missiles, explosions in the streets that could have been automatic weapons, and masses of people pressed together, caught up in end-of-the-world emotions, desperate couplings, and sky-searching terror. And then, at last, the celebration had ended, the celebration that seemed more like Sodom and Gomorrah just before God's wrath, and the world had survived for another year.

The world was divided, Landis had thought, between pessimists and optimists, those who believed that the universe's dice were loaded and those who thought that chance would just as soon throw sevens and elevens as twos or threes or twelves. The pessimists worried about a million things that never happened— airplane accidents, fatal illnesses, robbers, doors unlocked, stoves not turned off, water left running. Pessimists were the natural custodians of all the might bes and might have beens, all those alternate universes where potential events really happened or real events happened otherwise.

Maybe it balanced out: the misfortunes that happened weighed against the agonies wasted on those that didn't, as if nemesis anticipated lost its power to destroy if not to injure. He understood apprehension; against his will, his mind drew up scenarios in which some current enterprise or relationship turned out badly. Even his dreaming self never let his fantasies achieve fulfillment, as if even asleep the writer was at work creating artistic difficulties. But, on the most part, he belonged to the optimists; he felt that there would be time enough to suffer when catastrophe really struck. It was not a matter of who was right, whether the universe was malign or benign or, as he suspected, indifferent. It was all a matter of temperament. Some people were worriers and some people were not, and basic temperament never

changed. People were born that way. Both kinds looked at the same world, the same set of facts, and came up with opposite conclusions about what was going to happen, about what it all meant.

The man who said on radio that he knew it was going to happen, the bombs were going to fall eventually, reminded him of the time he had tried to talk a girl—what was her name? April. How could he forget?—into bed with him. He had been eighteen and still a virgin, a fact that he had never revealed to April and lied about to his friends. "It's going to happen someday— maybe someday soon. Why not now? We both want to."

She had been unmoved. "It doesn't have to happen. Ever. I might die an old maid." And he had been unable to persuade her. Of course it hadn't been words she wanted. And of course she had done it within the year with an older fellow from college, and she had gotten pregnant and had to have an abortion. Or so he had heard.

He had wanted to call in to the radio show and say that it didn't have to happen. Nuclear war made no sense to anyone. As a matter of fact, the presence of the missiles that the man feared might have kept the world from blundering into World War III. And the break-up of the Soviet Union had reduced that menace almost to nothing.

But he had known the reply. "That simply left nuclear missiles in the hands of lots of smaller countries and terrorists. We'll use it. We've never yet had a weapon we haven't used."

That was one of his problems. He could see both sides of every issue. That made him an effective writer but a poor advocate. And, in any case, the program didn't welcome common sense; it thrived on passion and controversy, and it welcomed conspiracy theorists.

The conspiracy theorists had called in, as well, with their talk of black helicopters and suitcase nuclear bombs floating around the world and government agencies organizing campaigns of repression to legalize immorality and deprive people of their constitutional rights to defend themselves with cop-killing bullets and machine guns. Sure, you could make a case for conspiracy. As a writer he knew that you could make a convincing case for anything. But that didn't mean you*believed* your own fantasies.

At his computer by nine, Landis had delayed the pain of getting back to his new book by checking the mail. With any luck he would have an interesting letter or two that would demand an answer, and with even better fortune he could involve himself in responses that would extend until lunch and he would not have to suffer until one or so, and perhaps he could get himself interested in one of the bowl games and not have to work at all that day.

Of course it was New Year's Day, and he hadn't really had to work. Most men and women didn't work on January 1, but he was not, he had thought, like most men and women. Most men and women had little in their work to engage their attention, their selves, their souls, while he, William S. Landis, was a writer. He chose what he wanted to work on, and he worked only on what engaged him. If only, he had thought ruefully, it wasn't such bloody hard work and it wasn't so easy to put off.

Complaining always made him feel guilty. Even in the privacy of his own thoughts, it sounded like whining. After all, a person who could make his living at his computer, thinking his own thoughts, working at his own pace, earning as much or as little as he wished, should never complain. Anyway, as he often told aspiring writers, a writer worked sitting down, in old clothes, and at home. Working at home, of course, had its disadvantages; people always thought you were free for conversation, running errands, or recreation. By now, however, he had convinced most of the world that his hours at the computer were sacred.

Nevertheless, he preferred almost anything to the actual composition of text, particularly novels.

Non-fiction was not so bad. At least non-fiction had a subject and material; one could do research; one could organize and reorganize and find the best way of describing or explaining something, and that was enjoyable. The hard work was creating something out of nothing, turning the inside of his head into interesting characters doing and saying significant things in meaningful combinations.

And to the cynic who told him he didn't have to do it, Landis would have said, "But when I'm not doing it, I don't feel as if I'm justifying my existence. I don't feel like me. I feel most like myself when I am writing, even though the process itself is painful. I've talked to other writers, and they all say the same thing: We don't enjoy writing, but we enjoy having written. And I can't feel like myself and enjoy having written unless I sit at this computer for six to eight hours a day."

Unless he made himself sit there he would do no work. He didn't always work when he sat there, but unless he sat there the possibility of work did not exist. He would put it off as long as he could, and then he would reluctantly turn to the task at hand. Once it began it wasn't so bad.

Other writers had other answers. Some got up early in the morning, when the world was quiet and there was nothing to do but write, and they would finish their day's work by mid-morning and have the rest of the day to themselves. But he was not good in the morning. He needed time to wake up and get his blood flowing again. He needed breakfast and coffee and the morning news. Or at least he thought he did, and it worked. A writer, even one as otherwise rational as he believed himself to be, performed a kind of magic and nursed a superstitious dread of the possibility that changing the circumstances of the magic might make it impossible to perform.

Other writers worked late at night, while the rest of the world was asleep, but he was spent and dull after five in the afternoon. Of course, he might not be spent and dull if he had not used himself up during the daylight hours, but he thought he would be. Some writers set themselves goals in terms of production: four pages or even two pages, and maybe that would work for him, but he couldn't bring himself to quit when the writing was going well and he didn't think the system would work, psychologically, if he didn't.

His was a poor method but it was all he had.

After his procrastination, the only mail in his computer mailbox had been an invitation from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration to be a member of a committee to study the affects of religious fundamentalism on the space program. He would get no salary, but his expenses would be paid, and he would receive a per diem allowance of three hundred dollars while attending meetings in Washington or elsewhere.

Landis had looked up at the sign above his computer. He didn't like committees. They were frustrating, boring, and useless. They were set up to relieve pressures for action or to diffuse blame for unpopular decisions already reached. He had served on more than his share, and he knew that knowledgeable administrators determined the results of committees by the kinds of people they appointed to them.

On the other hand, the subject had interested him. It had fitted into the book he was writing. Besides, this had been the first indication that the Federal government thought of him as some kind of expert. That was heady stuff for a man who lived by his wits. He had recognized the flattery and his response to it at the same time that he couldn't resist the feelings.

Didn't Heinlein have a science-fiction story about that kind of thing? He had looked it up. No, Heinlein had a series of stories that dealt with the rise of religious fanaticism after the year 2000, but it was Asimov's story "Trends," published in 1940, that described religious opposition to spaceflight. He would have to read it, mention it in a committee meeting, maybe look up other stories that dealt with similar issues. They would make good conversation points during dull sessions, and useful interpolations into an

otherwise deadly committee report, and perhaps even offer insights into the problem at hand.

Besides, maybe he could wangle a trip into space out of his NASA contacts. He had dashed off a quick acceptance before he could think better of it and called up his file labeled "Catastrophe," although his word-processing program recognized only the first eight letters. An hour later he began to write, slowly at first, and then, as his ideas began to flow, with increasing speed until his fingers jigged across the keyboard as if each one were a worker bent on contributing its share to the output of the other nine. The work went well, and by noon, when he quit for lunch, the computer told him he was on page nine.

From a bachelor uncle, he had learned the joys of preparing a big pot of beef stew that he let simmer on the stove for hours and then put away in the refrigerator to draw upon at times when he didn't want to go out. He had warmed up a bowl in the microwave and thought about what he had missed in the pursuit of his own intellectual pleasures: the intimacy, the sharing of one's life with another person, the joys of raising children with all their developing awarenesses and needs.

He had missed all that. There had been a few women in his life with whom he had been close, but never close enough to want to share a life with one of them—or they had convinced him, by their behavior, that they would not welcome intimacy. Perhaps they thought he was too much attached to his books or his work. He could imagine their mothers telling them, "Never get involved with a writer." Or maybe, like April, they simply wanted someone who acted instead of talked. Sometimes he felt a hollowness in the center of his life, wondering about what might have been; then he immersed himself in his work. He had traded a more complete life for the books he had written and, generally, he was satisfied to be doing what he was doing. He had been searching for something when he was growing up and now, he thought, he had found it. He would not give it up, not for thirty years more of living, and he wouldn't lose it for a woman.

That was love, he had thought: the loss of self, the obsession with someone else, the feeling that one was incomplete without the other, that life was only existing unless one was with the other. He understood the attractions of the condition and the pleasures of its strong emotions at the same time that he preferred his own state of cool self-knowledge.

He wondered whether what he had experienced wasn't life itself, the way it was supposed to be, whether the natural progression of human existence was not a struggle for identity, to find what one was and then express it through what one did, a struggle that was forgotten as the need of the genes to reproduce themselves turned young bodies into yearning glands. No, that was wrong: It was all a part of life—the growing up, the pairing off, the reproduction, and then, if people were lucky, the chance to discover and express their unique selves.

That hadn't been true for most of human history. After reproduction came death, as to the mate of the black widow spider. "Reproduce and die," said the genes. "Get out of the way so that evolution can proceed." But then the development of intelligence produced an alternative to nature's way: social evolution, intellectual evolution. People could survive their reproductive deaths and discover what else they were good for. He had just skipped the first part.

If the genes could think, imagine their surprise! These creatures that they created, that they commanded, were good for something besides reproducing genes. What they were good for, apparently by accident, was discovering answers, thinking, creating. What is life for? these creatures began to ask, and answered by giving it meaning through the creation of something other than bodies that carried and transmitted in their turn old and new genetic combinations.

Although most of the world did not believe it, there was life after sex. Not that there was anything wrong with sex—or love, which was the mythology that romantic poets created to pretty up the reproductive

instinct. Like all significant inventions, the myth became reality and guided human affairs by influencing the way people thought about it. Laws, on the other hand, remained realistic. They were all concerned with who controlled the food supply and who could reproduce with whom.

Everything has meaning, he thought, if you looked for it, and every part of life has its place. Youth was no better than middle-age, and middle-age no better than old age. One lives through it, one survives if one is lucky, and does that kind of thing for which that stage of life and development is appropriate. There was no more use in looking back with regret than in looking ahead with apprehension.

The point of life was to find what you were good at and, if you were lucky, to be able to do it, and if you were very lucky to be rewarded for it. He was lucky, and he didn't want to change things.

When he had returned to his computer, the invitation from the Twenty-First Corporation glowed at him. "Say no," he thought, and then he noticed that there were more pages, and those pages contained a list of people invited. It read like a who's who of the financial, political, scientific, and intellectual community, including the name of environmentalist Paul Gentry, whom he had long wanted to meet. Indeed, though the knew most of the names, he had never met anyone on the list. Quickly, before he changed his mind, he typed out a short acceptance and dispatched it to the appropriate address.

With that decision behind him he got back to his book with renewed energy and by the time five o'clock had arrived, he had completed twelve good pages and hadn't watched a single bowl game. That was a first. He rewarded himself with a martini and settled down to watch the end of the Rose Bowl. Pretty soon he found himself caring who won, as if it really mattered and the world might not end before the next one rolled around.

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# Chapter Two

**February 15, 2000**
**Paul Gentry**

Paul Gentry had frightened his audience almost to the point of action. Not quite—even Gentry, with all his skills and Jeremiads, could not work miracles—but the students and academics who made up the group before him in the auditorium stood, applauding, when he finished.

Even more important for his immediate future, he had frightened the nubile blonde in the second row. He liked to select a member of the audience and address his Cassandra-like prophecies to her. It was almost always a "her" and a beautiful one at that, and if he frightened her enough she often fell into his arms at the end of the evening, as if she could ease her fears by embracing the source of them.

But now, over the heads of the group that surrounded him, he could see the promise of the evening disappearing up the aisle that led into the night. It promised to be a night as bleak as the nuclear winter he had described.

Gentry had looked out at the audience of five hundred people that filled every seat in the auditorium. Most of them had been students, stuffed with youth and yearning fluids that stretched their skins across their flesh. Here and there had appeared the older faces and figures of faculty members, like blemishes on the greater body of the audience. Life had thinned their hair and stolen some of its color; character had shaped their faces, and choice, not fashion, clothed them. But Gentry preferred the stuffed ones, particularly the girls. Character was overrated.

"The world is going to end," he had said, his dark eyes narrowed under their black eyebrows and his face

shadowed by gloom. "Perhaps today. Perhaps tomorrow. Probably this year, but if not this year, certainly within the lifetimes of most of us."

They paid him for this. His fee was ten thousand dollars plus expenses. At that rate, the five hundred people in the audience had paid twenty dollars each for the privilege of being depressed about the future. Of course, *they* hadn't paid him. If his audience had been compelled to pay for his performance individually, as if they were buying tickets to a Broadway play or a rock concert, few of them would be there. No, a generous administration had supplied the funds and a committee had selected him, not counting the cost per person.

Too crass. Calculating the cost-benefit ratio of an experience was business for accountants. A liberal education cannot be totted up like a balance sheet. He had heard those arguments often enough. When he had asked the question directly, in the blunt and practiced drawl that enabled him to say outrageous things because of his reputation as a public gadfly, the sponsors had frowned and replied that if knowledge and the arts had to be priced in the marketplace civilization would not long endure.

The barbarians were inside the gates. He was a realist about that as well as other things. He knew what he was, and he knew that the world was going to end because people were unwilling to count the costs of their desires and their beliefs. Meanwhile, if they wanted to pay him twenty dollars a head to point this out to them, he would not turn it down. He would give them good measure, heaping ashes upon their heads without stint and weaving their shirts from the scratchiest hair he could find.

"I could raise the specter of cosmic doom," he had said. "I am called a Jeremiah, and I could point out our fragile grip upon this privileged fragment of matter we call Earth. We think we are powerful, but in the face of the great and largely unsuspected forces that lurk in the great darkness where our mightiest telescopes cannot hope to penetrate we are as helpless as the dodo bird and the dinosaurs."

He always liked to start with the insignificance of the human species in the universe. He had told them about distant stars and the tremendous power they controlled—most of the time. Sometimes that power became too great to contain and then it was all released in an explosion sufficient to shatter space itself.

He had told them about black holes that might lurk unseen and unseeable at the hearts of galaxies, even their own, and how they might someday pull the sun and its planets into its insatiable and irresistible maw. And how the center of the galaxy might be exploding, and that unimaginable release of energy might be approaching indetectably at the speed of light, indeed, might reach them at any moment.

He had told them about the miniature black holes that had been wandering through space since the explosion of the original monobloc, that might be oscillating at the heart of the sun or of the planets, or that might strike any spot on earth and destroy it utterly as scientists speculate might have happened in 1908 in Tunguska, Siberia. Or, if not a black hole, a sizable meteor or the head of a comet, which would do almost as much damage and before which the inhabitants of this small planet were equally helpless.

In fact, he had said, the evidence of the earth and its extinct species suggested that periodically most life on Earth had been extinguished in a collision with a comet. Sixty-five million years ago the dinosaurs and many other species died out suddenly. Perhaps every twenty-six million years a comet, disturbed in its distant orbit in the Oorts Cloud beyond Pluto by a dim companion star of the sun, called Nemesis, or by some as yet unknown phenomenon, plunged toward the sun and found the Earth in its way. The result: a cataclysmic bombardment of the Earth, a great cloud of smoke and debris that would shut out the sunlight and bring a winter that might last for years, and with it the end of many species. The human species could be one of them.

Then he had got to the sun and the possibilities that it might expand or contract or explode, or even

simply alter its output, up or down, by ten percent or so. Even that small a change would modify the conditions of human existence so greatly that civilization would collapse. By the time he had finished with cosmic catastrophe, his audience would be pushovers for any less cataclysmic scenario. Particularly the young women, custodians of the continuation of the species, whose confident grasp on the future would have been loosened. Some of them were always so breathless at the prospect of never fulfilling their biological destinies that they would clutch at the nearest source of strength. Many times that had been Gentry.

He had picked out a young woman in the second row with blonde hair and brown eyes and a sensual mouth. He imagined her lips trembling beneath his and then, emboldened, pressing his body there and there and there in the growing abandonment of passion.

"But the truth is," he had growled, looking directly at the blonde, "we probably won't go that way. We will die not because we are so helpless but because we are so powerful and so stupid. It used to be thought, before the latest theory about cometary collision, that the dinosaurs died off because they got too big for their brains. That may be a better description of the human species. And its fate.

"Some scientists speculate about the presence of aliens in the galaxy. Planet formation seems to be commonplace, if not automatic, and with so many billions of stars, some of them must have evolved intelligent species. Such scientists tend to be optimistic not only about the existence of alien creatures but about their intentions. Why should aliens be inimical? What can they gain by conquest? And yet, if they are wrong, and aliens arrive on Earth, as U.F.O. fanatics believe already has happened, the human species might be eradicated or enslaved.

"But we needn't fear such a fate, nor should aliens—like H. G. Wells's invading Martians, envious of our privileged piece of real estate in the solar system—waste their efforts in clearing us from this valuable soil. We will do the job for them."

Then he had told them about human folly. That was the part he liked the best, and the part they liked the best, too. They liked to be told what idiots they were. He sometimes wondered what disease of the will had infected contemporary Western culture so that its citizens were eager to assume humility and guilt. What once was the "me generation" had become the "mea culpa generation."

He had told them about the great tragedies brought upon human society by unrestrained human selfishness. He had told them about the perils of overpopulation. It was all very well, he had said, to "be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it," when the Earth was large and the numbers of people small. But when the Earth was small and the number of people large, unfettered fruitfulness was madness from which other madness flowed.

"But people as a whole will accept no limitation upon their right to unrestricted and unprotected fornication," he had said, staring right at the blonde. She did not flinch at the word. Instead she stared at his face as if trying to memorize his Lincolnesque features; that was always a good sign. "Nor will they accept any limitation upon their right to breed."

Certainly, here and there in the world, he had told them, people in certain countries practiced birth control and had stabilized their populations, but only by raising their levels of consumption so high that they impoverished the rest of the world, and the rest of the world had taken its revenge, naturally enough, by reproducing. Children were a form of social security in countries where there was no other. And although birth control always followed an increase in the standard of living, to increase the standard of living worldwide to the point where everyone would practice birth control in their own best interests would place unbearable pressure on other resources.

"We are doomed by our very numbers," he had said. "The United Nations Office of Population will announce late this year that the world's population has passed six billion, doubling in the past thirty-five years. If you think that six billion people is not too many, what about twelve billion by 2030? Twenty-four billion by 2055? Forty-eight billion before the end of the next century?"

No, he had told them, let us face reality: Malthus was right. Food supplies increase arithmetically, but population increases geometrically. For awhile, with the opening of new farmlands in the American and Canadian and Australian and Latin American frontiers, the invention of new methods of agriculture, including fertilizer and new varieties of grain, and the burgeoning production of the Industrial Revolution, Malthus had seemed refuted, but those two centuries were only temporary aberrations, and now reality was catching up. As Brian Aldiss said once, Nemesis was overtaking hubris.

The human species had doomed itself by its own reproductive instincts. Even with the best will in the world, if every wealthy country in the world shared half its national gross product with the underdeveloped nations in an effort to provide incentives for birth control, the juggernaut of population increase could not be stopped. It would crush everything in its path and would, in its turn, die and decay.

"Today the world has more people of child-producing years than ever before, and they will not refrain from producing children because we say so," he had said. "And the children they produce will produce more children, simply because there are more of them."

But that, of course, could not go on. The Earth might be able to sustain six billion people—barely. But not twelve billion. Malthus's correctives would come into play: famine, disease, and war. And one or two more that Malthus had never known about.

Certainly there would be famine. Already in many places in the world but particularly in northern Africa, famine had corrected population excesses—where massive relief efforts had not intervened—but only after land had been ruined by over- cultivation. Increasingly hunger would seem the normal human condition, and where people were hungry they would be driven to desperate remedies.

Hunger rendered people susceptible to disease. Germs and viruses found easy victims among weakened bodies, and then, having fed and grown strong, swept on to healthier countries. The world should expect new plagues, perhaps as deadly as smallpox to the Amerindians or the Spanish influenza of 1919 or the Black Death of the Middle Ages that destroyed half the population of Europe. Moreover, new genetic experiments might get out of the laboratory into the general population. A stray virus of fatal dimensions impossible to calculate was long overdue.

"As a matter of fact," Gentry had said, "some new viruses that have become epidemic in the past decade or two may well have originated in that fashion. So when disease-control laboratories announce some miracle cure for a new disease, we might well ask whether that disease, or another, did not also originate there."

Hunger also turned upon its neighbors. Hungry countries went to war. Wars reduced population. It used to be that such reductions were only temporary, since the basic necessity for population increase was a plentiful supply of fertile women, but contemporary wars do not spare civilians. Women would die, too. Perhaps the entire human species would die, if the scientists predicting a nuclear winter were correct.

The blonde in the second row licked her upper lip. She had a creamy, unblemished skin, not like Angel's, which he had no delight any more in unveiling or touching and only physiological pressures that he was unable to relieve in any other way drove him to embrace. And even that release had been denied him since Angel's recent poor health. He felt sorry for her, but he also had a healthy appreciation for his own needs. Gentry had imagined himself removing the blonde's clothing piece by piece and unveiling that

youthful skin.

It was true, he had pointed out, that the world had not yet resorted to all-out nuclear war, although it had come close. But in the coming year or years of starvation and madness, wars would be fought with all the weapons at hand.

Finally, awaiting humanity if it avoided the three fates that Malthus had predicted were the second unholy trinity: energy, pollution, and heat.

These were the lashes with which he had finally scourged the audience into submission and temporary—he had no illusions about permanent change in the human species—agreement with his social thesis. The easy energy sources were running low, and the high- technology sources were either inadequate, like geothermal, too dangerous, like nuclear fission, or too difficult, like nuclear fusion and space mirrors.

Energy was still available, to be sure, but the costs of availability were rising toward the criminal if not the suicidal. Pollution was rapidly rendering the biosphere unlivable, and although pollution could be controlled, the costs of control made a technological civilization possible only to the few. And heat, the ultimate pollution, could not be controlled. Civilization operated on machines that converted raw materials of one kind or another into energy; such processes produced waste heat, and waste heat accumulated, along with the carbon dioxide that was the byproduct of chemical combustion and trapped increasing amounts of the sun's heat. No way to stop it: Earth would turn increasingly hot and finally become unlivable.

The only way to rewrite that tragic scenario, he had concluded, was to change the way people lived and thought. No longer could we afford the luxury of governments that make concern about individual welfare their central organizing principle. That was merely institutionalized selfishness. We had to change to systems that encourage people to think of themselves as members of groups, that place the welfare of all above the welfare of any smaller number.

"And if you ask me: Am I recommending socialism?" he had said. "My answer is that of course I am. I am not the one urging this change upon you, however, but the unavoidable logic of catastrophe. We cannot afford, if we wish to survive, to continue to think ourselves as anything but the human species. We will all live—or, more likely, we will all die. We cannot survive as individuals.

"I say that we will all die because I do not believe in the basic rationality or even the basic good will of the human species. I do not believe that people can change. I do not believe that they will change, even under the threat of imminent destruction if they do not. I would be glad to be proved wrong."

He had finished: fifty minutes on the nose, like a well- trained academic. And the audience had approved its own evisceration. It was a simple group, in spite of its university setting, and it had responded to his oratory as uncritically as any groundlings. The faculty and students wore their hair shirts with pride and welcomed the ashes to their heads with melancholy joy.

The blonde in the second row sat, her breathing rapid, staring at him, while her neighbors rose and headed for the aisles. When she got up at last, he moved toward that side of the platform so that their paths would converge as he descended.

"Dr. Gentry," a woman's voice said, and a middle-aged woman with dyed black hair and too much makeup intercepted him. Her voice was breathless. "It was such a beautiful presentation. I don't know how you managed to cover so much—"

"Thank you—goodbye," he said, trying to move past her as he saw the blonde entering the aisle.

But the middle-aged woman had maneuvered her too-bony body in front of him. "I just love your books, Dr. Gentry." Her eyelashes were long and black and unmistakably false. They fluttered against her cheeks in a sickening imitation of youthful flirtatiousness. She was reaching into her large, leather purse and pulling out—not one but two, no, three of his books to autograph.

He looked despairingly at the back of the blonde moving smoothly up the aisle. The back looked even more appealing than the front.

By the time he had autographed the books, a seedy-looking professor in a tweed jacket was standing behind the middle-aged woman. He was holding a pipe by the bowl and pointing the stem at him. "What about the decline in the population growth rate in China?" he demanded. "I'm a geography professor and population growth is one of my specialties."

"It's only temporary," Gentry said heavily, "and partly a result of drastic measures that cannot be sustained."

"But twenty years ago, your book on the population explosion predicted that by this time we would be destroyed, and we're no closer to that than we ever were," the geography professor said.

"Are you in a hurry?" Gentry asked.

"I'm a physicist," said a tall, slender youngish man, "and you apparently are unaware of new breakthroughs in thermonuclear fusion—"

"I've been hearing about such breakthroughs for thirty years," Gentry said, "and we don't seem to be any closer to a practical application. It seems to me that there are fundamental obstacles." He rocked back on his heels. He had given up on the blonde.

"But that's what I said about—" began the geographer.

"But in the experimental tokomak at—" the physicist said at the same time.

"In any case," Gentry said. "My argument is not dependent on any one element. If I grant this gentleman his slowing of the population explosion and you your fusion generators, it will only postpone the inevitable by a few years. Population growth will not stop short of catastrophe, and more energy only will mean more waste heat. And meanwhile political tensions increase and although nuclear arsenals have dwindled, more nuclear weapons have fallen into the hands of terrorists and other irresponsible and desperate groups."

Another woman, this one a fat bleached blonde, spoke up from behind the geographer. "You convinced me, Dr. Gentry. But I wonder what you convinced me of. Are we supposed to just give up and die?"

"My business is to make you think," Gentry said, "not lead you by the hand. But if you had been listening at the end, you would understand that the only way to salvation is by social action."

An earnest, dark-haired young man had edged his way into the circle that now surrounded Gentry. "What kind of social action are you recommending? Revolution?"

"If necessary," Gentry said. The circle recoiled a few inches. These were the privileged few, and revolution would mean the end of their comfort. "It would be better if people would simply stop being selfish and agree to act for the greater good of the whole society, to reduce their standards of living to a level that this planet could sustain and that everybody could share, to reduce their numbers to a size that could coexist comfortably, and to give up notions of sovereignty and nationality. In other words, if people agreed to behave rationally."

"But what about freedom?" the dark young man asked.

"What about catastrophe?" Gentry responded.

"Isn't that communism?"

"I'm talking rational behavior. I'm not interested in labels. If you want to call communism rational, that's your choice."

"How are we going to reduce our standard of living?" the fat blonde asked.

"We can start in little ways. By reducing our dependence upon machines. Walking or riding a bicycle instead of starting up an automobile. Staying colder in the winter and hotter in the summer. Growing as much of our own food as we can. Eating less meat and more vegetable matter, which would be more healthful anyway. Stop using fertilizers and farm machinery. Go back to the land. Stop expecting other people to do things for us that we can do for ourselves—"

"In other words, live like our ancestors lived," said the geographer.

"Exactly," Gentry growled.

"A lower living standard means a lower survival rate," said the physicist. "More infant mortality. More people dying of disease."

"Exactly."

"If everyone is raising their own food and doing their own chores," the dark young man said, "that might be the end of philosophy and art and poetry."

"As in Aristotelian Athens or Shakespearean London."

"Dr. Gentry," an sandy-haired middle-aged man said, "we've arranged a reception in your honor, and perhaps this conversation could continue at my place."

Gentry thought about the blonde and felt bitter. "I don't go to receptions," he said.

"But—" The man seemed unable to find words to fit the situation. "There are guests—"

"That's not my problem."

"I understood—. There was correspondence."

"If I have to associate with the people who pay me," Gentry said heavily, "my fee would be twice as high." He enjoyed the look of shock on their faces, but he didn't show it. Nobody said what they meant anymore. If people spoke their minds, there would be less polite boredom, more real encounters.

"And now," he said, "if you will pardon me—"

They would pardon him, he knew, as he moved through them toward the aisle. A person who spoke bluntly was always forgiven, because he said what they all wanted to say. He did what they all wanted to do. And they would dress up his calculated rudeness as rugged honesty and tell stories to their friends about their encounter with the man Diogenes was looking for.

As he emerged from the auditorium, he heard a soft voice on his right. "Dr. Gentry," it began, "I just wanted to tell you— "

It was the nubile blonde. She had waited for him after all.

He took her hand and placed it on his arm. "I want to hear everything you have to say," he said. "But this is not a good place to talk. Come with me and we'll have a bit of dinner, a drink or two, and some good conversation."

In a world doomed to catastrophic destruction, which could not much longer avoid the precipice, which might, indeed, already be toppling, he had gotten lucky once again.

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# Chapter Three

**March 8, 2000**
**Elois Hays**

Elois Hays returned to the theater exactly on time. The building was dark and empty. Some places seem right without people—bedrooms and bathrooms, for instance, but others need the press of life or machinery's illusion of the vital process. Busy intersections are like that, department stores, restaurants, auditoriums, theaters.... Without people they seem oddly wrong, scenes not for murder but for horror.

She was used to getting back before the others. An hour for lunch meant an hour and a half for everybody else. But she was never late. She didn't want to keep anyone waiting. Josh would have said that it was her professionalism, and her psychiatrist, that it was her over-punitive superego. Why couldn't it simply be the right thing to do?

She wanted to do the right thing, and all the wrong things in her life had happened not because she willed them but because of accidents or miscalculations. She was always on time because she didn't want ever to be in the wrong; she didn't want the responsibility for things not working out; she didn't want anybody yelling at her. So even when she knew the others would not return on time, she was there.

She wandered down the left-hand aisle toward the stage feeling around her all the ghosts of audiences past. Their quiet was the hush of enthrallment as the magic of the stage captured them, enraptured them. They listened, they were involved, they were all the great audiences rolled into one in this place where magic was commonplace.

She had always been in love with the theater, ever since she had been a little girl. She had loved to dress up and become someone else. Her psychiatrist said that this was because she was unhappy with the person she was, but she thought it was because she was in love with magic. People didn't have to escape *from* something; they could escape *to* something. Escape could be a positive step.

Well, maybe there was something to the thought that she truly enjoyed losing herself in a part, thinking like that person, feeling like that person, becoming that person. When she played a strong woman like Elizabeth the Queen, Medea, or Hedda Gabler, she felt strong and confident, sure of herself as she wasn't in real life. And even when she played a weak woman like Ophelia or Camille, she felt as if the world made sense and that even her weakness had a place in it.

There is something grand about dying for love or because the world is out of joint, but there is nothing satisfying or redemptive in living without love because you are afraid to make another mistake, or failing at love because you don't know how to play the role.

She mounted the empty stage with its few bare sets and props to suggest the lounge of the mountain inn where the four doomed characters in *The North Wind* had come together to strut and fret their hour

before the new ice age ground them and their artifacts into drift to be puzzled over by some strange successor breed.

She pivoted upon the dusty floor. If the audience could see how it really was, perhaps the mood so essential to the magic would be destroyed. Dirt and grime, canvas and artifice, the paint applied too thick, the lines too deep, the costumes dirty and perhaps a bit ragged, the actors smelling of garlic or alcohol, or even of unwashed bodies. But then the magic began, the stage became a wonderland, and the actors became like gods, capable of commanding tears and laughter—yes, and love.

The opening nights were grand with all their uncertainties and fears of unremembered lines. Like dressing up for a costume ball. Everyone becoming someone else, falling into their parts, their lines coming like natural conversation, only better, not the way conversation is but the way it ought to be. And beyond the footlights, the audience falling silent before the voices from the stage, demanding attention, weaving spells.

She remembered moments when it had happened. Surely it was worthwhile to have lived, if only for this, to have felt the power of the act and the transmutation of lead into gold. She stood upon the stage and listened to the echoes of all the great lines spoken upon its boards.

Actors and audience, players and played-upon. Shakespeare had rung all the changes upon the resemblances of life to the stage, or the stage to life. That was what they were, weren't they? Sometimes players, sometimes played-upon, or always played upon with only an occasional illusion that one was a player, a manipulator rather than one manipulated, an actor rather than an audience.

But she liked the stage best, she thought, when it was like this—bare. As in *Our Town* . With only the suggestion of place in the midst of the frank admission of theater. Until the words of the Stage Manager begins to weave a spell, and the actors create their illusion, and the great magic begins again. And it is like being a child once more, dressing up, dreaming marvelous dreams.

She wandered off, stage left, looking for someone else in the gloom broken only by a stray beam of light from a distant bulb. Hearing sounds, she moved toward the dressing rooms, passing her own, coming to Susan's and finding the door barely ajar.

The sounds were familiar but puzzlingly alien as well.

Elois Hays had looked out the inn window through cold blue eyes that reflected the advancing glacier. "The long winter has come again," she had said, "and it will bury everything human and decent."

The Poet had looked up from the little table nearest the bar. "Human and decent," he had said bitterly, "there's an oxymoron for you."

"At least," Teddy had said, rummaging behind the bar for the absinthe, "it will bury us first, and we won't have to worry about the rest of the world."

Susan had been standing by the glass doors that opened onto the veranda. "Maybe the rest of you are willing to wait while that glacier grinds us into little pieces, but I think we should get out of here—travel south while there's still time."

"There's no escape," Elois had said. "The ice is going to cover the world."

"Besides," Teddy had said, "we've had a taste of the weather out there already. If we hadn't come across this place here in the foothills—"

"We'd be dead already," the Poet had said. "We are dead. We just haven't admitted it yet."

"Anyway," Teddy had said, holding up the bottle of absinthe in triumph, "we can go out in style. We'll hold an end-of-the- world party better than any wake."

"I'm not sorry for myself," Elois had said. "I've had my chance, and I didn't do much with it. But I feel sorry for all the people who didn't have that chance—born and unborn."

"'Some say the world will end in fire,'" the poet had quoted, "'some say in ice.'"

"Are those your lines?" Teddy had asked, pouring himself a big glass of absinthe.

"A far better poet than I," the poet had said. "His name was Frost. Isn't that irony for you?"

"I don't see how you can all just go on talking when any minute that glacier is going to lurch again and kill us all," Susan had said, looking pretty and helpless.

"It's just because that is going to happen," Elois had said. "There's nothing to do but talk."

"Drink!" Teddy said.

"Drink!" the Poet echoed.

"Have a drink, Susan," Elois had said. "A new ice age is beginning, and you may not have another chance for five thousand years."

"First act curtain," Josh's voice had said from the dark auditorium. "Let's have some lights."

The house lights had brightened. The actors had walked toward the front of the stage.

"It's coming together," Josh had said. "I'll have notes for all of you in the morning. In general, however, we need a little more life. Susan, more bubbling intensity, more desire to survive. Teddy, a bit more drunken charm. Poet, a bit more gravel. And, Elois—you've got it just about right. But I'd expect that of an old pro like you. You have any comments, George?"

George, his chins draped over his collar and his tie askew, was sitting beside Josh. "It's going great, people. Just great. But I've got a couple of words, in private, for Susan."

"Okay, let's take an hour for lunch," Josh said. "Be back by one-thirty, and we'll run through act two."

They had scattered, and Elois had made her way into the audience toward Josh. As she approached, he was getting to his feet. "Who are you trying to kid?" she had asked.

He had raised his eyebrows at her.

"This is a piece of shit, and you know it," she had said.

He had raised a finger to his lips and nodded toward the back of the theater. In the last row she had seen a figure that she recognized now as the playwright, Fred Hampdon. George had invited him to the apartment once, early in the negotiations, and Elois had considered him likable enough but a nonentity.

"He might as well know it, too," she had said. "Poet, indeed! And the cast. That Susan is only a willing body."

She had looked toward the front of the theater where her husband and Susan were disappearing backstage, his arm around her shoulder, his head bent close to hers.

"I think it's got a chance," Josh had said mildly. "Maybe it's not great literature, but it has a certain timeliness."

"A new ice age? Come on!"

"That's what some experts are saying. Anyway, it's just a way of dealing with approaching catastrophe. What's the line? Fire or ice? What does it matter?"

Elois had shivered. "It matters to me," she had said. "Sometimes I look out that window and think I really see the glacier approaching."

"Maybe that's your problem," Josh had said. "It makes too much sense to you. If you can just get that feeling into your performance—"

"You know me," she had said ironically. "'The old pro.…'"

"You know what I meant, darling. Purely a compliment."

Elois had shrugged and walked on up the aisle thinking about lunch: a salad, certainly, and a glass of wine. If she had the salad without dressing, maybe she could have another glass or even a bottle. She needed something to get her through the second act.

"Can I buy you lunch?" someone had said.

Elois had been drawn out of her thoughts into the presence of Hampdon.

"I couldn't help overhearing what you said to Josh," he had said with a boyish grin that Elois found unexpectedly appealing. "Maybe you can tell me what's wrong while there's still time to rewrite," he had said.

She had looked at him with eyes appraising and lips half- parted and said, "Why not?"

Hampdon had taken another swallow of his scotch. He had ordered veal parmesan with a side order of spaghetti, but he had hardly touched either one though he was on his third scotch. "Of course the glacier is just a metaphor," he had said, trying hard to convince her. "I mean, the possibility of an ice age is real enough, but the glacier really stands for a dozen different calamities that might overtake the human species."

Elois had dutifully finished the last bite of her dry salad. He had been talking almost continuously since they left the theater. Ordinarily she found that kind of self-absorption offensive, but, by comparison with those men who had talked about her and solicited her opinions, in Hampdon it seemed only a kind of ingenuous enthusiasm. "Mm-m-m," she had said.

He had needed no more encouragement than that. "I could have chosen the sun turning nova, say, but that would be over so quickly that there would be no time for dialogue. Pollution and overpopulation take too much time and seem too grim."

"Catastrophe ought to seem grim," she had murmured.

"Of course," he had gone on, unheeding. "But the characters have to be able to reveal a variety of responses. They can't all just lie down and die."

He had started the discussion innocently enough, asking why she didn't like the play, half turned toward her, half trotting along beside her as she spoke. And when he had dragged out of her the fact that she

thought the characters weren't real people but attitudes with names, stock responses without any other characteristics, he had admitted his inadequacies as a playwright and then launched into a discussion of his ideas.

"This is the year when everything changes," Hampdon had said. "Not only the year but the century, and not only the century but the millennium. After this everything will be different. And that's what *The North Wind* is all about. Change."

Elois had taken a sip of her white wine. It had been only her first glass, and she knew, now, as late as it was, she would not have time for another. Maybe she wouldn't need it. "But why couldn't it be change for the better?"

"Oh, it could," he had said enthusiastically. "I'm not one of your doomsayers. I really think things are getting better. But you can't make a play about that. And there is a widespread uneasiness about the possibility of catastrophe. Don't you ever think about that?"

"Yes," she said. "Sometimes I wake up in the night—"

"If you want to get heard, you have to give people what they want—or what they think they want—or what they're most afraid of. Get their attention, and then you can talk to them. That's what my old professor at Yale used to say. Was he surprised when I told him my play was going to be produced on Broadway by George Witherspoon and directed by Josh Nugent and that the part of Peggy would be played by Elois Hays herself!"

He had looked at her so proudly that she felt her heart turning mushy. She had recognized the feeling. She had felt it often enough before. How old was he? No more than thirty. And she was forty-two. But she had felt herself falling in love with this sorry excuse for a playwright, with this puppy of a man, and it would mean no end of complications.

"Well," she had said, steeling herself to be brutal, "the play will be a flop as it's written. The critics will savage it. Take it from me."

He had turned suddenly sober and silent. "But what about Witherspoon and Nugent? They liked it."

"They have their own reasons," she had said, seeing again her husband leaving the orchestra with his arm around Susan. "My husband needs a tax writeoff and Josh needs to get back into harness, no matter how."

"What can I do?" he had asked humbly.

It had almost broken her heart. She had drawn a deep breath and said, "Change the Poet. He's such a stock figure he's laughable. Maybe Saroyan could get away with it, but you're no Saroyan. Make him my husband. Make Teddy less of a lush. Have them both panting after Susan while my character looks on and then steps in at the last moment to bring them to their senses.

"Make Susan less of an ingenue and more of a real person. Make them all into real people, not standing around uttering stagy lines but acting and talking the way people would really act and talk in a situation like that. And don't make it a glacier. Real people would simply get out of the way. A blizzard maybe, maybe the blizzard of the century."

She had stopped for lack of breath, certain that she had destroyed whatever chances she had had with him and sure that it was the right thing to do but a bit wistful about it all the same.

But he had looked at her as if he had heard her for the first time. "You're right," he had said. "You sound

just like my professor. You're both right. I know it. I'll do it. But what are George and Josh going to do?"

She had looked at him. Maybe he wasn't such a fool after all. "They'll be surprised as hell," she had said. "They'll object at first to all the changes and the delay, but then they'll see the improvements and go along with them. They wouldn't mind having a better play. But don't tell them I suggested it. Tell them it was your idea."

"I will," he had said. "I will. I don't know how I can thank you."

"Keep me from having nightmares," she had said. And then, when his expression had asked for explanations, she had looked at her watch and said, "It's almost one thirty. Got to get back. Even to a second act that is under revision."

Hampdon had left her as they approached the lobby, in a hurry to get back to his apartment and his word processor. She had felt a kind of pleasure at that, a mixed feeling of power and the compliment he paid to her mind by accepting her suggestions, even though, she knew, he would soon forget that the changes had been her idea. She was used to that.

She should have been used, as well, to the reason for the strange sounds that awaited her backstage. She would have turned and gone back if she had deciphered them earlier, but by the time she had glanced through the gap left by the unlatched door it was too late.

Susan was bent back over the arm of a couch, naked to the waist, her skirt thrown back to reveal the startling white slimness of her thighs. George was in front of her, his hands holding her buttocks, his trousers and underpants in a comic heap around his ankles while he shoved himself into her again and again in an absurd parody of lovemaking. His fat bottom and flabby thighs jiggled ridiculously each time he thrust. His eyes were closed in rapture, but his breathing was harsh and gasping, not with passion but with the effort demanded of his out-of- condition body.

Elois wished she had a video camera. "If he could see himself," she found herself thinking, "he wouldn't be so pleased with his conquests."

Susan, she saw with fleeting satisfaction, was not caught up in the excitement her husband felt. Instead Susan's face was set in lines of discomfort and resignation. She was paying the price for her part in this poor excuse of a play.

And then Elois saw that Susan's eyes were open and turned toward her in an expression that could have been embarrassment or an appeal for understanding or even for help. But George did not see her, and Elois turned away.

Now she knew what it was like to face the coming ice. She would not divorce George, that she understood. She had known about his affairs for several years, and they had enjoyed no intimacy for even longer, once he had allowed himself to get fat beyond the fleshiness that he had allowed himself before their marriage. It was his innate grossness emerging, she had decided, and his lack of self control and concern about how she felt about him had turned her away.

His infidelities were only to be pitied. His pursuit of conquests without affection, lust without love, and, now she knew, sex bought with position, were only his frantic efforts to deny his mortality. But she would not admit to the world another failure. He was witty when he wanted to be, charming when he had to be, and an entertaining companion, full of stories of the theater, always. She would not divorce him, but she knew the deep winter of the soul when she thought of their life together for the coming years, and perhaps, although she pushed the thought away as quickly as it came to her, because she could never again make love without realizing it was the same gross, ridiculous act whose parody she had just

witnessed.

Well, she could play the part. She would play the part. The rehearsal was over. Let the play begin.

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# Chapter Four

**April 11, 2000**
**Sally Krebs**

The armored helicopter hovered above the battlefield like a clumsy valkyrie. Below, the sound from its ungainly blades made the soldiers jerk up their heads, even while the bullets whined among them. And then they looked down again, into random violence of lead and steel, reassured by the insignia they recognized as CNN.

Inside the helicopter the sound was muffled, but the occupants could feel the vibrations inside them like a second heartbeat. Sometimes Sally Krebs felt like screaming, if only to take her mind for a moment off the relentless thumping, but she didn't. Someone would be sure to mark it down to female fragility, and that weakness would damage the reputation she had worked so hard to build, and the cause of all women everywhere.

And the soldiers below, as ragged, ill-fed, and poorly armed as George Washington's more than two and a quarter centuries before—their sufferings were so much greater that she would have been ashamed to show her discomfort. They advanced and died by the thousands, taking and surrendering and retaking the same barren, pock-marked wasteland until nothing had any meaning any more except dying.

She took a deep breath and studied the battlefield. There was no shape to it, just the boys and the old men advancing raggedly toward more worthless desert. Here and there some were going the other way, retreating or simply turned around in the confusion, and in places officers were threatening them with pistols or here and there shooting those who kept moving in the wrong direction.

"Get the officers shooting their own men," Krebs said into her throat microphone.

The camera lenses swiveled underneath the helicopter, and a bullet pinged against the underside. Krebs flinched instinctively, and then forced her eyes back to the monitor. One of the officers was firing his pistol at their ship, in defiance of international convention and the orders of his own leaders. He was commanding the soldier near him to fire as well, and Krebs stared down at a dozen automatic rifle barrels raised toward her.

"Get that picture and let's get out of here," she said. "No use precipitating an incident." Too much paperwork, she thought. Her superiors wouldn't thank her for that, and even though they would back her in public, the cost and delays of the action would count against her record.

"Let's find the front, wherever it is, and get some defenders in our footage," she said. "Maybe some armor. The defenders still have some, I understand."

The helicopter tilted and swung as if fastened by an invisible wire to some child's finger high in the sky, and then slid off in the direction the soldiers were moving. Within a few moments, the bodies on the ground outnumbered those standing.

Beyond the field of bodies the positions of the other army were relatively untouched, though mortar and artillery shells landed occasionally in their midst. Their fixed machine guns and tank artillery were leveled

across the field, harvesting the attacking forces as if by some invisible machine. And yet the attackers continued to advance, and an experienced observer might have detected a certain uneasiness in the defensive positions, as if the inflicting of casualties had a psychological limit.

It could have been World War I below, Krebs thought, with its massed armies advancing into fixed positions, except for the helicopters and jets that occasionally still made their appearances above the battle, and the television eyes in the sky recording it all to enlighten, or enliven, the sets of avid viewers around the globe. The world had not changed much in eighty-five years.

And in the fact that this war had lasted, on and off, for twenty years—if one counted from the beginning of the Iraq-Iran war—and for more than fifty years if one counted from the beginning of the Arab-Israeli Wars. And it had dragged in the whole Muslim world, the Kuwaitis, the Saudi Arabians, the Syrians, the Lebanese, the Jordanians, the Palestinians, the Libyans, and, in the end, Turkey and Egypt, and Israel, when it was attacked. The fifty-year war had started for religious reasons, first as the Muslims against the Jews, and then, when the Israelis won every war, Shiites against Sunnis—and continued as a war about power. Or perhaps that was what it had always been about.

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent destruction of its military machine by the coalition forces had changed not only the balance of power but the nature of the battles themselves. Arab forces began to choose up sides against the strongest. Peace, such as it was in the midst of widespread terrorist attacks, had been brief. And when Israeli-Palestinian accords had been signed, old enemies began eyeing their neighbors uneasily, and small acts of violence or territorial encroachment, or changes in oil quotas, became magnified into causes. Tribalism, once stifled by nationalism and police power, re- emerged throughout the Middle East and Africa, and inevitably the entire Middle East exploded, while Europe looked the other way and the United States, disillusioned, brought all of its forces except the news agencies back to the North American continent and began pursuing a policy of energy conservation and alternative sources.

It would be a different world, Krebs thought, if women ran it. And then she thought about Golda Meir, who had presided over the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, and Margaret Thatcher, who had her jolly little war with Argentina. Maybe it was not the sex of the politicians, she thought, but their positions that determined their actions. Or maybe politics.

No matter. As a news gatherer Krebs knew that she had to make the same decisions a man in her position would have made. She had to do it or be replaced. And she had to do it, because it was her job and she was a professional. She had to get the pictures that showed the way things were, no matter how she felt about what they revealed.

"Over the hills to the south of the defensive positions," she said. "Isn't that an attacking detachment working its way toward the flank?"

"Yeah," said the pilot, and turned the helicopter in that direction.

But the defensive air power had seen the threat as well, and hurtled from the sky to strafe the detachment, while towering dust toward the west suggested that reserve tanks had begun rumbling toward the hills.

"Some jets are approaching from ten o'clock," the pilot said.

"Let's not get caught in the middle," Krebs said. "Kick in the afterburners and head for Cairo."

But before she could finish the sentence, an explosion rocked the helicopter and as Krebs was blacking out she felt the ship spin sickeningly out of control toward the desert floor below.

They had started their day in Beirut with some establishing shots of a ruined city: desolation broken here and there by the glistening stone and orange girders of new construction, like hopeful flowers springing through the ashes of winter. One of the newer buildings had been demolished in the early dawn by a light plane loaded with explosives that had kamikazied into it.

Maybe it had been something to see when it had happened, but now it was just another ruined building. The airplane debris was indistinguishable from the other rubble. They had taken shots of the building from several angles, some footage of militia rushing around in old trucks, cars, and jeeps, and other guerrilla forces firing at them, and a few sniper bullets had whined off their armor plating, but all the real action had been on the ground and a ground crew already was on the job.

Someday, Krebs had thought, they would let her have an assignment in a combat situation on the ground, and she would show them what she could do. That was where the glory and the advancement was. Why didn't they realize that women could handle it? Why didn't they realize that she could handle it?

"All right," she had said into her throat mike, "we've got more than anyone will ever use. Let's go find the front."

During the two-hour trip, one of the cameramen had moved back to sit beside her. He had nodded at the footage she was spot-checking. "Pretty good stuff, eh?"

"Good camerawork, Bob," she had said. "You can tell Fred I said so. You're both professionals." It was the best compliment she could pay the work of people who got paid for what they did. She thought he understood that. She hoped he thought she was a professional, too.

"It takes a good director," he had said. "Fred and I were saying, we'd rather work with you than anybody. We're going to get the shots, and you aren't going to get us killed."

"Thanks."

"Cigarette?" He had offered her an opened pack.

"No thanks," she had said. "Never use 'em."

"Stupid, I guess," he had said. "Lung-cancer rates keep going up. Heart attacks, too, I hear. But what the hell! The world may end this year."

"That's just superstition," Krebs had said.

"Maybe it is. Maybe it isn't. We won't know until it's too late. Stuff we've been shooting, though"—he had nodded at the monitor—"makes you wonder."

She had turned to look at him. He wasn't a bad-looking guy, even though he needed a shave and was getting bald. He was tall and had broad shoulders, and balding men sort of turned her on. "I'm never sure if all you cameramen look at what you shoot."

"Hey," he had said, "I'm human, too. I got feelings. You get a little deadened after awhile, just like doctors and undertakers, but we notice things. Staring through a viewfinder, of course, what you see is how good a shot it is. Only there's a place in the back of your head somewhere that sees what's going on and tells you about it later."

It had pleased her to learn that other people felt it, too. "I understand. But this war isn't that different. There've always been wars. Terrorism, too. How would you have liked to have lived when the Thugs were terrorizing India, killing people as part of their religion. I wonder if it wouldn't be better to die by a

bullet or a bomb, and maybe even better by an atomic bomb, than a spear through the belly or an arrow through the back. Maybe it's the mass slaughter or the impersonalization of death that makes it seem worse."

"I got some Indian blood in me," Bob had said, "and I can imagine fighting, and maybe dying, for your family or your home. Killing other people for it, too. It's killing without reason that's hard to understand. I think the Indians got a bad deal. Bad press, too. If CNN had been around, maybe they'd be remembered better."

"There've been plenty of other times," Krebs had said, "when life was even cheaper than it is today—the Middle Ages, for instance, or Rome when it was being sacked by the Visigoths and the Huns, China under most of its emperors, the Middle East when it was being ravaged by the Mongols, Mexico under the Aztecs—"

"Okay, okay," he had said, raising his hands in mock surrender. "You really know a lot of history. But I still wonder if maybe this year ain't different."

"Just because we assign numbers to the years and attribute greater significance to some numbers than to others," she had said, "doesn't mean that the universe pays any attention."

"What about predictions?"

"What about them?"

"Some people made some pretty accurate predictions about what was going to happen. Edgar Cayce. Nostradamus. Jean Dixon."

"All ambiguous or after the fact or phony," she had said firmly. "If they could really predict the future, they'd make themselves rich betting on horse races or buying and selling on Wall Street; they wouldn't die poor and persecuted, or have to make money by selling their predictions."

"I never thought of that," Bob had said. "But what about the Bible? It's full of predictions. Back then religion was more important than money."

"The Bible's just like a clouded crystal ball—you can see anything in it you want, including a prediction that contradicts any other prediction. It helps to understand why a prediction is made, the motives behind predicting a Second Coming or the Final Judgment. A guy named William Miller predicted the end of the world back in the mid-1800s, basing them on various readings of Scripture. When it didn't happen, his followers became the Seventh Day Adventists. A guy named Russell predicted the millennium for 1914, and when only World War II occurred, his followers became Jehovah's Witnesses."

"You really know a lot of stuff," Bob had said admiringly, putting a hand on her trousered knee. "I like that in a woman."

"Thanks," she had said, and removed his hand gently. She was used to fending off passes, however disguised, and Bob's had been one of the gentler kind. "There's the battlefield."

Krebs could not have been unconscious for more than a few seconds. When the blackness lifted, the helicopter was still swinging in the air and spinning like an elm pod in a spring breeze, and Krebs knew the ground could not be far below. An icy rage at the unfairness of it all stormed through her veins, and she struggled with her seatbelt until the buckle popped.

On the other side of the small cabin Bob was hanging from straps over his camera. Krebs knew there was no help there. A forward surge threw her back in her seat. She levered herself up and grabbed a

handhold high on the wall, and then another farther forward, fighting against the violent swings of the aircraft. Finally she reached the door to the pilot's compartment. Hanging to the handhold above, she got it open and saw the pilot slumped over the stick, while the cameraman and co-pilot beside him bled over the cracked window he leaned against.

Krebs dragged herself forward, and pulled on the pilot's shoulder, not caring at that moment whether he was alive or dead as long as she freed the stick. Pushing him aside with her left hand, she steadied the stick with her right, partly through instinct, partly through her observations when she had occupied the co-pilot's seat. The helicopter straightened out.

Only then was she aware of her muscle cramps and the sweat that covered her body. "Jerry!" she said. "Jerry!" But one look at the pilot's face told her that he was dead. A splinter of steel had entered his throat from the right and emerged from the left, severing his jugular as it passed, and his life had gushed out instantly. Now his eyes stared unseeing toward the windshield.

Krebs turned toward the co-pilot. "Fred!" Fred was unconscious but still alive. The blood on the window seemed to be coming from his right shoulder. She shifted hands on the stick to shake Fred with her right. "*Fred!*"

For several long moments she did not think he would respond, and then his eyes blinked and he said, "What?" His voice was slurred and his left hand came around to his right shoulder. He opened his hand and looked at the smear of dark red. "I'm hit," he said in amazement.

"Fred," Krebs said, "you've got to listen to me. Jerry is dead, and I can't fly this thing. You've got to take over."

"Sure," Fred said. "I'll take over." But he didn't move to take the stick. He kept looking at his left hand.

"Fred—" Krebs began, her voice and hand shaking.

"How's Bob?" Fred asked.

"I don't know, but if you just take over here, I'll go back to check.

"Sure," Fred said. This time his left hand came to the stick and settled on it.

For the first time in minutes, Krebs relaxed. All her muscles went limp at once. "Let's get to Cairo, as fast as we can, Fred, if we can make it," she got out. "After I check on Bob, I'll call and let Cairo know what's happened and tell them to have an ambulance waiting. Do you hear me, Fred?"

"I hear you now." He moved his left hand briefly to the panel to turn on the after-burners.

A surge of power pulled Krebs back, but she clung to Jerry's seat and levered herself forward so that she could adjust the dean man's seat belt to keep the body from falling onto the stick again. At least the explosion, whatever it was, hadn't damaged the working parts of the ship. She looked at Fred's eyes. They seemed clear. They were checking the electronic map, the directional guide, and the windshield in front. "If you feel yourself fading, give a yell," she said.

She crawled back to Bob, afraid to stand. From the purpling lump on his forehead, his head apparently had slammed forward onto the inside camera mounted in front of the left window. But he was breathing.

Krebs dragged herself back into her seat and began the long process of informing the Cairo office what had happened and what to expect when—and if—they landed. Afterwards, between trips to check on Fred and to put a temporary bandage on his right shoulder, in an attempt to bring some semblance of

normalcy back into her life, she began reviewing the day's taping.

The footage at Beirut was as inconsequential as it had seemed, and the battle scenes were not as dramatic as their eyes had viewed. They never were. But there were some usable shots, and one classic moment when the camera caught a youngster—he couldn't have been more than twelve—looking up at the helicopter just as a bullet hit him. It must have been an explosive bullet or a shell, because it nearly tore him in half.

Krebs averted her eyes. On top of everything else that had happened today, it was too much. But in the midst of her revulsion she knew, all the same, that it was Pulitzer material. That single frame summed it all up, the futility of war, the pointlessness of the dying. She also knew that if they hadn't been flying overhead, taking their pictures, the boy might not have died.

News crews did that. They didn't just report the news, they influenced it. It was the Heisenberg's uncertainty principle at work in the macroscopic world; the very act of observation changed what was observed. Nothing happened quite the same if it were being filmed for television. It was true. It was also unavoidable. Rational decisions demanded information. She could regret the boy's death, regret Jerry's death, regret all the events that her presence created, but she knew there was no other way, no matter what the know-nothings said. If the means were available, you couldn't willfully choose ignorance.

"Is that the one that got us?" a voice asked.

She looked over. Bob was conscious. He was rubbing his forehead, but his eyes were looking at the monitor.

"Bob," she said, feeling a surge of joyfulness not only that he was alive but that she was no longer alone. "Are you okay?"

"I think so. Those who live by the camera will die by the camera." He gestured at the equipment hanging at eye level in front of him and then, a bit weakly, at the monitor. "Is that what took us out?"

Krebs ran back the footage to the boy's death and then saw, beyond his mutilated body, the plumage of a ground-to-air missile moving toward the camera. "They really hate us," she said. "Maybe I would, too, if I were down there."

"You wouldn't be down there," Bob said. "Neither would I."

"We might, if it were our job. We're up here."

"Yeah," he said. "It's a crazy world. People used to talk about theaters of war; now it's war as theater."

"That's good, Bob. Can I use it?"

"Maybe I heard it somewhere."

"We almost didn't have to wait until the end of the year, Bob."

"Aw, I don't believe that stuff anyway."

She looked back at the monitor and reversed the tape to the boy's last look at life. She froze that frame.

"God," Bob said softly.

"All the other stuff they'll throw away, or file," Krebs said, "but this will be on every television set in the world before the day is over. That and the rocket trail toward the camera. Is it worth it? Jerry dead?

Fred wounded? The kid?"

"Not if you counted it up ahead of time. But you never know. You want to erase it?"

She didn't answer, but her finger was over the erase button. It was generous of him to make the offer: It was Pulitzer time for him, too. "You know what you said earlier? That you liked to work with me because I wouldn't get you killed. Well, I almost got you killed. I got Jerry killed."

"That was just talk," he said. "You know—man to woman talk. You're okay, though. It could have happened to anybody."

"You're okay, too." She felt warm toward him, almost sexually aroused by his presence and everything that had happened. Maybe that was what nearly being killed did to people. "Tell you what—if I get an assignment to cover the end of the world, I'll ask for you and Fred." She took a deep breath and removed her finger. That day, Jerry's death, the boy's death, should matter for something. Maybe it would move somebody else to find some other solution than war.

And there was the Pulitzer.

She wondered why she was crying.

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# Chapter Five

**May 5, 2000**
**Murray Smith-Ng**

Murray Smith-Ng looked around the smoke-filled student hang- out and then at the tables around which the members of his seminar were seated and wondered, not for the first time, why he had consented to join the group in their end-of-the-semester celebration.

Pitchers had come and gone like an extra-inning baseball game. Two tables had been pulled together to provide room for the eight of them; the one that Smith-Ng thought of as "the plodder" had gone home to his family after a single glass. Now the table tops were puddled with condensation and spilled beer in which soggy popcorn floated as reminders of the refilled baskets that had accompanied and reinforced the need for the pitchers. Sticky glasses registered various levels like bar room barometers. When they got below half empty, however, someone quickly filled them.

The students sat on their wire chairs conversing by twos or threes, or leaning forward across the table to listen to one of the professor's stories, drinking their beer until they could hold no more and then weaving their ways between crowded tables down dark corridors to find the odorous restrooms. Smith-Ng occasionally thought about getting up, saying his goodbyes, and going home, but inertia, and too much beer, kept him weighed down in his chair.

The Beer Cellar was dirty and cramped and old, but alumni would remember it as a place where, they would tell old friends, they had learned more about life and themselves than in any classroom. Above was an old cafe grandfathered into a prime location next to the campus when a master plan had been adopted by the city; beneath it, a basement had been converted into a beer hall by enlarging a doorway and installing a bar, tables, and chairs. On weekends students blocked the intersection outside by wandering between bars, and when the restrooms were busy, as they usually were, aroused the resentment of nearby residents by pissing and puking in their yards and bushes.

The Cellar was dark and noisy, but students milling, yelling, drinking, and rubbing against each other wove a protective cocoon against the dark responsibilities that lurked outside.

Of the group around the two tables, Murray Smith-Ng had consumed the most. He had poured beer down his throat a glass at a time and between drinks consumed handfuls of popcorn, and he hadn't visited the men's room once. His students regarded him with awe. He was becoming a legend. He showed no signs of drunkenness, no signs even of uneasiness of bladder, but his speech had become a bit less precise and its subject matter more personal.

"My mother was Chinese, you know," he confided in them, "and my father was a Jew. You wouldn't know that from his name. He took the name 'Smith' to avoid discrimination. As a young Army doctor, he was ordered into Nagasaki after World War II to help study the survivors of the second atomic bomb dropped on Japan."

"The second?" Calley asked. She had consumed less than any of the others, but she had been to the restroom three times.

Smith-Ng looked at her. "The first one gets all the attention. Everyone forgets the second. I was a second son, you know. My brother died when he was a baby of a gen—of a genetic disorder of the liver. My parents argued for months about whether they should risk having another child, because, you see, my mother was on the periphery of the radiation effects."

"At Nagasaki?" Lisa asked.

"Of course. That's where they met—the young Jewish doctor who concealed his race behind a Protestant name and the victim or near-victim or possible victim of the world's second atomic bomb dropped in warfare. The one that everybody forgot. Afterwards they wrote to each other, and when my father set up his practice and my mother was eighteen, they married. My father, ashamed perhaps of earlier concealment or determined that his children would not live his lie, combined my mother's name, Ng, with his."

"Your mother was Chinese and yet she was in Nagasaki when it was bombed?"

"Her parents were Chinese diplomatic personnel interned in Japan when the Sino-Japanese war began."

"What a romantic background!" Lisa said.

She was sitting to Smith-Ng's right, Calley to his left, as if they had responded to his secret desires. By leaning to his right Smith-Ng could press himself against Lisa's magnificent breast. By allowing his hand to drop casually from where it rested at the edge of the table, he could touch Calley's slender thigh.

He did neither. "Romantic, maybe. Catastrophic, certainly. If my heritage could be turned into equations, it would match the equations that describe the end of this ill-omened year. Even my name says it: Smith-Ng. Catastrophe!"

"I think it's romantic!" Lisa said. "My parents met at a supermarket."

"How can you complain when you have done so well?" Calley said. "The Jews and the Chinese produce more brilliant people than anybody else. You must have got the best of both races."

"Oh, I wasn't complaining," Smith-Ng said. He leaned over to pick up the nearest pitcher of beer. His shoulder pressed into Lisa's breast. She didn't move away. As he brought the pitcher to his glass and began to pour, his left hand dropped to Calley's trousered thigh. She didn't flinch.

He put down the pitcher and picked up the glass with his left hand, feeling strangely bold and light-headed. "I was explaining my commitment to catastrophe theory. After people have fulfilled their biological imperatives, they try to make sense out of their existences. Who are they, what are they good for? Where are they, how did they get there? What does it all mean?"

Smith-Ng felt another foot touch his. He glanced to the right at Lisa. Her smile revealed nothing. He looked at Calley. She was staring at her nearly full glass. Lyle was leaning toward him across the table. "Do you feel as if you have fulfilled your biological imperatives?" Lyle asked.

"I'm married and have two children," Smith-Ng said, "if that's what you mean."

"Is that what *you* mean?" Lyle asked. He smiled.

Smith-Ng realized that the foot touching his belonged to Lyle; its nudge seemed knowing. Smith-Ng felt uncomfortable; he thought it was his bladder. "That's what I mean," he said, getting up. "I'll be back in a moment."

He realized as he walked toward the back of the room that he had waited too long, immersed in his drinking and his fantasies, and now his bladder was jiggling painfully with every step. He joined the line of post-adolescent males waiting to use the one- time closet that had been converted into a men's room. Young women, close enough to brush shoulders with the men, lined the other side of the hall, and when men and women emerged from their respective restrooms, they had to make their way through a kind of gauntlet, bumping and being bumped in turn like a fertility rite.

The men, Smith-Ng noticed as he shifted impatiently from foot to foot, turned toward the person squeezing through, while the women turned away, toward the wall. Perhaps the women wanted to protect their breasts from unwelcome contact, or perhaps they didn't want to appear as if they were offering themselves for such attentions. Smith-Ng turned away so as not to endanger his sensitive bladder.

When at last he had relieved himself in the cracked and dirty stool that had time only after every other use to refill its tank and flush, he felt human once more, able to face the world and all its temptations and potential catastrophes, even the Lyles. Blessed, sanity-producing relief! But as he made his way back down the corridor, squeezing between the fertile young bodies and trying not to be aroused, he felt a hand on an unexpected part of his anatomy.

The evening had started at another table. From his position at the head of it, Smith-Ng had looked around at the members of his seminar. It had been a good class. The level of effort had been high and the class was talented as a group, but there had been no individual genius of the kind he had displayed when he was a graduate student.

Well, he had realized he could not expect greatness. Like a catastrophe, greatness was an unusual event, a sharp break with what had gone before, not simply a bit more talent. Unless, he thought, it was the bit more talent, like the bit more fissionable material, that created a new condition, like a chain reaction. His equations could handle both: the mutation and the critical mass.

Greatness could be a catastrophe, too, in the traditional sense, both to the person who had it and the world in which it appeared.

The class had started with nine students, and only one had dropped out. Four of the students were men, eager, mostly thin, bespectacled, and bookish, and all but one still pimply, even though three of them were in their mid to late twenties. The exception was an older man, returned to graduate school after some community-college teaching to work on his doctorate and attempt to upgrade his situation to a

four-year college or university. He was a plodder, but he would plod his way through, doing everything that was required of him; he was capable of little more.

The other four members of the class were young women. Women were uncommon in the mathematics graduate program, and rarer yet in his seminar on the practical applications of catastrophe theory. Two of them were earnest and hard-working, one tall and thin and dark-haired, the other short and blonde and a little plump, and neither was attractive according to his tastes, which were, to be sure, particular. The tall one was perhaps the best student in the class. Elizabeth was her name, though no amorous young man would ever call her Betty. But the life of the mind had its consolations.

The other two, Lisa and Calley, were unusual, too, but for other reasons. Not only were they young, they were nubile. Lisa was red-haired and full figured. She had freckles and large blue eyes and a pouting mouth that looked as if it were waiting to be bruised by eager male lips, hips that curved as much behind as at the sides, and large breasts that she showcased with tight sweaters, thin blouses, and even thinner brassieres that scarcely diminished the shape or color of her pink nipples. "Showing the roses," one coed had described it knowingly to a colleague, who had immediately passed it along to his fellow professors, suffering as they were from the same kinds of coeducational provocations.

Calley, on the other hand, was small, slender, dark-haired, and beautiful. Her hips were boyish and her breasts little more than dents in her tailored shirts, but her legs were slender, her skin and features were perfect, and her brown eyes were always wide and always looking at him.

Lisa and Calley. Twin distractions. Sometimes as the class ran on automatically while students reported on their research, he had imagined himself making love to one or the other. Lisa would be hot blooded and responsive; she would make love to him, pressing her breasts into his mouth, his hands between her legs. Calley would be cool and reserved, requiring much patience and amatory skill until all her banked passion would come spilling out, like lava breaking through a dam of ice.

Sometimes he had imagined himself in bed with both of them, enjoying first Lisa's hot abundance and then Calley's cool reserve.

Of course he had known it was all daydreaming. What would these magnificent creatures see when they looked at him? A man who was too fat, too old, too ugly for them to think of as more than a teacher. Perhaps, if he were lucky, they might think of him as a brilliant teacher. Even if it had been otherwise, he did not have the courage to suggest by word or touch his improper desires. What if they turned him down? What if they laughed at him? What if they accepted him and he disappointed them; if they were angry or scornful? What if they changed their minds afterward and accused him of seduction? Or rape? What if they fell in love with him and insisted that he divorce his wife and marry them, on pain of public exposure? What if he were discovered with them, in embarrassing disarray, by a boy friend or a colleague or a janitor, and he was beaten, or, even worse, exposed and forced to give up his position, perhaps even his career?

He dealt with catastrophe on a professional basis, but that didn't mean he wanted any in his personal life.

Lisa was a good student, almost as promising as Elizabeth, in spite of her appearance, which might have led her into more social areas of study—education, say, or business or theater. Calley remained in the class only because he made excuses for her, carried her, provided her with answers. But he couldn't bear to part with her share of his fantasies.

"Since this is the last class of the semester," Smith-Ng had said, "I'm going to leave the last few minutes for general questions. Anything." He had waited. "Don't any of you have anything in your heads that I didn't put there?"

Calley had given him a smile. Ordinarily her face was serious and perfect in its controlled way, but a smile transformed her features into something so angelic it almost melted his reserve.

"How much can we trust catastrophe theory in ordinary life?" Elizabeth had said carefully.

"As much as you would trust other mathematics," he had said, nodding approvingly but unwilling to bypass the opportunity to appear brilliant. "If you're building a house or surveying a piece of land, or even estimating probabilities of success or failure in business, you'd better use mathematics. It's the same with catastrophe theory."

"A lot of people are saying that this year, since it is the last year of the second millennium, may end in catastrophe," the young man named Lyle had said. It was a question that had been lurking, unasked, the entire semester and maybe bore some responsibility for the substantial enrollment. Smith-Ng had been surprised that it hadn't come up earlier.

"What do you think?" he had said. He got up and moved to the portable blackboard behind him. Quickly he scribbled an equation on it and then another and another.

"According to those," Lyle had said hesitantly, "the possibilities of a sudden change of state are twenty to one."

"But what kind of change?" Smith-Ng had said. It was a trick question, and he had looked first at Lyle and then, when Lyle had looked puzzled, around the room.

"It doesn't say," Lisa had said.

"Exactly," he had said. "We'd have to identify the unknowns and develop equations for each of them. The overall possibility of catastrophe wouldn't change, but we'd come up with individual possibilities that would add up to the total. But what about this part of the last equation?"

"That's a variable," Calley had said. She rarely spoke, and when she did Smith-Ng encouraged her.

"Yes," he had said. "Go on."

She had hesitated, apparently having exhausted her knowledge.

"In what direction is this variable moving?" he had asked.

"It's increasing," she had said, as if making a wild guess.

"Exactly," he had said, nodding, "and what does that mean? It means—." He had looked at her expectantly. "It means that—."

"The possibilities of catastrophe are increasing," she had said desperately.

"You've just made an 'A,'" he had said. "The possibilities of catastrophe increase as the year approaches its end until they reach almost total certainty at the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve. Is that correct?"

"I don't believe it," Elizabeth had said. "It's too much of a coincidence. And if it's true and we knew it to be true, we wouldn't be sitting here."

"We'd all be out eating and drinking and making love," he had said. "Or maybe praying. Of course the equations are only as good as the information that went into them. They describe a state of catastrophe, but they can only be applied to the real world insofar as we can factor the real world into them.

"Now we must factor ourselves into the real world," he had concluded.

After he had issued the usual compliments on the performance of the class, urged them to continue their studies, invited them to come in for a personal conference or with any problems they might have during their remaining student days, and said goodbye, they still sat in their chairs.

"Dr. Smith-Ng," Lyle had said finally, "since this is the last class meeting, we all decided to go out and have a few beers. We thought you might like to come, too."

He had looked at their faces without expression, enjoying their various emotions from timidity to embarrassment to fear, and then he had smiled. "That's the best idea anybody has had all semester. I'd be delighted."

With less caution than he customarily displayed, Smith-Ng had driven home rather than confess to his students, by calling a taxi, that he was inebriated. Home was a ranch house along a row of almost identical buildings, distinguished one from another by color or landscaping or by the placement of the two-car garage and its accompanying driveway. At night such discriminations were more difficult, particularly after as many pitchers of beer as Smith-Ng had helped consume, and he was guided more by instinct—and by the response of the garage door to the coded radio waves from the garage door opener.

The house was dark as he let himself through the door, with some skill, he thought, considering his condition. He turned on the light and looked at the kitchen clock: 12:45. That wasn't late. His wife must be asleep. No doubt she had been asleep for hours. But 12:45 wasn't late. He often stayed up that late working on a paper for some journal or meeting, watching television, or reading. The only thing remotely unusual was that he had been drinking with his students, and that was not truly unusual if done on special occasions such as this.

Nothing was remotely catastrophic.

Until he found the note.

It was propped up against the tea kettle on the stove and it told him that one part of his world had ended. "I'm leaving," it said. "Frieda called me to say that she'd seen you drinking with a bunch of students at the hangout just off campus. Some of them were girls. I know what you're like, fantasizing about those girls. I know what they're like too, those young women with their loose legs. Well, they're welcome to you, fat lot of good you'll do them. As if you'd have a chance with any of them. You keep telling me that some catastrophe will happen at the end of the year. If the world is going to end in a few months, I don't want to spend them with you and your equations. Don't try to get in touch. This time I'm really through." It wasn't signed, but Smith-Ng finished it in his head: "Angrily, Elly."

Smith-Ng squinted at the paper in his hand, suddenly sober. What could she know about Lisa and Calley? What could she know about his fantasies? Then he realized that all that didn't matter any more. His world had come apart in a way that he might have anticipated if he had been paying attention, but his theories could not have predicted. The years of emotional security, of a castle to which he could retreat after battling the dragons of uncertainty in the outside world, of meals always waiting for him, of clothing and towels washed for him and put away neatly in drawers, of all the little things that consumed the time and thoughts of other people—all these services that he had taken for granted now were things of the past. He knew he had neglected many obligations that he should have taken care of; he was guilty of other sins of commission or omission; but he had not expected it to end like this, suddenly, without a chance to explain or justify or plead for forgiveness.

He shook his head, trying to clear away the last of the alcoholic fog, trying to shake off, as well, the feeling of depression that had swept over him. He would cope. Certainly he would cope. Now he would

be free to do all those things from which a sense of obligation had restrained him. Right now, though, he couldn't think of any.

He thought about their years together, he and Elly, the way the years had passed, had slipped away, had made their unnoticed alterations in everything, the world, the way people thought about the world, the way he felt about the world and himself. Once they had been young and eager and adventurous, and the world lay before them like an unknown landscape waiting to be explored. There was apprehension, sure, but they were strong and adaptable, and they could handle whatever happened. And life had happened, given them children, settled them into routines that enabled them to cope with difficult times, made them older and tireder and looking for comfort instead of excitement. Occasionally one or the other got restless, wanting a return of what had once been so abundant, youth, passion, and adventure. But usually the feeling passed, sometimes leaving behind a dull ache that was difficult to pin down, that lasted for weeks.

Life had changed him. Life had made him fat and fifty. But he was still optimistic, still open to what might yet happen; life had made him cautious but not bitter. Life had given him his professional accomplishments, his position, his satisfactions in teaching and publication.

But part of his life was over, and it was a part that was more important to him than he had realized. His stomach contracted. All the beer he had consumed seemed as if it were lying in the pit of his stomach, congealed into a solid, indigestible mass.

Elly always had known him too well. Why couldn't he have understood her? He didn't understand women at all. Tonight, after he had felt that hand grasping him so intimately, he had looked into the face of the cool and beautiful Calley. As he had turned sideways to squeeze past, she had turned toward him instead of away, and someone had pressed him from the other side so that for a moment their bodies had been molded together. He has been sweating, apologizing, holding out his hands so that they clearly were not touching her, and he had sidled away, still feeling the imprint of her flesh on his, almost as if they had been lovers, and the memory—surely it was not an illusion—of a small hand squeezing, squeezing, like a promise of unspeakable ecstasies to come, his now embarrassing erection. Offered the chance to indulge his wildest fantasies, to feel sexual excitement once more engorging his organs and pounding through his arteries, he had mumbled his excuses to the table of his students and stumbled off into the night.

Would he ever have another opportunity like this? he wondered. Or would the fear of catastrophic change stop him again as it had before? He was getting old, and that was catastrophic too.

But he shouldn't have been surprised: This was the year of the catastrophe. All his equations said so.

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# Chapter Six

**June 3, 2000**
**Barbara Shepherd**

Something extraordinary happened to Barbara Shepherd as she was approaching orgasm: She had a moment of transcendence. The experience had nothing to do with sex, but it was, like sex, a simultaneous focusing and expansion of consciousness. Like sex, the sensation left her supremely aware of her self and its position at the very center of the universe, at the same time that she felt detached from it, a part of the observing universe and the part being observed, simultaneously hearing and making the sounds of skin sliding against skin and of sighs and moans and muffled words, smelling and releasing the pheromones.…

A few hours before, her companion had been a stranger when they had met at a party given by Randolph

and Alexandra and Daniel Williston. Randy, Sandy, and Dandy were what they called themselves, and, as if their taste in names and their own marital arrangement weren't odd enough, they liked to offer revels in their Manhattan townhouse in the Roman tradition: delicacies, drugs, and nudity. As a rule they invited people to their parties only once, and preferred guests who had never met. "Intimate strangers," they called them, and tried to shock the uninitiated with decadence, and if the guests were innocent— there still were a few in these degenerate times—to watch their hesitating but inevitable descent into depravity.

The guests were always young and beautiful, but not always strangers. Sometimes the Willistons ran out of new guests and had to invite people who had attended one of their parties before. If they couldn't get inexperience they settled for fame or notoriety. Many guests, however, refused to return, and some could not, for the parties sometimes got out of hand; at least one guest was rumored to have died during some kind of perverse play and several had been injured.

Shepherd had been there once before, so she had no illusions about the party or why she had been invited to return. She was famous for winning a gold medal at the Olympics when she was sixteen, for earning a Ph.D. in philosophy at the age of twenty- eight, and for making it to the final selection process to become an astronaut before she was disqualified because of her fear of heights. And she was notorious as an actress who had become an overnight sensation in two hit Broadway dramas and a musical, and an overnight failure in three films in succession. She was good looking enough, she knew, and her figure, in spite of abuse, was still firm enough to move naked without embarrassment among people bare and clothed. But the other female guests had been chosen for beauty alone. Shepherd would have declined the invitation, but she was bored. She was so bored with men, with sex, with food and drugs, with life itself, that she could die.

She didn't expect to die at the Willistons', though it didn't matter to her much, one way or another, because she had had about enough of everything she could think of. She wasn't concerned about taking care of herself, however: Muscles that had been trained for years and coordination that had been fine-tuned for competition did not disappear with the reasons for them; and every now and then a craving for physical fitness came over her, and she punished her body for a few weeks just to prove to herself that she could still do it. Still, the element of danger, the risk of death or injury, was an attraction.

It hadn't even been that the Willistons' parties were unusual. They may have been a little wilder than most, perhaps because the Willistons were richer than most and more decadent than most, but almost everybody did it now. At least everybody who didn't have to work for a living. Maybe they did it too, Shepherd sometimes thought, but less ostentatiously. Statistics indicated that alcohol and drug consumption were epidemic, as well as crimes of violence and passion; in fact, both were so common that they weren't news any more. Everybody was bored and at the same time lived with the omnipresence of unnamed disaster. Military service had been described, she had thought, as long stretches of boredom punctuated by moments of terror, but today boredom and terror coexisted.

By the time she had arrived at the party in an armored taxi, the revels had already reached the point at which the most attractive women and the better muscled men had already begun stripping down to undergarments, and some had been nakedly parboiling themselves in the hot tub or swimming in the chilled pool or lolling around one of the low banquet tables, nibbling at exotic delicacies or each other. As a wave of crowd noise and bathhouse odors had hit her at the door, Shepherd had almost turned around and left, hoping to catch the taxi before it left. But Sandy and Dandy had caught her by each wrist and drawn her into the entryway.

Dandy had been wearing a tuxedo and Sandy, a silver lame evening gown, a little daring in the way it molded itself to her body but conservative compared to the dress or absence of it of her female guests. The Willistons liked to remain fully clothed in the midst of nakedness, like Dionysus indulging the

weaknesses of his followers but remaining above them. What they did when they were alone, how they sorted themselves out, if they did, or what they did with guests who lingered behind, was a subject that Shepherd had speculated about with other survivors of a Williston party; none had stayed long enough to acquire first-hand details.

Shepherd had been clothed in a short-skirted red cocktail dress that revealed her athlete's legs, that were slender but, like her, too short. At the moment her wrists were captured, she had realized why she had not returned to a Williston party in spite of several invitations. On her earlier appearance she had behaved with embarrassing public wantonness, but that would not have stopped her. What she did not like was the Willistons and their voyeurism. But they would not let her go.

"Bobby," Dandy had said. "We're so delighted you could come."

"Barbara," she had said. She hated being called "Bobby."

"We invited someone we particularly thought you'd like, Barbara," Sandy had said. She had wrapped Shepherd's hand inside her arm and squeezed it to her unfettered breast as she dragged Shepherd into the next room.

Sandy was taller than Shepherd, although probably not as strong, but Shepherd could not free her hand without a struggle, even though contact with Sandy's body had been unpleasant. She had nothing in theory against group sex, or even lesbian sex, but in practice group sex required too much planning and lesbian sex was too artificial. And Sandy's vulturine watchfulness made such possibilities even more repulsive.

But maybe she had just been in the wrong mood.

The rooms were coolly elegant, with spare, fragile, polished wood furniture and parqueted or marbled floors and walls textured in grays and light blues—all carefully designed by some high- paid interior decorator to look like anything but a bordello. But the people who had moved through the rooms or clustered together closer than any of them would have found tolerable in normal circumstances had been in various stages of scarcely concealed tumescence and would have seemed better complemented by flocked, red wallpaper and velvet drapes.

"Here," Sandy had said, and had stopped in front of a muscular young man dressed only in a pair of hip-riding red silk shorts.

The young man had been talking to an equally handsome young woman clad like her companion only in underpants; hers were small, black, and lacy and her full, firm breasts rose and fell as she breathed. Barbara had looked at them with admiration and a trace of envy.

"This is Joe," Sandy had said. "Isn't he marvelous? We found him at the local service station. Service station, isn't that priceless? Joe, I want you to meet Barbara. Barbara Shepherd."

Joe's back and legs had been covered with black hair and as he turned Shepherd could see that his chest was even hairier. Like an ape, she had thought, and could not help but notice his erection, which he waved before him like a banner. "My brother Esau is an hairy man," she had remembered from her early Bible- reading days. She liked smooth men.

"Hi," Joe had said. He didn't recognize her face or her name. He was a handsome fellow, short but broad shouldered, and he worked out with weights and exercise machines, it was clear from his muscular definition and ridged abdomen. He had looked her up and down without concealment as if he were appraising a used car.

She had flushed and felt embarrassed about behaving like a school girl. No, not even school girls blushed any more. "What?" she had asked.

"I said," he had repeated, "what do you do?"

"Nothing," she had said.

"You got money, then," he had said as if the statement were as natural as his state of sexual arousal.

She had noticed his hands. They were large and hairy like the rest of his body, and she had repressed a shudder as she thought of them touching her. They would be like huge spiders with broken, dirty fingernails. She should not have been turned off by the emblems of his labors, but she liked cleanliness in a man, too.

Moreover, she had known, Joe was too certain that he was the object of desire, too ready to use that to his advantage. Like a beautiful woman, he believed that the universe revolved around him, and he didn't need to care about anything or anybody else.

"Do you know what year it is, Joe?" Shepherd had asked.

"Sure," he had said.

"Do you know that the world might end this year?" she had asked.

"Really?" the girl had said, as if wanting to remind Joe of her presence. Her breasts had wobbled.

"Who the fuck believes that shit," Joe had said.

"Hold to that thought, Joe," Shepherd had said. She had nodded. "Nice to have met you."

Sandy had left to find other victims. Shepherd had wandered off.

Now that she was actually there, her desire to leave had been balanced by her inertia, and she had drifted through the rooms, upstairs and down, not in the Olympian aloofness of the Willistons but in an uncomfortable detachment from the general mood of sexual excitation. Perhaps the Willistons enjoyed watching defenses crumble and inhibitions discarded, and people behaving in public in ways they usually reserved for their fantasies, but Shepherd had thought it was ugly. Lord Chesterfield was right, and someone else's sexual contortions were even more ridiculous. She had been embarrassed that she had behaved much the same as these others when she had been here before, and she had been embarrassed to belong to a species that behaved in this manner, and she had been embarrassed to admit to herself that if she would only let her hormones perform their usual functions she would be just like them. She had tried a drink of scotch, but it didn't help, and the drugs laid out in one of the rooms might have put her too much at the mercy of the Willistons.

"There must be something better," she had thought.

"There is," a man's voice had said, behind her, and she had realized that she must have spoken.

She had turned, expecting to see someone like Joe, but it was a tall, dark-haired man in a blue bodysuit. He had been older than the usual Williston guest though still younger than she by several years, she had guessed, and his face and body were ugly, though in an interesting, Lincolnesque way.

"Do you realize," he had asked, "how sexy a woman fully clothed appears in the midst of all this nudity?"

"Do you realize," she had said, "that you don't really need an opening line in the midst of all this opportunity?"

"Too easy," he had said. "Sex without conversation is like meat without salt."

"You need a little resistance to whet your appetite?"

"Conversation without sex is all right, too."

He had not been the usual Williston guest, and she had warmed to him because of that. She was long past the point of pretending a maidenly reserve she did not feel, but she had not been in the mood.

"Maybe another time," she had said, and turned away. She had picked her way through clotted flesh toward the door. Several men and one woman had tried to clutch at her as she passed them, but they had been drunk or doped and she had slipped from their grasp and finally reached the wall telephone in the entryway. As she had taken down the receiver, a large hand had reached past her shoulder and closed the contact. It had been, she saw as she half turned, Randy, the third member of the Williston family. He had been dressed in a tuxedo identical to Andy's, but he was bigger and a bit older and fatter, and it didn't fit him as well. By this time in the evening, the tie had been a bit awry and color had climbed into his cheeks. It had been, she had suspected, from excitement, not indulgence.

"I need to call a taxi," she had said.

"Later," he had said. "There's something exciting going on downstairs. Something different. You'll like it." His eyes had glittered. He was the best looking of the Willistons and maybe the most dangerous.

"Not tonight," she had said.

"I insist," he had said, like a genial host, and his sweaty hand had caught her by the shoulder. "I'll be your cicerone."

She could have gotten away, but not without a struggle. She had been torn between the desire to hit him in a way that would make him incapable of enjoying the rest of the party, and the desire not to seem prudish or to cause a scene. "No," she had said, and tried to turn out from underneath his grasp.

His hand had tightened, and she had been gathering her resolution to act when a man's blue-clad arm had slid between them and pulled her away. "She's with me," a familiar voice had said. It had been young Abe, and he had pulled her away from Randy and through the doorway into the night.

It had been a little chilly outside after the overheated atmosphere of the townhouse, but the smog had dissipated a bit. She had shivered and put her back against the door jamb. "Thanks," she had said. Her mood had changed; she would let gratitude and interest ripen into desire. She had decided that he would do, after all, and maybe even have enough character for a return engagement. Perhaps he might even represent a long-term relationship, as such things went in these days of imminent catastrophe, a few weeks or a month. She was, she had realized, no different from Williston's other guests, just more particular.

"They can be repulsive," he had said.

"They have difficulty not being repulsive. I need to call a taxi," she had said.

"I have a car. Let me take you home."

His name was Evan. He had given no last name, and she had not asked for it. She had been sure he was

married. He had revealed, as he drove his bulletproof Mercedes through the empty Manhattan streets, that he was an executive in an unnamed but powerful international corporation. It had not been his first invitation to a Williston party, either, but how many he had attended he had not said. The number might have been too revealing about his character; but perhaps he had business connections with the Willistons. He had called her "Barbara" without asking her name. When they had arrived at her apartment building, she had invited him to come up for a drink, and he had accepted.

There had been the usual armed guards. They had nodded at her and inspected her new companion. They knew her habits and, she suspected, talked about them with other members of the staff. She hadn't needed the usual blood check; the Willistons' RSVPs required current medical certificates. As soon as they had been inside her door, he had put his arms around her and said, "I don't need a drink. You're intoxicating enough."

The line had been no more original, but this time it hadn't mattered. He had kissed well, and he had removed her clothing slowly and expertly, pausing to admire each aspect of her body as he had revealed it, before he had picked her up and, with her guidance, carried her into her bedroom.

He had been an expert lover, as much concerned about her stimulation as his own and willing to answer her when she asked why he wanted her rather than one of the younger, better endowed guests. "You're Barbara Shepherd," he had said. Saying her name had seemed to intensify his passion.

"If you know who I am," she had murmured, "you know that I'm as easy as they are."

"You're not," he had said. "You might sleep with a different man every night—."

"I wish," she had said.

"But the point is, you pick him. Besides, you're not just a body; you're a person. You have a mind and a character."

"Not much of either one right now," she had said.

Matters had got more intense for awhile until she said, "Wait!"

"What do you mean?"

"Stop a minute."

"What's the matter?"

"I had a—a feeling."

"You're supposed to have."

"No—I mean a*feeling* !"

"What kind of feeling?"

"You'll laugh."

"I never felt less like laughing."

"A feeling of—something greater. Of transcendence."

"I've never caused a woman to feel that before. Maybe it's a matter of terminology."

"It had nothing to do with you," she said.

"Thanks a lot."

"It was a revelation, a flash of light—of enlightenment, like Saul on the road to Damascus. Everything became clear for an instant, but now I've lost it."

"Good," he said. "It was just a funny feeling then, that people get sometimes for no reason, like déjà vu. We can get back to what we were doing."

His hands and lips got busy again, but she pulled away and put her hands over his to make him stop. "You don't understand. I've got to get it back."

"That's silly," he said. He was getting irritated. "Those things never come back."

"I've got to feel like that again. Like there was something more. Like there was meaning. Like certainty."

"Like stupidity."

"Call it what you like." She knew she wasn't being stupid. For a second there, for no reason she could think of, she had grasped something infinite, something she had been looking for all her life and didn't know it until it happened, something that had made her seek all the substitutes that had never been enough. Why it had occurred to her at that moment she might never know, but that was the nature of revelation. That was why religious rites were called "mysteries," she thought.

"Come on, sweetheart, I've been very patient."

He meant he was becoming impatient. "I've been chosen," she said.

"By me."

"By God."

"You're joking."

"I've never been more serious. I don't know why I've been chosen or what I've been chosen for, but the finger of God has touched me, and my life will never be the same."

"You've been born again," he said sarcastically.

"I suppose," she said. "I was looking for a purpose and now I've found it. I've got to find out now what it's all about. I've got to tell other people how to feel the way I felt there for an instant. I've got to feel that way again."

"A fucking missionary."

"A missionary, anyway. You see, everything's changed."

"Except me."

"Let me change you, too," she said, seizing him by the shoulders and holding him up from her with surprising strength. She looked into his face, into his dark eyes.

"I don't want to change," he said and levered her arms aside before he forced his way into her. "I've never screwed a missionary before," he said.

She could have hurt him and made him stop, but that didn't seem fair, and somehow being fair was more important than anything else. The feeling of being violated, of betraying and being betrayed, didn't last. He wouldn't last either; she had been wrong about him as she had been wrong about so many men. But the revelation would last. She would search for it, wherever it took her, and she would find it again.

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# Chapter Seven

**July 4, 2000**
**William S. Landis**

The shuttle dived into the atmosphere like a sparrow flying into a pane of glass. But then, as the delta wings found a purchase in the scattered molecules, the heavy craft leveled off and skittered across the pond of air. Landis felt the shock grab his insides and slam them against his backbone, and then he was thrown forward against the heavy belts that fastened him into the contoured flight chair.

This is the way it ends, he thought, with a bang, not a whimper. Among the tens of thousands of switches and valves that served this craft as synapses and sphincters, one had malfunctioned and poured all the remaining fuel into a sustained rocket blast. Rather than slowing the shuttle down for a more gradual re-entry, the accident had virtually stopped the shuttle dead in orbit. Now the only control the crew on the flight deck could exert over their fate was through the limited influence of airfoil surfaces on thin air. It would not be enough, Landis thought calmly. After the buffeting would come the too-rapid aerodynamic heating that the tiles were not equipped to withstand, and even if the passengers did not cook and the shuttle did not melt or come apart, they could not reach the Kennedy or Vandenberg landing strips.

After the first announcement to the mid-deck passengers, the flight deck had been silent. The crew was too busy to calm hysterical passengers.

He noted his own reactions and felt pleased that he was facing the end without panic. He had seldom experienced situations that demanded courage, and he had never been sure how he would respond. The few occasions in his life that had called for action had elicited the fight-or-flight adrenaline response, but they were minor stuff to which the acceleration of his pulse, the cold sweat, and the shaking afterward could as easily be symptoms of weakness as of strength. But now he had nothing to do except to die, and he could face that without fear and without regret.

Perhaps he was reconciled to his fate by the irony of the fact that he, like the world, had been anticipating final catastrophe at the end of this millennial year, and now his world was coming to an end in the next half hour. But that statement always was appropriate. Every minute the world ended for somebody, somewhere in the world. He did some rapid mental calculation. No, every second the world ended for somebody. What did it matter if it ended for everybody on December 31?

Well, he thought, maybe it mattered to the species. People like to think that their existence has made a difference. But for most of humanity—and he considered himself, without false modesty, in that group—the only mark they left on the world was in the form of descendants, who in their turn might or might not make a difference. To the human species, however, to those creatures that had climbed up from the slime and down from the trees to look around and question why they were there and what it all meant, to the collective consciousness of the creatures that had been fashioned out of such an absurd mixture of primitive passions and wistful wonder, it mattered that the promise might remain only a promise.

As for himself, he had no regrets. His parents would miss him, he thought, but he had given them fifty

good years which is more than many parents get out of their offspring. He had not given them grandchildren, but he had given them more cause for pride in his accomplishments than concern about his welfare. A few readers knew his name; they might mourn him, but he would fade into their memories as the author who died a hero, and perhaps his literary reputation might benefit from a timely expiration. And although he felt that he had much left that he could do, much left that he might say and write, it would not be substantially different from what he had done already—even though he had not yet written the Great American Novel, or even a bestseller. Goodbye, mother and father, he thought. Goodbye, readers. Goodbye, cruel world.

The others were not taking it as well.

Eileen Simpson, the engineer who had been experimenting with construction methods for the U.S. space station yet to be started, was gripping her restraints with whitened hands, as if she could hold up the shuttle by adding her strength to that of the crew at the controls. But she was coping. She had been in dangerous situations before, clearly, and although her attractive face was set and her mouth was tight, she was free of tears or sounds.

Jock McKenzie, the supervisor for the asteroid-protection installation, who had come out on the previous shuttle trip to inspect the latest addition to the space-based project, was grunting like a primitive steam engine. He was a big, rugged- looking man, but his teeth were clenched in a frozen grimace, and he seemed unaware that he was making a noise.

Barry Risebad, the fundamentalist minister sitting next to Landis, was whimpering. Between whimpers he said, "My God! My God!" It was not a prayer. He was face to face with the eternity for which he had been preparing himself and others for twenty years, and he was terrified.

Fear had not been apparent when the shuttle took off, although Landis had thought he could see sweat on Risebad's forehead.

The shuttle trip had seemed like a public relations masterstroke when he suggested it to the committee. NASA had muffed its previous opportunity to become the vehicle of romance. On its way to the moon it had opted for an air of everyday reality: The astronauts were depicted as the boys next door, the trips were marvels of complexity but as commonplace as a jaunt to the nearest shopping center, and the language for describing it all was the jargon of engineers not the poetry of science fiction. Now the asteroid-protection system was taking shape in the sky. The Star Wars project had been dusted off and its supporters hauled on board for a system that might possibly take care of accidental missile firings or isolated terrorist attacks but was really aimed at the random violence of the heavens. After many delays, a space station was nearing reality. People were talking seriously about a permanent moon base. The off-again on-again plans for a joint Mars mission with the Russians apparently were on-again. Now NASA had another opportunity to put the poets in charge instead of the engineers. Perhaps they would not again misread the mood of the public.

Landis himself had made the suggestion to the committee on Public Attitudes Toward Space, the group that NASA had put together to consider the growing opposition of fundamentalist groups toward space programs. Offer one of the fundamentalists a place on the next shuttle flight. Everybody but Landis was surprised when Barry Risebad accepted the invitation. Risebad, Landis pointed out, had been an enthusiasts for Star Wars and reluctantly had supported the asteroid-protection system, and he could bring back to his worldwide congregation a personal report on its glorious defensive potential. Although he opposed the lunar base and the manned trip to Mars, as well as construction of the space station, he might return from space with greater appreciation for the challenges of space, or able to press an attack on those projects with the enhanced authority of somebody who had seen them personally. It was worth the risk.

Landis had laid it out for the committee. But he had also volunteered to go along to guide Risebad's perceptions and, if necessary, to refute criticisms, and the committee had thrown its weight behind that, as well. If getting himself a ride into space had been part of Landis's agenda from the beginning, no one seemed to care. Part of the support for Star Wars had come from space enthusiasts who saw it as the 21st century equivalent of Wernher von Braun's V-2 rockets; technological advances in mass killing were regrettable, but they often meant progress in other fields. The committee was more interested in the future of humanity in space—which might mean the future of humanity if something happened to the Earth or to the sanity of its inhabitants—and that future might be determined in the next few years. People who thought like that were in the mood to gamble.

Landis, strapped tightly into his contoured chair, had leaned as far as he could toward the minister and asked, "Are you all right?"

"Certainly," Risebad had said. His voice had been steady.

Landis had sunk back. It would not do to be sitting crooked when the blastoff occurred. "Don't worry," he had said. "It's only a minute or two away." Actually it was forty-six seconds and counting.

"*I'm* not worried," Risebad had said. "The Lord has told me to go on this journey and he has assured me that his arm would be around me the entire time. You're the one who should be concerned."

"Not as long as I stick with you," Landis had said dryly.

Risebad had looked at him sharply, and Landis had reminded himself that the minister might be misguided but he wasn't stupid, and that he should not be antagonized unnecessarily. Then the big solid-fuel boosters had kicked in and there had been no time, or breath, for talk. His weight had increased under the acceleration until he was not his normal one hundred sixty-five but more than four hundred pounds, and he had been crushed back into resilient pads until he thought he never again would draw an easy breath. He had had no time to worry about the booster rockets or the Challenger explosion or how they would get out if something happened; he had been too busy worrying about whether he would breathe and move again.

Then as suddenly as it had begun the pressure had released and he had weighed nothing at all. His stomach had rebounded into his throat and he had almost vomited before he thought about the mess that would float around the mid-deck and swallowed hard and swallowed again, and noticed that two of his companions were doing the same thing while Risebad was smiling beatifically.

The son-of-a-bitch has a sailor's stomach, Landis had thought.

Then the acceleration pressures had begun again and built to their previous levels. The solid-fuel booster rockets had been used up and had been jettisoned. Now the external tank was the sole source of fuel for the shuttle, and they were arching higher, out of the atmosphere now, into space itself, on the white-hot fury of combining liquid hydrogen and oxygen.

When the pressure had let up again, Landis had vomited, but this time he had prepared himself with a plastic bag. When he had looked up from his misery, Risebad had been grinning at him. Soon, however, Landis's mind had been diverted from the state of his body to the maneuvers of the shuttle and the conversations of the crew as their vehicle had caught up with the Russian space station, the linked Salyut 7 and 8, and prepared to dock. In their windowless mid-deck area, the progress of the shuttle could be tracked only by the laconic interchanges of the crew and by the creaks and groans of the shuttle and the brief roar of control rocket jets until they ended with a jar and a snap that echoed through the craft before silence fell.

"I think we're here," Landis had said.

"By the grace of God," Risebad had added.

"And the skill of people," Landis had said.

Even with the two Russian stations linked by the combined efforts of the U.S. and Russian space programs financed almost entirely by the U.S., the space habitat still was primitive. The U.S. project, if it ever got past the budget-cutters, would look like a Tinker Toy model of metal cylinders held together by lattices of flimsy girders, but it would be spacious by comparison. The Salyuts looked like space bugs with metal wings, two dark panels of solar cells, two heat radiators, white on one side, black on the other.

The cylindrical living quarters had seemed tiny until they got inside, but, Landis had told himself, a cylinder offers a great deal of surface area when one can use every square foot. Life inside this overgrown hot-water heater had been pleasant enough, with moments of excitement, after Landis's stomach settled down and he had got used to the smell of fuel, sweat, food, and body wastes that no filters could ever scrub from the air and no amount of deodorizing could conceal.

Eating had been a problem until one got the hang of it, the art of spearing solid food so that it did not escape to float in the air, of smearing softer foods around a fork so that they did not disintegrate before they reached the mouth, of sucking and swallowing liquids with lips tightly closed—and never, never sneezing or coughing with one's mouth full. Sleeping cocooned inside netting, on the other hand, he never got used to, and he had awakened periodically from a dream of falling in which he never reached the ground. He remembered reading somewhere a superstition that the dreamer who hit the ground would die. He also remembered the speculation that the dream was an ancestral memory of falling from the trees and that dreamers never hit the ground because if they had their ancestors would have been killed before becoming progenitors, or that they hit the ground but survived.

He finally had accepted frequent wakefulness as the price for the experience.

Much of his time he had spent simply staring out the portholes at the stars, like bright holes pierced in the black velvet of space, at the men and women in white spacesuits checking out the exterior, performing experiments in space, or putting flimsy additions into place, at the clean, cold disc of the moon or the big, fertile, blue, green, and white globe of the Earth as they floated past.

Up here some four hundred miles above the atmosphere the planet below looked peaceful and almost untouched by humanity except when the station passed into Earth's shadow and he saw the scattered brilliance of its cities. He could not see the pollution that despoiled the air and oceans. He could not see the armies or the tanks and guns or the missiles. He could not see the dangers that threatened the survival of humanity—from the perils that swam in the great emptiness of outer space to the turmoil of plate tectonics and the mysteries of matter that lay beneath the surface of this peaceful globe. Most of all, he could not see the fears, hatreds, and suspicions that led people to gamble the planet itself against their momentary victories.

Risebad had seen him at the porthole once and glancing briefly at the globe of the Earth had said, "Can you imagine how that will look on Judgment Day?"

The rest of his time Landis had spent recording his impressions on his laptop computer, talking to the other passengers in the visitors' quarters, or, occasionally, visiting with the station personnel whose living space was in the other cylinder.

Risebad had disliked everything about life on the station and had complained continually. "If God had

wanted man to be out here in space, he'd have made the atmosphere extend clear to the moon," he had said, more than half seriously.

"If you had been around a century ago, you'd have said that if God had wanted man to fly he'd have given him wings," Landis had joked, "like your pious predecessors."

"There's nothing wrong with flying," Risebad had said, "or with television, or with anything else that God has inspired Christians to invent that helps spread the word of God."

"Maybe God inspired the makers of spaceships so that you and your colleagues could spread His word throughout the galaxy."

"You're making a joke," Risebad had said. "To whom would we take God's word?"

"To the benighted aliens, of course, or, if there aren't any, to the humans who will colonize planets and moons or even build space habitats."

"If God had wanted people to inhabit other planets, he'd have put them there."

"Maybe this is God's way of putting them there."

"There's nothing about that in the Bible."

"There is the injunction to be fruitful and multiply. With a universe to expand into, humanity could multiply indefinitely. Besides, I'm sure you can find something that authorizes it if you look hard enough," Landis had said. "Airplanes and television aren't mentioned either."

"There have always been birds that fly, and prayers that are transmitted instantly. But there's something unnatural about being in space, without God's friendly embrace to hold you gently to the Earth." Risebad had shivered. The movement made him twist gently in the air, looking like a lost cherub as he searched for something to stop his spin. He was a man of substantial flesh who should have enjoyed the evaporation of his weight, but his dignity had dwindled with it, and his presence had diminished with his mass.

Landis had reached out a hand to the minister and pulled him to one of the pipes that held magnetic tables, velcroed chairs, and webbed bunks. "By the time we get back, God's embrace might not seem so friendly."

Risebad had looked so woeful that Landis almost felt sorry for him. "I will never complain again about my weight," he had said.

Only after appeals to his religious convictions had Risebad been persuaded to struggle into a spacesuit and open the airlock door into the weightless vacuum outside. But, carefully fastened by safety lines to eyebolts on the surface, they had inspected the outside of the station and the space telescope not far away, although Landis had not been sure how much Risebad saw. He had heard the minister's breathing, like the soundtrack from *2001*, and when a stray beam of light had illuminated the inside of Risebad's helmet Landis had seen his eyes rolling toward the big disc of the Earth as if fearful that it would fall on them.

Risebad had almost refused to visit an asteroid-protection installation. They had had to attach themselves to a vehicle that was little more than two tanks of fuel and a rocket jet, like balloons fastened to a broomstick. Risebad's terror was almost tangible, rippling out from him like gravity waves through skin and spacesuit and void, but Landis had known it was only imagination. And it was only in imagination that he could have seen Risebad clutching the metal bracket to which he was anchored and staring straight

ahead lest he look down—up?—what was the use of directions when gravity was gone?—and fall.

But Landis had also felt, or thought he felt, Risebad's terror ease and his normal optimism return as they had approached the long lattice-work of the rail gun that, when completed, might shoot homing devices at rogue asteroids or stray missiles and then, a few kilometers beyond, the compact cluster of tubes that was the experimental X-ray laser that, in the event of an attack, would destroy itself in an atomic explosion that would channel X- rays from its projecting rods to destroy attacking missiles in the microseconds before the rods themselves were vaporized.

Risebad's God, it had seemed, was a god of destruction.

Upon their return, Risebad had seemed to accept their quarters and situation at last. "It's been worth it," he had said, "to see God's shield over his chosen people."

"Or man's shield from God's wrath. Whichever it is, we shouldn't forget that there wasn't anything here until scientists and engineers put it here," Landis had said. "The same ones who are building the space station and planning the colony on the moon and the trip to Mars."

"God works through his Earthly instruments," Risebad had said serenely. "But some are the instruments of Satan."

"A man must be very shrewd to tell the difference," Landis had said, "and confident he knows who are the chosen people."

"Of course," the minister had said. His conviction was unshakable.

And then their two weeks had been over, the shuttle was back in its dock, and they had reboarded the craft that they had almost forgotten and fastened themselves into their chairs for their descent to Earth.

What should have been routine had turned into crisis. No one feels quite as helpless as a passenger on an endangered vessel, a ship, an airplane, most of all a space shuttle, Landis thought. No amount of effort can hold out the sea or keep an aircraft from falling, and no pulling at armrests can help control a shuttle bucking in the outer reaches of the air as the heat begins to mount in the cabin.

After the first few moments of terror, Simpson and McKenzie had relaxed and were exchanging brief, knowledgeable comments about their chances of survival. Risebad also had regained his air of serenity, although Landis thought he could see the minister's lips trembling. Perhaps he was only saying a silent prayer.

"Are you all right?" Landis asked, suddenly conscious that he was repeating a question he had asked two weeks before.

"If the Lord wishes to call me to him," Risebad said, "I am ready."

"Why would He want to do that?"

Risebad shrugged. "God's plans are beyond human understanding."

"You were telling me at the Station that you understood all that," Landis said, realizing that he was sounding querulous and not able to help himself, "who was doing God's work and who, Satan's, who were God's people and who weren't."

"And so I do," the minister said, his jowls shaking, "and so does every man who looks into his own heart and finds God there. But if it is God's will that I join him in Eternity, I will not question, I will not shrink

from that fate. Instead I will rejoice and prepare to meet my Maker."

"What if He's really trying to destroy the space program and doesn't care if He destroys you with it?" Landis asked.

"Praise the Lord," Risebad said cheerfully.

"What if He wants to send an unbeliever like me to Hell and doesn't care if He snuffs you, too?" The cabin was getting uncomfortably warm as the air conditioners labored to cope with the heat from their too-rapid passage through the air. Soon it would give a passable imitation of Hell.

"That's nonsense," Risebad said. "You'd be better off spending your last moments in prayer."

"Or maybe," Landis muttered, "He wants you and He doesn't care if He takes the rest of us."

"Judgment Day is coming soon for all humanity, anyway," the minister said. "Perhaps I have been chosen to go first so that I may greet the others."

"I thought you predicted the End last New Year's Eve?"

"A small miscalculation. A human error," Risebad said.

"You can make mistakes, then," Landis said.

Risebad was incapable of inspecting his premises. "It still makes sense to me that the second millennium should end with the change of the date to two thousand."

"As it did to millions of others. Psychological rightness is always better than literal truth."

"I don't agree," the minister said. But his mind was elsewhere, and his disagreement was perfunctory.

"What I don't understand is your fondness for Armageddon," Landis said, hoping to take not only Risebad's but his thoughts away from imminent destruction. "Not just yours, of course, but all you fundamentalists."

"We anticipate Armageddon because we anticipate the Second Coming of Christ," Risebad said as if he were repeating a familiar explanation. "It is the place where the last battle will be fought between good and evil on the great day of God. Why wouldn't we long for it?"

"Maybe evil might win," Landis said. "Or maybe, more likely, we'll see Armageddon, and it won't be God's will but human folly, and there won't be any Judgment Day, just total destruction—the end of everything, including human hopes as well as lives. And all because we have this passion for catastrophe."

But Risebad wasn't listening. His lips were moving again, and his eyes were staring, unseeing, at the wall ahead. The time had passed for talking. The shuttle was descending rapidly through the air, falling through the sky, shifting from side to side, the delta wings groaning as they tried to cope with stresses they were not designed to withstand, the heat building to near intolerable levels as the tiles ablated too and the air conditioning began to fail.

From the outside, Landis thought, they must look like a Fourth of July rocket, spinning down in flames.

And then they began to slow. The shuttle still was falling, but the descent seemed more under control. Cheers came over the speaker system from the crew.

"The shuttle is responding," one of the crew announced over the speakers. "Most of the excess speed has

been killed, and the heat build-up is leveling off. We're going to be okay."

Celebration seemed premature, Landis thought. They still had to find a place to land, and Kennedy and Vandenberg were on the other side of the planet.

"What's that place down there?" one of the crew asked. The microphone hadn't been turned off.

"There's Africa, and that's the Middle East," another voice said. "And that's Saudi Arabia, right?"

Risebad, who had begun to relax, was tensing his muscles again. Listening to anyone else, even the nervous voices of the crew, calmed Landis, but Risebad was straining to hear a more authoritative message and it wasn't coming.

"What's that thing down there?" one of the astronauts asked. "It looks like the longest runway in the world."

"Don't worry," Landis said to Risebad. "People like this are used to handling emergencies."

The crew was up to this one, too. Two minutes later they put the big delta craft down on the Saudi Arabian quarter-mile- wide, six-mile-long causeway at Jubail.

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# Chapter Eight

**July 20, 2000**
**Paul Gentry**

The muzzle of the handgun looked too big for a .22; perhaps it was a .32 or even a .38. But Paul Gentry had never looked at this end of a pistol when someone was pointing it at him with the apparent intention of pulling the trigger, so perhaps the impression of size was purely psychological.

Nevertheless, the damage the bullet could do was sufficiently alarming that he could feel his heart hammering inside his bare chest. Why didn't the man say something?

"Frieda," he said. "Frieda!" he said again, shaking the shoulder of the woman beside him in the bed.

She came up slowly out of the sea of sleep, rising from sheeted waves like Venus. Some women were like that; others slept like cats with one eye half open. "Wha—wha?" she said, turning over, sitting up. She did not clutch the sheet to her breasts as so many prurient films had suggested was instinctive but stared, blinking, into the darkness.

"We have a visitor," Gentry said calmly, admiring the way he was concealing his panic. "He—I think it is a he—must have let himself into the apartment with a key, because I heard no sound of forced entry, and now he's sitting over there pointing a gun at us."

Frieda's eyes focused and her pretty face contorted. "You bastard!" she screamed.

"You seem to know the person," Gentry said.

"I should," she said. "He's my husband."

They had met, typically enough, at a reception following an afternoon meeting in San Francisco of the advisory board for the Committee on the Environment. The Committee was an umbrella organization for groups concerned about various aspects of the environment, intended to focus and coordinate the efforts

of the thousands of volunteers who were passionately committed to the cause of clean air, clean water, clean soil, and the protection of the ozone and all sorts of endangered species, but who often worked at cross-purposes.

Committees badgered Gentry ceaselessly to lend his time, his efforts, his name, even his money, to good causes. He accepted the few that required little effort and less time, paid his expenses, and offered an opportunity to mingle with people of wealth and influence, who could contribute to *his* organization or hire him as a consultant or a lecturer. At the least he could arrange a lecture in the area of the committee meeting, and collect his travel expenses twice.

The board meeting had gone well. He had identified several prominent men and women of means, pinpointed their particular areas of concern, and singled out an earnest young fellow who had enthusiasm and ideas but no means and no constituency. And as that young man, his face shining with vigor and his words made eloquent by passion, had seemed on the point of swinging the board to his particular line of action, to the clear discomfort of Gentry's targeted prospects, Gentry had proceeded to stop the speech in mid-sentence with a single question and then, with sarcasm and wit, to demolish the young man, argument and person, and turn the entire group, the crushed young man excepted, to *his* program, invented on the spot.

Later, basking in the afterglow of the exercise of personal power and the promises of support from two of the three prospects and the possibility of a follow-up with the third, Gentry had been sipping the first of several martinis when he hit upon Frieda—or was hit upon. It had not been a new experience but an infrequent one. He knew he was ugly. That in itself was sometimes an attraction to women, but usually it had to be combined with a display of charm or intellectual intensity. But some women had a sense for drama and were drawn to him instinctively. Or so he liked to think.

Frieda was tall, nearly as tall as he in her high heels. She was well built but sturdy with big bones, broad shoulders, deep breasts, and generous hips that missed seeming plump by virtue of long legs. All these attributes had been clearly outlined by her long, yellow cocktail dress, with its bodice cut halfway to the waist and its skirt slit far up the thigh. She was shaped like a power forward, he thought, as he watched her make her way toward him, swaying her way through the chattering groups: She had to weigh one hundred fifty pounds, he had thought, but she carried it so well that it would seem like one hundred twenty until he took hold of her. And he would take hold of her, he had known with the certainty bred of long experience.

First, however, would come the mating dance, the seemingly casual circling and display, the crowing and clucking, the pursuit and modest retreat, the retreat and modest pursuit.… Frieda was not important enough to be a member of the advisory board, but she had been invited to the reception for her social skills and other charms. She had introduced herself and commented on the good reports from his performance at the meeting and the good job he was doing for the environment in general. He had said that the real work was being done by volunteers like her. She had said that a job like his must be very tiring, traveling so much, so many people wanting his time and energy. He had said the secret of survival was relaxation, and he always found a few hours during every trip when he let everything drop and just tried to be himself. She had said that San Francisco had some great places to relax, and perhaps she could recommend some, when he had interrupted and suggested that she show him herself.…

It had been all as ritualized as primitive ceremony or hard- wired animal behavior, and he had told her so after they had made love the first time, smoothing the fine hair around her damp face. She had been as strong and demanding as her body implied, guiding his hands and lips first to this part of her body and then another, applying herself with equal energy to his body, and then, after insisting on a condom that she supplied, maneuvering their bodies into position after position. It was enough to make a lesser man

unsure of his masculinity, but Gentry savored it as a change of pace. He had enjoyed plenty of soft maidens whom he had to persuade that there was more to sex than the missionaries had prescribed.

"Call it what you will," Frieda had said. She had a fine husky voice, deepened now by copulation, that had stirred Gentry's loins the first time he'd heard it. "Men are all barbarians. They'd prefer to say, 'Let's fuck,' and jump into bed and have at it. The women are in charge of civilization— "

"And sex?" he had said.

"And they know that pleasure is heightened by delay—that's where the word dalliance comes from."

"I think you're confusing philosophy with physiology—the mating dance may be nothing more than foreplay, essential for the female, pleasant but unnecessary for the male."

She had run her hand through the thick mat of black hair on his chest. "Don't give yourself airs," she had said, and pulled out a handful.

He had risen from her bed as if in anger and returned, upon her entreaties and apologies, with his tie and a scarf and a pair of long towels. This time he had used his superior strength, against her protests and then her growing anger and threats, to tie her wrists and ankles to the bedposts. Now he was in charge and finally, when she had ceased struggling, her response had been loud and prolonged.

"You bastard!" she had said into his ear when their breathing had slowed.

"That isn't the first time you've enjoyed bondage," he had said. "I noticed the scuff marks on the bedposts when we entered."

"Not my bondage!" she had breathed. "His!"

And, to be fair, he had allowed himself to be tied down, fearing the loss of control that he needed but allowing it to heighten his sensitivity to her lovemaking.

Now, with Frieda's screams of rage still ringing in his ears, Gentry looked at the man sitting by the door. This time, he thought, he had really done it—been caught*flagrante delicto* by an outraged husband with a gun. Was it worth it? Had it really been worth it, all the*flagrante delictos* of this life? Well, yes, it had, but that was no reason for it to end here. If he got out of this alive, he would give up—Frieda: Frieda had been fun but not worth dying for. No woman was worth dying for, and he wouldn't care if he never saw Frieda again; nor, he thought, would she care if she never saw him again. What they had done had been, for them, as natural as breathing. Still, if he could go back and not begin the mating dance—but it had all been preordained, hadn't it?

Having thought it through, he stopped shaking quite as violently.

The man by the door reached over and turned on the table lamp beside him. The gun barrel wavered and Gentry decided he would rather be shot standing than sitting in bed beside the suddenly silent Frieda.

"Don't get up!" the man said.

Gentry sat back down hastily. The man's voice was soft, even in command, and although Gentry didn't want to risk a sudden move he felt better now that the man had started talking. The man was sitting on the edge of a low chest, and the lamplight, flaring upward, illuminated his throat and chin and cast Mephistolean shadows up the rest of his face. Most of all, however, it made the gun seem more menacing.

"You're Paul Gentry," the man said heavily.

"That's right."

"For God's sake, Earl—!"

"You stay out of this, Frieda!" the man warned. "This is between him and me. You're the environmentalist."

"That's right, Earl."

"Don't call me 'Earl,' the man said. "Just because you've fucked my wife doesn't mean you can call me by my first name."

"I understand, Earl."

"For God's sake, Earl," Frieda said, "what are you doing here? You're supposed to be in New York."

"Does that make it any better?"

"You know I wouldn't embarrass you in public."

"I suppose I should feel grateful for that."

Gentry started to rise again. "If you'll just let me get my clothes, I'll get out of here and let you two—"

"Stay where you are!" Earl said firmly. "I want you to tell me something."

"Whatever I can, Earl," Gentry said, bracing himself for questions about how he and Frieda had ended up in her bed or what they had done there.

"Is it true what they've been saying about the end of the world?"

"What have they been saying, Earl?" Gentry had come to the conclusion that it was more difficult to shoot someone who called you by your first name.

"You, too—what you've been saying. That the world is going to end."

The barrel of the gun was wavering again, this time as if Earl had forgotten it was there. Gentry thought maybe Earl was trying to convince himself that it didn't matter if he killed them since everybody would die soon anyway. "There's no certainty, Earl."

The gun barrel steadied. "That isn't what you've been telling everybody else. I've read that stuff—pollution and overpopulation and the greenhouse effect and all."

"That's all happening, Earl," Gentry said, "but we don't know when the conditions will really become critical."

"What I've heard, some of it already has."

Earl had lowered his head a bit, and the light now revealed all of his face but his eyes, which looked like black pits. Gentry started to say something else to cast a bit of doubt into Earl's mind, but he heard himself saying, as if he had said the same things so often that they had become automatic responses, "Some of us think that's true, Earl—the population may have passed the point where anything but plague, starvation, and war can reverse it, the carbon dioxide now in the air or to be released in processes that

cannot be stopped for a decade or more may have reached critical mass, and pollution—."

"All that takes time," Earl said impatiently. "Why this year?"

"What do you mean—why this year?"

"Everybody says this is the year the world ends."

"Not everybody," Gentry said. "That's just superstition, religious fanatics, people with a vested interest in Armageddon. . . ." He, of course, had a vested interest in Armageddon, but not this year. It had to be far enough down the line that people could do something about it, either to stop it or prepare for it. If people believed the world was going to end in a few months, he would get no more speaking engagements or contributions; they would turn for salvation to someone with a better offer.

"This year," Earl repeated, "the year two thousand."

"The universe doesn't know anything about the way we measure time," Gentry said. "Three-fourths of the world doesn't even use our calendar."

"Why are you talking about this stuff?" Frieda said. "What does this have to do with anything?"

"Why," Earl said simply, "it has to do with everything."

Nobody spoke for a few moments. Gentry could hear Frieda breathing beside him and he thought, inconsequentially, of how she had panted during their lovemaking and then how that body, with all its capacities for emotions and work and thought and creativity, might soon be stilled forever. He felt, for a brief moment, a sense of sharing, a sense of concern for someone besides himself. And then it was gone.

"I'm going to get up now," he said carefully, moving slowly.

The gun jerked in Earl's hand and fired. Gentry was surprised that he did not know which action came first, and then he checked himself for pain and then looked to see if Frieda had been hit before he noticed the black hole in the foam-rubber pillow between them.

"I'm not a very good shot," Earl said apologetically. "I almost hit you. If I were you, I'd stay where you are."

"You needn't worry about that," Gentry said. "Or about the world ending this year either."

"Tell me about the comets," Earl said.

"There's always that possibility. Many are periodic; some appear for the first time. The Earth could get in the way of one of them, or a large meteorite. It's happened before. It's likely to happen again sometime. Chances are even a direct hit by a big one wouldn't kill everybody."

"That's some consolation. What about the galaxy exploding?"

"There's a theory," Gentry said cautiously, "that huge black holes occupy the center of every mature galaxy and that these either gobble up all the stars or cause an ejection of smaller black holes or radiation that would be fatal to everything in their paths. But cosmic processes take millions, billions of years."

"But we wouldn't know, would we? It could happen this year?"

The incongruity of his position struck Gentry suddenly—here he was in bed with another man's wife and he was discussing with her husband the possible ways in which the world might end. He almost laughed,

and then he caught himself and realized that he could still be shot, and that would be even more ridiculous. "Anything could happen, but it's unlikely."

"I've heard that volcanoes could cause a new ice age," Earl said reasonably.

"Volcanoes are still unpredictable, and another big explosion like Krakatau could cause even greater damage today and the smoke and dust could cut off a lot of sunshine—a bunch of them could bring on an ice age. But that would take time. The more likely cause of an ice age would be fluctuations in the output of the sun."

"It could go up instead of down, I guess."

"Nobody really knows why stars put out more or less radiation. It could blow up, though that's not characteristic of stars as small as the sun."

"But it could happen."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you," Gentry said with a hint of impatience. "Anything can happen. The only thing people can do is to stop behaving like damn fools; don't poison themselves, don't foul up the environment, don't produce more babies than the planet and the ecology can feed and house and provide a decent opportunity to exercise their humanity, don't blow themselves up."

"Earl," Frieda said, "this isn't like you. We haven't had this kind of marriage. Nobody has this kind of marriage any more."

"That's what I came home to tell you, sweetheart," Earl said steadily. "It came to me in New York, walking those streets, seeing those people—selling themselves, killing each other, living in the most degraded environment right next to indescribable wealth—and I turned around and came back to Gomorrah."

"That's all crazy, Earl."

Gentry put a warning hand on her wrist, under the sheet, but she shook him off, and he realized that Earl and Frieda's relationship was beyond caution.

"Is it? Is it crazy to realize that we're all foul and corrupt and that we deserve to be wiped from the face of the Earth? I came home to tell you that we needed to get away somewhere, to start over, to cleanse ourselves for this life, or the next one. Only it's too late, isn't it? We're as sick as the rest."

"Speak for yourself," she said, and folded her arms defiantly across her chest.

"Well, yes, I can do that all right."

"You've discovered God," Gentry said.

"You could call it that. I was sitting there in my hotel room waiting for company—"

"Your usual whore," Frieda said.

"Not the usual, no. A little kinkier this time. I felt in the mood for something as sick as what I was seeing around me, and I just happened to take the Bible out of the drawer beside the bed, and it fell open to Genesis eighteen and nineteen."

"Some previous occupants had similar concerns."

"Choose any explanation you want," Earl said, "but suddenly I understood that the world really could end in a few months, all it took was somebody bigger than you or me to say 'blow up, sun' or 'blow up, world,' and that would be it."

"The really sad thing," Gentry said, "is that it doesn't take God. Just somebody like you or me to push a button."

"Yeah. It could be God or anybody. The point is that we deserve to die. We've got nothing to live for."

"Not me—I've got a lot to live for," Frieda said.

But Earl wasn't listening. "Just waiting around for a few more months. What's the point in that?"

"Maybe we'll get a reprieve," Gentry said. "Maybe if there is a God he'll send a Savior again."

But Earl was beyond salvation. He raised the gun from where it had been resting against his leg. Gentry tensed himself to spring but the gun kept rising, turning, and, Gentry, realizing finally what was going to happen, swung his legs out of bed and got up and was halfway to the chest, not knowing what he was going to do, when the muzzle of the gun went into Earl's open mouth and exploded.

Gentry felt splatters like warm raindrops. He knew it was blood and brains, and looking back, as if in slow motion, saw that Frieda, even where she sat with her mouth open in astonishment, was covered with little red flecks, and turned to where Earl was toppling from the chest, and he thought, in a final moment of irony, how appropriate it was that nature's experiment with intelligence should end like this.

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# Chapter Nine

**August 8, 2000**
**Elois Hays**

They had surrounded her before she knew she was not alone. They were not the young wild ones, driven even wilder by the panic of their elders that they could scarcely understand but whose contagion they could not avoid. The young accept life as it is, with all its perils; the real terror that tenses their necks and twitches their eyes has been called the Peter Pan syndrome, the fear of growing up and assuming the responsibilities that make zombies of their parents.

No, these were the middle-aged crazies. She had heard about them: how they drifted together in night-shrouded Central Park to commit their silent and inexplicable deeds. Never the same individuals, never the same acts. A recent article in *The New York Times* provided case histories for two of them. They had stood up one evening in their respective middle-class living rooms, one a man, the other a woman, and walked out without a word, without responding to the inquiries from their wondering and then alarmed spouses and met up with others, similarly moved to some unspoken rendezvous, and wordlessly had done their deeds and returned, without explanation, to their homes.

The phenomenon almost made people believe in possession by medieval demons—or in its contemporary equivalent, aliens in their unidentified flying objects and their curious ability to contact only the unsophisticated and the credulous, as well as their curious desire to control the thoughts and actions of a few believers. But the experts said the agency was fear—fear of a world out of control, fear of random violence, fear of the end of everything, exacerbated by the panic of this millennial year. Their fears took possession of them, and acted out their own exorcism. Sometimes they turned their terror upon inanimate objects: beds of flowers, park benches, street lights; sometimes they killed

animals—rabbits, squirrels, cats, dogs—tearing them apart with their fingers. Lately, the remains of missing children had been discovered, small pieces of flesh laid out in circles around a pile of bones, as if some barbaric rite were being performed or some ancient god were being propitiated. But psychologists said the patterns were meaningless, and that the appearance of order was as illusory as the apparent timing of the gathering. The crazies had no organization, no leadership, no plan; the phenomenon was a form of mass hysteria to which the susceptible succumbed when the conditions were right and, as if sleepwalking, joined with others temporarily in the same condition.

But they had not attacked adults. Until now. Elois Hays thought of the Maenads, those drink-crazed followers of Dionysus who ripped apart wild beasts with their bare hands. She had once played in a revival of Euripedes's *Bacchae* . But these sober citizens were even more frightening, and she realized, sharply and unexpectedly, that she wanted to live.

She had not thought so earlier as she had left the cast party. Suicide had not been on her mind, to be sure, but neither had survival. She was tired of struggling, tired of playing the old roles of featured actress, of gracious wife.… She was sick of seeing the same precious people, of saying the same things in response to the same weary stories. They were talented, creative people and for years she had considered herself privileged to be one of them, to experience their ready charm and their concern for art. But lately she had begun to realize that creativity was no substitute for kindness and that wit could not conceal an emptiness of soul.

*The North Wind* was a success. She knew that. The others congratulated each other and smiled confidently, but she knew. She had opened too many plays not to scent the difference between success and failure, and she had not needed the buzz of the audience at intermission or the look of the critics rushing to meet their deadlines to tell her which this was.

Fred Hampdon had rewritten the play according to her brief critique, and he had done it even better than she had imagined possible. He had talent—perhaps in time he might become a first-class playwright—and that moment of insight had released the inhibitions that had made him unwilling to drop his protection from the world, to reveal to uncaring strangers what he really was like.

As she had expected, he had forgotten that the suggestions were hers, but she had forgiven him that. She had been willing to forgive him almost anything if he could stop her thinking about George. George had been surprised by the changes and more than a little annoyed; Josh had been irritated by the delay. But both had recognized the improvement and had been persuaded to start over. The subject was timely, as Hampdon had said. In the last few days of rehearsal, the cast had come together and had begun to embody in their small ways the impatient dread the world was experiencing. The play was due for a long run—unless apocalypse cut it short.

Her attraction to Fred had deepened and sharpened over the months, but she had suppressed it. The time had never seemed right to get him alone, to brush against him, to put her hand over his, or even, in the modern style, to declare her interest. Fred had been busy with rewriting, and then she had been busy with rehearsals, and then he was busy with other friends or closeted with Josh or, more often, George. She had told herself that it was all for the best; just because George was involved in a series of desperate encounters, she had no need to be as foolish—or, more appropriately, because George was involved in a series of ridiculous entanglements, she would avoid anything that even slightly resembled his stupidities.

But she could not help what her heart felt, and it yearned for Fred. Foolishly, crazily, it had built a shrine for Fred with a sentimentalized image of him above the altar of her desire. She had known it was folly, she had known the difference in their ages was not only biological but cultural, she had known he was not worthy even as she suspected that she was not, but she had not been able to help it. Each day she had forced herself to behave normally in his presence, and each day she had felt her resolution weakening.

*Wait* , she had counseled herself.*Wait until the run is over. Wait until the play has opened. Wait another day, another hour....*

And now the play had opened. The cast was happy. Josh was happy. George was happy, and he would, she had known, soon be rutting with Susan. She could easily get Fred alone. In his state of incredulous excitement at his own artistic success, he would be easy to arouse, to lead to an unoccupied bedroom, to deliver to the bliss of final fulfillment. For herself as well as for him.

But how would she feel afterwards? How could she then distance herself from the disgust she felt for her husband?

As the producer, George had wanted to host the opening night party in their own Central Park West apartment. By the time Elois arrived, the living room had been filled with overdressed people trying to impress each other while crowded into unaccustomed intimacy. Waitresses, hired for the purpose, threaded their black uniforms through the narrow spaces with trays of hors d'oeuvres and champagne in fluted glasses.

Elois, delayed by well wishers and the chores of changing herself from actress to hostess, had had to brace herself to enter and accept the recognition and congratulations she knew would be her burden of the evening, but she had squared her shoulders, taken a deep breath, put on a smile, and made her way into the smoke-filled, crowded room.

Nobody had recognized her.

She had experienced an eerie sensation of disorientation, the anxiety nightmare of walking into the wrong party, which is the adult equivalent of the class she had never attended or the opening night of the play for which she had never memorized her lines. That was what we all were, she had thought, unprepared actors thrust onto a strange stage to improvise and fake our way through our scenes as best we could. Now the stage was even stranger: the sets, the apparatus, were changing around us, and the audience was disappearing in a fog that was creeping closer moment by moment.

And then she had recognized a familiar face—the wife of one of the backers—and then another and another, and then she herself had been recognized and the terror of alienation was replaced by the irritation of social intercourse. She did not want to be here, pretending to be something she was not, a satisfied wife, a successful actress, a contented member of the artistic class.... But the alternative had seemed worse: offend expectations, insult friends, break free, undergo the upheavals of change.

She was used to being what she wasn't, and she had put on another performance—making her way through the crowd, speaking to friends and well-wishers, accepting congratulations and, without recoiling, the fat arm around her shoulder and the blubbery kiss of her already slightly tipsy spouse. And smiling modestly as George called for attention and raised his glass in a toast to the play, the playwright, the director, the cast and the crew, and most of all to his talented and beautiful wife, the great, the immortal Elois Hays, who had another hit to add to her long list.

And she had had to make her little speech in turn, deflecting the praise onto the playwright and the other members of the cast, upon Josh, and upon George and his backers who had made it all possible by their confidence and willingness to put their money into art.... It was all partly true. Partial truths are the biggest lies, she had thought.

She overheard fragments of conversation as she made her way among the guests, playing the gracious hostess. Some of it concerned the play, of course, but not much. Most of it was idle conversation, the sort of things that people say to each other at parties: superficial comments about appearance, about mutual friends, about tastes, about diet, about illness, about occupations, about economic conditions,

about the weather. Mostly, though, she overheard concerned voices discussing the end of the world.

"I've heard talk of a new disease," a woman had said. "Worse than AIDS. Takes you in weeks not years. Nobody is saying anything officially, but I have it from the best authority.…"

"What about that new volcano in the East Indies—and the old one in Chile?" a man had said. "I don't want to be an alarmist, but several eruptions the size of the one in Washington in the early 1980s could actually change the climate, and an explosion like those in the South Pacific in the 19th century.…"

"I say we've got to start building nuclear reactors again. With oil at one hundred fifty a barrel and natural gas going up more all the time, we've got to start getting over our neurotic fear of radiation."

"Not to mention the pollution from coal-fired generators. They keep talking about doing something for acid rain, but the lake where I used to fish in Vermont.…"

"I just heard the other day that the average temperature has increased by two degrees since the turn of the century. That may not seem like much, but it means a radical change in climate."

"Like drouths in one place, you mean, and gulleywashers in another?"

"And the violence of storms. The more heat, the more energy. It's gotta go somewhere. Do you know that hurricane winds have averaged fifty per cent higher in the past dozen years? We may have to adjust to higher winds, with occasional gusts that blow us around—if they don't blow us completely off the planet."

"Talk about plague, talk about hunger—that's just nature's way of adjusting the population to the resources available. Malthus was right. There's six billion people around. And the population will double again in the next thirty-five years."

"Watch the skies, I say. There are things up there that can kill us: comets, giant meteors, cosmic rays, solar explosions.… I heard the other day that the center of the galaxy might have exploded and we wouldn't know it until the wave of radiation hits us and sterilizes the Earth just like a test tube in an autoclave."

"It could happen just like that. Tonight. December thirty- first. What does it matter? The sun could explode. A meteor could strike. The bombs could fall. The human species would be just as dead."

"And we'll be dead a long time."

"My dear," a woman had said to Hays, clutching her forearm in a gesture of familiarity she had not earned and breaking Hays out of her reverie, "you were superb tonight. A tremendous performance. I tell you I really felt cold, like I was sitting up there under the glacier with you."

"Thank you," Elois had said, and moved on.

Parties, she had thought, were such sweet sorrow.

Josh had caught up with her in the corner farthest from the bar, near George's orange tree that he tended every morning and evening. It actually bore real oranges.

"Well, Josh," she had said, smiling at him, "we did it again." She had felt a kind of conspiratorial warmth toward him. He'd had some bad luck lately, but he was a truly talented director; unlike these others, who fed, like vampires, off the creativity of others, Josh had suffered with them through the difficult times and steered them back on course when they strayed from his vision. He had earned the right to be here, even

the right to be a friend.

"You brought it off," Josh had said. "I want you to know that." He had raised a finger to his nose. "And I want you to know that I know."

"What do you know?" The finger to the nose had alarmed her; she had felt a chill in her bowels. Surely everybody knew about Susan and George, and everybody knew that she knew and didn't care. She dreaded the possibility that Josh thought she was upset about George's infidelity but was able to cope with her marital problems and get on with her job.

"Hampdon didn't come up with that revision on his own," Josh had said, nodding wisely. "It had to be you."

Elois had shrugged, relieved. "Give the young man some credit."

"Oh, he wrote it all right. I give him credit for that. But he would never have done it on his own."

"Maybe George gave him a few pointers."

Josh had looked at her oddly. "I might have thought so," he had said, "but George was so upset about it I knew it had to be you. Besides, it had your touch."

"Well," Elois had admitted, willing to accept this small accolade in lieu of the embarrassment she might have suffered, "I might have expanded a bit on my comment to you that day. But he did it all; let any suggestion that someone else might have been involved die here."

"It will." Josh had taken her hand. She hadn't minded that. He was a dear. Every relationship was conditioned by whether the other person was male or female, but to her Josh seemed totally non-sexual, however he might appear to others. "I won't mention it to another soul. I just wanted you to know that you're a bloody genius."

She had felt the glow of his admiration and let it flow through her. It had sustained her through another hour of enforced hospitality and meaningless conversation when all she really wanted to do was to lie down and sleep for a week—maybe even to the end of the year, hibernate like a bear and wake up to find that this was 2001, or that the world had ended and she had missed the fireworks.

The first reviews had come by fax from cooperating newsrooms about 1:30 and they had been glowing, as Elois had expected. George had read them aloud to his appreciative audience, rolling the adjectives around his tongue like olives and spitting out the nouns like pits. Everybody had laughed and cheered, and everyone had been toasted again.

By two in the morning, when people should have started drifting away, leaving their thanks and congratulations and goodbyes behind them like confetti, the party had seemed to get a new surge of adrenaline when a couple of guests broke out their own supply of methamphetamine and the pipes to smoke it in. It hadn't been George—he knew how Elois felt about drugs—and she had looked around for him to subtly direct the indulgers elsewhere. But he had disappeared. So had Josh. Even Fred, who would have been no help anyway, had been gone. She had been all alone with the problem and she had not felt up to it. It wasn't, she reflected wryly, in character for the role she was playing.

She had started to look around for someone else, anyone else, when she had seen Susan standing nearby. "Where's George?" she had asked, barely considering the impropriety of the question.

Susan had shrugged.

"No, I need him," Elois had insisted.

"Why should I know where he is?" Susan had asked innocently.

Elois had looked at her and realized that Susan truly didn't know where George was, and what was more, she didn't care. She was not a good enough actress to dissemble. And that meant that George had taken up with someone else. Suddenly a great burden of uncertainty had descended upon her like the glacier in *The North Wind.* She could endure knowing who George was with and what he was doing, but she couldn't stand not knowing.

Carefully, as if she were drunk but determined not to reveal it, Elois had walked to the carved double doors and slipped between them. She had had no coat and the August nights had turned unusually cold, just like the play, but she had not thought about that. She had wanted to get away from everything her life involved.

Surrounded by the middle-aged crazies, Elois realized how foolish she had been to wander out into the Park alone so late. A street light cast enough illumination over her shoulder to reveal the faces of the men and women who formed the part of the circle she could see. She did not look behind her—she knew instinctively that would be a sign of weakness—but she knew the circle had closed there as well.

She noted the sameness of the features, the lack of emotion, the rigidity of the eyes. What set them off; what was the signal for the cold frenzy with which they committed their deeds?

Fear, she thought. Fear. Just like hers but unfocused. But they didn't attack. Why didn't they attack? Then it came to her: They were waiting for a sign from her, for her to try to get away. And she realized what she had to do.

Her features smoothed into immobility; her eyes froze. Stiffly, as if she were sleepwalking, she moved forward, reached the edge of the circle, and inserted herself between a man and a woman, turned like an automaton, and waited. An absurd phrase entered her mind but didn't alter her demeanor: If you can't beat them, join them.

The circle wavered, as if uncertain in its mindless gestalt how it should act, and then, one after the other, the contemporary Maenads turned, broke the circle, and moved in different directions until they all were gone but Elois. She waited for a moment and then, moving like the others, returned back the way she had come.

She was shaking when she reached the street. It had been, she thought, the greatest performance of her career.

Emerging onto Central Park West, she realized that she did not want to return to her apartment. The party might still be going on, and she could not make herself return to it. Instead, she got her car from the garage. For several minutes she sat at the wheel, staring blindly at her reflection in the rearview mirror, and then she started it up and drove slowly and aimlessly before she realized that she was near Fred Hampdon's hotel. Only then did it occur to her that she had not been driving aimlessly. All along she had known she would end up here, but she had not let herself think about it.

She hesitated for several minutes outside the hotel before she summoned the strength to move. How would Fred respond? What would she do if he turned her away? How would she excuse her presumption? And then she knew that there were worse fates than embarrassment. She had almost experienced one of them, and she had been living several of them.

She found herself outside Hampdon's door. She raised her hand to knock, hesitated, and then rapped

once and then, when no answer came, twice more. She was turning away in the institutional hallway with its muted red carpet when the door lock clicked behind her. She swung back to see the door open and Fred appear in the dim light behind it. He was clad in his pajama bottoms and looked ruffled and young and so appealing that she had to swallow hard.

"Elois?" he whispered.

And then a voice came from the room behind. "I told you not to answer the door. For god's sake, Fred, tell whoever it is to go away."

Elois froze where she was standing, feeling almost like the mindless Maenads in the Park. It was a man's voice. And the man was George.

When she got back to her apartment, she told the stragglers at the party firmly that the party was over and it was time to go home. And when the guests had gone and even the waitresses had been shooed out the door, Elois picked up George's orange tree, carried it to the balcony behind the bar, and dropped it carefully over the edge into the empty street.

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# Chapter Ten

**August 24, 2000**
**Sally Krebs**

The saucer-shaped spaceship sat on top of the hill as if it had been built there. Sally Krebs saw it first from above as the CNN private jet banked over the site remote in the Tunguska region of the central Siberian plateau. The ship shimmered in the near-Arctic sunlight as if it were made of some alien matter eager to slip the surly bonds of Earth and regain its rightful place among the stars.

"Look at that thing!" the cameraman said, as he tried to get a shot through the window. "I thought UFOs flitted around in the dark, like. You know, like nobody should be sure they saw them or be sure if they was really there. That thing looks like it wants to be seen."

"This is Siberia, not Manhattan," Sally Krebs said. "This is the kind of place where a mysterious explosion could send a pillar of fire into the air that could be seen hundreds of kilometers away and make a noise that could be heard as far as a thousand kilometers, and level a forest for one hundred kilometers around. And nobody would get around to investigating it for thirteen years."

"You think there's some connection?" Sid asked.

"Between Tunguska and now? No, that happened in 1908, and not more than a couple hundred kilometers from here, but the point is this area hasn't become a lot more accessible since then. No trains, no air routes anywhere near, almost no roads."

They could fly overhead but they couldn't land. They spotted a few villages within a ten-kilometer radius, but no airports. Eventually they found a runway north of the Arctic circle at Igarka after their Intourist guide and interpreter had spent nearly an hour on the radio persuading the local authorities that they had authorization from Moscow. By then the fuel supply was getting low and the strip below was too short and barely distinguishable from the surrounding tundra. But they helped the pilot get the plane down in one piece by holding their breath and squeezing hard on their armrests.

Sally sat silently in her seat when the jet finally stopped. Sweat trickled down her sides under her shirt

and her legs felt as if the blood had drained from them, and she wondered, not for the first time, what she was doing in this business that sent her so far from home and comfort and safety. Here she was, in a region of Siberia that might never have been visited before by an American woman, facing a trek across the wilderness, with three men and a camera, to explore an alien artifact. It wasn't fair, she thought, and then she took a deep breath and said to herself, "This is adventure." And this was what the business was all about.

Her stiffened backbone sagged again after hours of negotiation to find a vehicle they could rent that would transport them at least 500 kilometers through the Siberian wasteland. Alexei, the interpreter, did most of the talking, but Sally had to be there; she could not allow the interpreter to assume the leadership of *her* project. As it turned out, Alexei's credentials had no influence on the skeptical Igarkans. The authorities finally produced a battered relic of a Red Army jeep on which, years before, someone had mounted a wooden shell to keep out the Arctic blasts—after Sally had accidentally displayed her briefcase with its CNN insignia. Alexei said they were afraid she was a witch who could curse them, but Sally had been through it before: even in the depths of Siberia, people were intimidated by the power of television.

The trip to the UFO site was a nightmare of jolting along barely defined roads and wilderness trails, her feet on sleeping bags and provisions and cans of gasoline, a tripod-mounted camera nestled between herself and Sid. Alexei and the Igarkan driver sat in front. The night was short, only a couple of hours—a bit like the trans-Atlantic flight east—and they stopped only to relieve themselves and to open a package of Russian sandwiches: heavy dark bread and greasy sausages. Sid knew enough to let Sally fend for herself, but Alexei helped her in and out of the jeep and showed her to the best bushes where he gallantly turned his back and guarded her privacy. He even offered the first swallow from the bottle of vodka he pulled from his sleeping bag.

Sally wanted to tell him, bluntly, that this was business and they all were equal. But getting out of the one right-hand door to the jeep, stiffened as she was by the long ride, wasn't easy, and she was going to need his cooperation before this crazy assignment was completed. Moreover he was strikingly handsome. Still, she knew from the way he touched her that he had the wrong idea about who she was and what she wanted. That could be trouble—and yet she wasn't sure it was *entirely* the wrong idea. His dark, brooding Russian expression and his liquid grace were compelling, and if his European gallantry wasn't simply a courting maneuver, he might be an exciting lover. She also told herself that she was unlikely to see him again after this assignment was over.

On the other hand, Sid might carry back stories that would change her image with the people who made assignments.

They got lost three times and had to retrace their paths, the jeep's radiator boiled over twice and the engine stopped completely once until the carburetor was removed and cleaned, and they had to cut their way through brush and small trees innumerable times. Finally, three days after they set off from Igarka, they pushed their way through brush that had overgrown the trail and emerged onto a broad dirt road. It had been constructed within the last year, Sally thought, and it had experienced considerable recent use. At one end of the road, still a couple of kilometers away, stood the hill with the spaceship sitting on top of it like two metal saucers placed rim to rim.

At the other end of the road was a village. They went there first, wanting to get some information about the spaceship before they approached it, but the peasants were wary. They had seen Red Army vehicles before, apparently, and nothing good had come with them. Even if none of the strangers wore uniforms or carried weapons, the villagers preferred not to talk to them. But they admired the camera and when Sid began to tape scenes of the village, they jostled each other in their eagerness to get into the pictures.

After that, as if Sid's activities had delivered them from an oath of secrecy, they began to answer Alexei's questions.

Eventually, however, he turned to Sally frustrated and puzzled. "Yes," he said, "they know about the spaceship. How could they deny it? They built the road. But, they say, there are no aliens."

Sally shivered as if a blast of arctic air had blown down from Igarka. Something was wrong here. Perhaps the aliens had not yet emerged. Perhaps the aliens had brainwashed the villagers, making them forget all about their existence. If so, where were they now?

Perhaps the villagers *were* the aliens.

"Let's go see," she said, and they got back into the jeep and headed down the broad dirt road that led to the enigmatic spaceship on the hill.

The word about the spaceship sighting had come from New York in the form of a telephone call to the high-ceilinged room in the Ukraine Hotel on the banks of the Moscow River. Moscow was filled with diplomats and news crews, and Sally had been relegated to the outer circle, more than two kilometers from Red Square.

The building itself was an impressive pile of stone and concrete in the Stalin pseudo-gothic wedding-cake style to be found all over Moscow and Eastern Europe. But there still had been a large, older woman sitting at a desk by the elevator on every floor, as much to keep track of the comings and goings of the guests and to control contacts by Soviet citizens, as to provide hotel services. A big, decent-enough restaurant, when it had the ingredients, led off the cold, polished-marble lobby, but each floor still had its small, Russian buffet where women not far removed from their villages served tea from giant kettles. Gorbachevian reforms had revolutionized the Soviet state and Yeltsin's experiments in free-enterprise had begun the transformation of the Russian economy, but basic habits were hard to change. Sally sometimes wondered about the listening devices cunningly concealed in selected rooms and whether successors to the KGB still listened because nobody had told them to stop, or whether the words fell into empty rooms.

If she had been in Moscow on open assignment, she would have suggested a feature on the Russian secret police and its survival into the year 2000 and what that said about the lingering resistance to the political changes that had shrunk the Soviet empire almost to its pre-World War II borders, and then the shattered the Soviets into their constituent and quarreling republics. The secret police were still a force, the Russian Army was still a massive presence, Soviet missiles with nuclear warheads, wherever they were located, still were ample to blow up the rest of the world, and some Soviet citizens had confessed to her an uneasy feeling that conservatives were mobilizing again for a political coup that would return "the good old days," perhaps with a dramatic incident that would force tighter governmental controls.

But she was in Moscow to report a different kind of spirit: the summit meeting of the millennium—not just the U.S. and the Russia or even the major Western powers, but leaders from East and West and from Australia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America as well. They were gathering in Moscow beginning that day and continuing for an entire week to shape the world of the 21st century. Of course everything had been carefully worked out behind the scenes in diplomatic meetings at the United Nations and meetings of regional organizations, and particularly at two- power and later five-power mini-summits.

The next week would be an occasion to ratify those agreements, to sign non-aggression pacts all over the place, to make announcements about the dismantling of warheads and plans to prevent further proliferation, and to shake hands and generally publish platitudes about freedom and peace and plenty and good will. The news media knew all that, knew that nothing that truly could be defined as news

would come out of this event, could predict exactly what would happen, could script it better than the spin-doctors themselves. But they could not stay away.

This had been an *Event* . This had been the contemporary counterpart of the Congress of Vienna or the Yalta Conference. Here would be shaped, perhaps with greater success than its predecessors, the political world of the 21st century. And from here, for the next week, anchor people would announce the obvious with the Kremlin walls or Lenin's tomb or the Cathedral of St. Basil the Blessed in the background, and they would query their traveling correspondents and political experts to learn answers already imprinted on prompters.

And Sally would have been there, getting establishing footage, hunting up illustrative shots from the archives, interviewing fifty Soviet citizens and a dozen tourists for commentary to break up the scenes of talking heads—maybe, if she had been lucky, stumbling on a real news break that would get her identified on the air or at least recognition or a commendation from the studio executives in New York. By such means—the right place and the right time coinciding with recognition of its significance and the readiness to film—were careers lifted out of the earthbound into the stratosphere.

So Sally had been analyzing the likely chain of events, cultivating her sources, planning the official schedule with notes about targets of opportunity, when the telephone had rung. The sound had startled her. Visitors to Moscow, even in these latter, relaxed days, were always tense, waiting subconsciously for the tap on the shoulder, the knock on the door, the ring of the telephone. Only when one left and felt the arbitrary hand of the state released did one realize that one's nerves and muscles and even a place at the back of the brain had been knotted all this time.

Sally had picked up the telephone. It had been Atlanta, and after a few moments Sally had been connected with Lloyd Saunders, her immediate supervisor at CNN News. "Take a small crew—just you and Sid ought to be enough—and go check out a UFO sighting somewhere on the central Siberian plateau. Not too far from Tunguska."

"Tunguska?"

"You know—the place of that mysterious explosion in 1908."

"Oh, that one."

He didn't miss the irony. "You can look it up. Anyway, I'll give you the coordinates. There's nothing nearby except maybe a village."

"Why are you doing this to me, Lloyd?"

"I'm just trying to get you out of the deadly routine of the Moscow summit."

"Seriously. I'm going to chase to the ends of nowhere and find—nothing."

"There's something, Sally. *Pravda* ran a story about it—."

"*Pravda* is always running stories about UFOs and aliens. When it comes to that sort of stuff, they're the *National Enquirer* of Eastern Europe."

"We've got confirmation from a confidential source in the Pentagon. There's a spaceship sitting on a hill out there."

"They're pulling one on you, Lloyd."

"I'd think so, too, kid, but we've got stories about similar sightings from Uruguay, New Guinea, Zaire, and northern California in the Mount Shasta area. We've dispatched crews to each of them."

Sally gave up. "It'll take time to reach there, even after we get permission."

"I'm on it already. Don't worry: this is sweetness-and- light time. You can take the Lear jet. Get me a good story, kid."

"Sure, Lloyd." And after she put down the telephone she said it again to the empty air.

The closer they got to the spaceship on the hill, the shabbier it looked. The surface of the metal was battered as if by hammer blows; the portholes were black, gaping holes. What had happened here? Sally wondered. She began to construct a scenario in which a spaceship had landed and the frightened villagers had stormed the hill, forced their way into the ship, and exterminated the aliens. Or, she thought, this was a crewless observation vessel, and it had sat there for days, months, perhaps even years, until the villagers, impatient for consequences, had turned upon the ship in anger and disappointment.

Sid was getting tape, but she could tell from his shoulders and his moving eyebrows that he didn't know what to make of it either. Alexei seemed unconcerned, as if this were the mania of these absurd Westerners and it was none of his business. The road was rough here, however, and he grasped her elbow to steady her as they approached.

As they got within a hundred meters, the ship began to appear as if it had been pieced together out of odd bits of sheet metal. She could see where they had been nailed together.

"What's going on here?" Sid asked.

"I don't understand," Sally said.

Slowly they went around the structure. It was the same on all sides. Its circular shape had been an illusion; up close it had angles like a hexagon or an octagon. It only looked like a spaceship.

"Come here," Alexei said. He ducked under one corner of the structure. Sally followed and stood up inside a darkened space illuminated here and there by sunlight coming through what once had appeared like portholes. As her eyes adjusted, she saw that they were standing inside a wooden framework to which the sheets of metal had been nailed. On the insides of some of the sheets were printed Cyrillic letters and a few pictures or paintings. One of them was of a Pepsi Cola bottle.

Sid followed them. After he had adjusted his lenses he began to tape the interior. They waited in silence until he was done.

"Take it back to the village and get the antenna set up so that we can relay everything to the satellite in"—Sally checked her watch—"an hour and a half. We'll walk back."

When Sid was gone, Sally turned to Alexei.

"It is—. How do you say it in English?" Alexei asked. "A representation."

"An icon," Sally said.

"Of some new religion perhaps."

"The villagers—they built it."

Alexei nodded.

"It must have been a tremendous effort for them—comparable to a pyramid for the Pharaohs."

"All is possible to the Russian soul."

"They must have scavenged sheet metal from everywhere."

"These are the people who built the cathedrals. That's what this is—a cathedral. To a new religion."

"No," Sally said. "A decoy."

Alexei looked at her for a moment in the gloom and then shrugged. "What does it matter? It is only peasant folly. And you see"—he pointed to a corner where a blanket covered a pile of straw—"the young people of the village have used this place for their own ceremonies."

"Yes," she said, moistening her suddenly dry lips. She wondered suddenly at her motivation for sending Sid back to the village.

"You have been sent on a—what do you call it?—wild-goose chase."

"Not quite," she said and was annoyed that she sounded a little breathless.

"Perhaps," he said, "there can be compensations." He took her arms in his hands and kissed her with what she thought of as Slavic intensity and drew her toward the blanket.

She returned to the everyday world and the smell of moldy straw. She peered at her watch in the darkness. "My God," she said, "we've got only twenty minutes until my story has to be ready."

"A few more minutes," he said, reaching for her. "There will be other news stories, but occasions like this are rare."

But she already was struggling into her clothes. She didn't want to look at him, concerned that she might not be able to resist his appeal. Then, when she could not help but see him out of the corner of her eye, she thought that his features were a little heavy and that he had a weak mouth and a roll of fat around his middle.

She went down the hill, not worried about her footing, not caring whether he was following her, and half ran-half walked to the village. She made her self-imposed deadline with only two minutes to spare. Sid had the folding antenna fanned out next to the jeep and already hunting the signal that would zero it in on the satellite. When the antenna steadied, Sid pressed the button that started the rapid transmission of the tapes he had shot.

By the time Sally had picked up the handset Sid was finished and she had regained her breath. "Sally Krebs, Central Siberia, to CNN News, Atlanta, Lloyd Saunders. Lloyd," she said, not hoping to get an answer, "we've just sent you all the tapes Sid shot, but it's just a human-interest piece."

"I know," Lloyd said. "Sally, I'm glad you're there. We were worried about you—."

"That's why you've been monitoring the satellite? Well, listen, it's a cargo cult. Like in New Guinea after World War II. The natives built airstrips and airplanes hoping to entice the gods to send them cargo directly instead of having it intercepted by the white man. These poor peasants are hoping to lure aliens here to give them wonderful gifts: electricity, washing machines, television, VCRs, automobiles."

There was a pause for the message to get halfway around the world. "I know," Lloyd said. "But it's not just peasants. Those people in northern California were expecting immortality, a cure for cancer,

enlightenment about the nature and meaning of the universe—maybe even a trip to the stars."

"If you knew," Sally said, "why did you send me here?"

Another pause. "You just took longer. The other crews discovered the same thing, although we had to get some experts to figure out what it all meant."

"Thanks a lot," Sally said.

"But you've got to get out of there," Lloyd said, not waiting for Sally's response. "All hell broke loose in Moscow after you left. The President was assassinated, a new hard-line government has taken over, and we weren't sure for a while if they would let out the diplomats, much less the news media. If the coup leaders had had time to consolidate their power, I'm not sure that they wouldn't have held the world's leaders as hostages. As it was, they all got away in the confusion except the French, the Indian delegation, and a few African representatives. And the Chinese party secretary—although it's not sure whether he was trapped or stayed on purpose.

"Anyway, it's not safe to go back to Moscow. If you can get enough fuel, the experts say the best bet is to fly south to Ulan Bator."

"Thanks a lot," she said again, and wondered if Alexei would want to depart with them.

No, she thought. It would be better for everyone if they left him behind in Igarka and let him make his way back, if he wished, to Moscow.

But she was more concerned about the fact that this stupid assignment might have canceled her rendezvous with fame.

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# Chapter Eleven

**September 12, 2000**
**Murray Smith-Ng**

The observation hut sat on the edge of the volcano's jagged rim like a hunched vulture brooding over the absence of carrion; it had rested there for twenty years while its occupants had read the instruments connected to sensors in the crater below and watched, with growing contempt, the wisps of vapor escaping from ancient vents.

Murray Smith-Ng looked out the window facing the crater, admiring the yellow sulfur deposits on the jagged peaks and lower in the pit the steam jets, boiling wells, and mud cauldrons that dotted the crater floor. Its bright colors—reds, yellows, greens—made it resemble a scene from a Disney version of *The Inferno* , complete with odors of fire and brimstone and the sound of subterranean rumblings.

"I still don't understand why you're here," Richard Kelso said. The tall vulcanologist was standing just behind Smith-Ng and to his left as they looked into the crater. Behind them was a table with a vertical centerboard studded with instruments registering their measurements and recording devices vomiting paper trails, all inside a wicker enclosure. Above them draped fabric softened the lines of the ceiling. A generator chugging outside fed power to the window air conditioner that ran constantly to combat both the tropical heat and the volcanic vapors.

"To check my equations against the reality," Smith-Ng said. "But I hadn't realized it would be so overpowering."

"You still think it's going to blow?"

"I'm just like that equipment over there," Smith-Ng said. "You put the figures into the equations, and the equations tell you whether there will be a catastrophic change."

"And your equations tell you something catastrophic is going to happen here at Papandayan?"

"Not just at Papandayan. If my calculations are right, volcanoes will erupt all around the circle of flames."

"Ring of fire," Kelso corrected dryly.

"You've found me out," Smith-Ng said. "I don't know a caldera from a hole in the ground. I just plug in the figures I get from people who do know volcanoes. As I understand it, a great belt of volcanoes girdles the basin of the Pacific—the 'ring of fire,' as you call it."

A vigorous jet of steam spurted almost to the crater rim before it evaporated. The floor of the hut trembled, and Smith- Ng looked quickly at Kelso. The vulcanologist shrugged and raised his pale eyebrows.

"We get volcanoes in the same regions as earthquakes. Probably the same underlying reason for both—the places where the earth is still folding and fracturing. They may not be directly related, but both seem to be means of relieving local strains. Just south of here the Indo-Australian plate is submerging itself under the Eurasian plate."

"You seem to be a lot less positive you know what's going on down there than some of your fellow vulcanologists," Smith-Ng said.

"They're theorists. I'm an experimentalist. Theories are always neater than reality."

"That's what I am, of course," Smith-Ng said, his round face trickling with sweat from the Java climate and the still active volcano below. "A theorist. And I gather you don't think much of my theories."

Kelso gestured at the crater. "Words and numbers seem inadequate to describe something like that. It's like trying to confine an elemental force. When you've seen what a volcano can do, without warning, you feel more like the primitives who thought they were sleeping gods and prayed to keep them from waking up."

"Speaking of that," Smith-Ng said, "my driver mentioned a word when he left me off: barata-something.…"

"Bharatagadha," Kelso said. "It's the Indonesian version of Ragnarok. The final cosmic battle of the gods. There's a strange similarity among the legends of the various races. All of them visualize the world ending in some catastrophic way. As if they knew stuff science hasn't figured out yet."

"Ragnarok," Smith-Ng said. "Bharatagadha. I'll have to work those in somewhere." A mud cauldron welled higher and spilled over into boiling wells nearby. "Is it doing something?" Smith-Ng asked. His voice went up a note.

"Sometimes there's a little more activity," Kelso said, "sometimes a little less."

"Why do I feel you'd be disappointed," Smith-Ng said, his eyes fixed upon the crater floor, "if my calculations proved useful, if your sleeping gods became predictable?"

Kelso didn't look at him. "Of course I'd rather you were wrong. Here, at least. Do you know what

happened in 1772 when Papandayan erupted?"

Smith-Ng shook his head.

"It blew out most of a mountain. It destroyed a sizable portion of the countryside around and killed thousands of people. And that was before Java became the most heavily populated nation in the world—more than 1,500 people per square mile. Think what it would do today. And you wonder why I hope your predictions are wrong?"

"Well," Smith-Ng said, a little uneasy, as always, when confronted by the real world, "even if it happens, I didn't make it happen, you know."

"I know. You asked if I'd be disappointed. Put it a little stronger: dismayed, disturbed, maybe even disintegrated. Because there have been signs—rumblings, a bit of seismic activity, an increase in the temperatures of the mud cauldrons and in the flows of the boiling wells."

"That's part of the input to my equations. The rest is data gathered from around the circle of fire. The experts tell me we're in for a renewed episode of volcanic activity, culminating toward the end of December. As a matter of fact, it's already starting. I saw eruptions in Kamchatka, Japan, the Philippines.…"

"You still haven't answered my first question: what you're doing here," Kelso said. "If you think Papandayan is going to erupt in the next day or two—"

"The next twelve hours if my equations are correct."

"Why are you here?"

"What do you mean?"

"If it goes up," Kelso said, "chances are it takes you along."

Smith-Ng stared at Kelso blankly while several hundred feet below them the crater floor began to buckle. Kelso moved quickly for a big man. He ran to the recording instruments in the center of the room, vaulting the wicker enclosure. The crater floor opened like a china platter shattering in slow motion. Vapor poured out of the cracks and rose in columns that joined into one. Explosions rocked the hut. A block of stone as big as a small automobile hurtled past the window. Through the ascending ashes and descending mud as they mixed with the condensing steam, Smith-Ng saw, awe mixed with terror, glimpses of glowing lava rising in the volcano's throat like the anger of a vengeful god.

It had all started out of frustration.

The day after the impromptu celebration with his seminar class, Calley—she of the cool reserve and the tantalizing hand— had stopped by his office to say hello. On impulse, he had asked her if she were going to attend a regional meeting of mathematicians.

She hadn't planned on it. Should she go, she had asked, her eyes on her professor.

It was important to be involved early in one's academic career, Smith-Ng had said, avoiding the possible misinterpretations of a direct answer. To be seen. To experience the profession. To give a paper, even as a graduate student, was even better, but, of course, it was a little late for that.

And all the while, as he had heard his words babbling as if they came from someone else and the perspiration beaded at his hairline, he could not avoid the realization that she had touched him intimately

and that she knew that he was thinking about that touch as he spoke so professorially.

Was he going, she had asked.

"Well, yes," he had said. "I have a paper to give." It was, he had heard himself say, a paper that had emerged from the very seminar she had experienced. A paper about catastrophism, about the end of the world.

"If it came from the seminar," she had said, with a smile as enigmatic as the Mona Lisa's, "then I really ought to be there."

He had almost forgotten the conversation—it played in his fantasies but not in his waking life—when he checked into the conference hotel. He was walking toward the elevator with his bag when a slender figure clothed in faded jeans and a lacy white blouse had intersected his path.

"Professor Smith-Ng," Calley had said. "I came to the meeting as you suggested. But there's one small problem."

"Yes?"

"There are no rooms available."

"No rooms?" he had heard himself say. "Then you must take mine."

She had taken his arm instead and half-urged him forward into the elevator. She had lifted his hand that did not hold the bag—what is she doing? he had time to wonder—and looked at the key held tightly in it. "Oh, I couldn't do that," she had said, and had pushed the button for the floor of the room inscribed on the key.

After that everything had happened as inevitably as in his dreams and almost as satisfyingly. They had left the room only when he gave his talk, and then only because Calley insisted, and once when, tired of room service, they had met at a restaurant remote from the conference hotel, even though Calley had scoffed at his caution and had asked if he were ashamed of her.

He had not even cared that his paper went over badly and that he had been challenged from the floor to back up his theories with checkable predictions. "This isn't catastrophism," the mathematician from Purdue had shouted. "This is charlatanism."

When he had returned home, exhausted from his regained youth but spiritually reinvigorated, he had found the courage to leave his wife and to rent an apartment. Not catastrophism indeed. With the surprise of his wife still swirling like a halo around his head, he had called Calley and heard her cool voice saying that she was going to Europe for the summer.

"With whom?" he had asked, hearing himself once again.

"Now, Professor," her voice had come over the telephone, "you sound like my father."

He was proud of himself that he had not protested or pleaded or reminded her of her breathless words in the dark. He knew the dubious value of words in the dark, even though his own, as he had demonstrated upon his return, had endured into the day. "Have a good trip," he had said and hung up gently.

Everything was catastrophe.

In an unprecedented act of hubris, before he could reflect upon it and conjure up a congerie of reasons

why such an act would be unwise and an accompanying set of scenarios in which he came off the fool or the buffoon, he had telephoned Lisa. Surprisingly enough, she still had been in town, and, even more surprising, not surprised to hear his voice.

She had accepted his invitation to dinner and enjoyed, with good appetite, the meal he had prepared with his own hands, wiping the last bit of sauce from her spaghetti plate with a bit of crusty bread, fishing the last bit of salad from the wooden bowls he had purchased just that day at the so-called import store, draining the last bit of Chianti from her glass. And she had come easily out of her sweater and jeans, her breasts even more erotic than he had imagined, her hips even rounder. As a matter of fact, it had been Lisa who had asked him for a tour of his new apartment and had turned to him, looking up provocatively out of the corner of her blue eyes, asking whether he had baptized the new mattress. And it had been Lisa who, fulfilling all his fantasies, had removed his clothing as well as her own and had made love to *him*.

Why hadn't it been enough? Why, in the afterglow of satiety, holding her ample flesh, seeing her red hair scattered upon his pillow, had he asked her why she had accepted his invitation, why she had not been surprised.

"Calley said you would call," she had said.

He had paused before he responded, trying to master the anger rising in his throat. "You mean I'm that predictable?" he had asked evenly.

She had laughed, heartily, unaffectedly. "All men are predictable."

"And you talk about them?"

"Why not? Just the way guys talk about women."

"You talked about me."

"I'm not one of her best friends. But we both knew you were hot."

"And Calley passed me along. How thoughtful of her."

"You were the one who called."

"What did she say about me?"

Lisa had smiled. "That you were boyish and sweet and terribly grateful." She had started to say something else and then had stopped and shaken her head. She had pulled his head down to her chest; her hand had moved down his body. "Talk is good," she had said, "but sometimes action is better."

"What else did Calley say?" Smith-Ng had insisted, his face pressed into those breasts he had admired so much.

"Nothing," she had said, her hand teasing him back toward amorousness.

"I want to know."

"If you insist," Lisa had said lightly, "she said you were enthusiastic but you needed guidance."

Although she had been with him twice after that, nothing was the same. The second time Lisa had said, "You really don't want me, do you? You just want to want me."

When she hadn't resonded to his calls, he had turned to volcanoes. They might be temperamental, but they were always there for him.

The route that had brought Smith-Ng to Papandayan had taken him around the western arc of the circle of fire. The seemingly interminable flight from the U.S. had passed near Kamchatka, with its dozen or so active volcanoes, before landing at Narita Airport outside Tokyo. Dust and ashes from the eruption of Bandai-san about 120 miles to the north still were being scoured from ledges and swept from the streets. Even had there been time, Smith-Ng could not have explored the strange philosophic resignation with which the majority of the Japanese accepted the breathing presence of their islands. But the airport, always crowded, teemed with further hordes who refused to share the fate that might await Japan.

Departing, the airplane had passed over the lava-filled mouth of Fuji-san, and, a couple of hours later, over the troubled Philippines, shaken by earthquakes, volcanic explosions, and revolutions. The airport at Singapore, five and a half hours after take-off from Tokyo, had been quiet, but whiffs of sulfurous smoke from Sumatra had drifted by the windows. Singapore, however, had been nervously quiet as it digested the effects on the world's economy of the approaching third millennium.

Only half an hour away, Djakarta had astonished Smith-Ng with its contrasts. In Singapore the past was carefully preserved among the skyscrapers; in Djakarta it existed side by side with the future. From the air this city of nine million had looked like a patchwork quilt of green trees and mossy, orange- tiled roofs, all surrounded by innumerable villages. On the ground Djakarta was divided by the ten-lane Jolan Thamrin.

An English-speaking Indonesian businessman who had sat beside him in the van from the airport had pointed out the *bongkaran* to the west, the packing-crate warrens set among bubbling, black-water canals in which people bathed and brushed their teeth while others defecated into the same water from bamboo scaffolds. To the east was Menteng, the white-washed mansions of old wealth and new.

Along Jolan Thamrin itself were foreign embassies, luxury hotels, glass-and-steel towers, and the 430-feet-tall marble National Monument capped by 77 pounds of pure, flaming gold. Smith-Ng had stood for a moment at the canopied glass entrance to his hotel and looked at a scene he could never have imagined: modern automobiles and buses competing with bicycles and motor scooters and pedicab drivers. Transvestites parading along the sidewalk; *banci* his Indonesian companion had called them, and the prostitutes, *WTS's* , which translated as "women of wounded morals." And the peddlers pushing carts loaded with Gucci-like bags and Levi-like jeans and the fast-food venders with their smoking kabobs and goat's feet soup. The street had been filled with odors, the familiar ones of internal-combustion engines and human wastes and the strange ones of spices and tropical blossoms like the frangipani.

Above the noise of the traffic and the shoulder-to-shoulder people had come a strange music like Arabic melodies set to a rock beat. The figures of the people were slight—he felt grossly overfed and overweight among them—and the faces were brown and handsome. The women were beautiful, and the men were even more beautiful. Before he had left Djakarta for Bandung and the resort city of Garut not far from Papandayan in the company of an English-speaking driver, Smith-Ng had begun to distinguish differences among the various races mingled together in Indonesia that his companion had pointed out: the Javanese, the Sundanese, the Balinese, the Buginese, and the Mandonese. And, of course, the Chinese.

For the trip the driver had brought along a native lunch of salted eggs and rice cakes in banana leaves, which he shared with Smith-Ng, who, improvidently, had brought nothing. He had escorted Smith-Ng to the foot of Papandayan and then, looking up at the smoking peak, had refused to go farther. "There have been omens," he had said.

"Omens?" Smith-Ng had repeated.

The Javanese had gestured broadly. "Omens. The *Bharatagadha* may be at hand."

"The *Bharatagadha* ?" Smith-Ng had asked, but the driver would say nothing more. Smith-Ng had shrugged and started his difficult, panting way to the top of the mountain of old lava— all 8,744 feet of it.

With the world exploding around him, Smith-Ng had time to feel a moment of triumph before the realization of what was happening sank in. Catastrophes were better considered from a distance. Close up they were dramatic, but too final. He had always been terrified of instability. Throughout his career he had tried to protect himself from abrupt change. Perhaps catastrophism, the search for mathematical certainty, was his way of appeasing the gods, much like the prayers of the Indonesians.

But as these reflections crossed his mind he was already turning toward Kelso. "What do we do now?" he asked.

"Die, I'd guess." Kelso opened a drawer in the table. He pulled out a gas mask and tossed it to Smith-Ng before he brought out another for himself. "But you are in luck. Normally there's two of us here, but Greg took a week off. Put that on."

By the time Smith-Ng had struggled into the unfamiliar hood and adjusted the straps, Kelso had opened a gate in the wicker, motioned him inside the railing, and fastened the gate behind him. "Unlike you," Kelso said, his voice distorted by the mask he was wearing, his face looking alien in the gathering gloom, "we may not be able to predict the future, but we prepare for it."

He lifted a protective plastic shield from a switch on the table and pressed it closed. Cables exploded below the table. He pushed another button and the walls of the hut fell outward. The volcano's wrath struck them. Heat blasted against Smith-Ng's face and neck and hands but did nothing to warm the cold terror that came with the realization of imminent death.…

He heard a rushing sound like gas escaping, and felt someone shaking him. Kelso's goggled face was close to his. The floor shifted under his feet. Panic flooded his throat.

"Hang on!" Kelso shouted and moved Smith-Ng's hands to the wicker railing.

Smith-Ng clung to it, even as the wicker jerked under his hands and he felt his body moving, rising. "This is it," he had time to think. "The top of the volcano has blown away." For him the millennial year was over; he would not be around to see the end of it. And then he realized that they were rising too slowly for that. He looked up. The fabric that had been draped below the ceiling now was curved toward him like a balloon. He looked down and saw, through occasional breaks in the smoke, the complete jagged circle of the volcano's mouth slowly filling with red vomit.

Then they were above the smoke, high in the air, drifting above green valleys, leaving Papandayan and its waking god behind. "We're going to live," he said. As Kelso looked at him he realized that the vulcanologist had removed his mask. "We're going to live!" he shouted joyously. Kelso nodded and motioned to Smith-Ng's mask. Only then did Smith-Ng realize that not only were his hands clenched to the railing of what now clearly was the basket of a balloon but that he could not possibly release them to remove the mask. Moreover, as the balloon drifted along the length of Java, high enough that he could see ocean on either side, he realized that they were not safe and that he was terribly, desperately afraid of heights.

The basket swung in the clear, bright air, and he clung to it, forgetting Calley and Lisa, and his wife, afraid even to hope that he would set his feet on the solid ground again.

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# Chapter Twelve

**September 24, 2000**
**Barbara Shepherd**

Barbara Shepherd was all tied up. Her arms, stretched above her head, were fastened together at the wrist with rough twine, and her wrists were bound to the handle of a pitchfork whose tines had been driven deep into the dirt floor of the horse stall. Her legs were stretched just as tightly in the other direction, and her ankles, bound together like her wrists, were fastened to the pillar on the other side of the stall.

Isaiah had knotted them with the skill of a farmer used to tying bales of hay. The twine, bristling with coarse, loose fibers, cut into Shepherd's soft skin, and the straw beneath her, odorous with horse urine and dung, was lumpy beneath her back, protected only by the thin flannel of a nightgown.

Isaiah had come for her in the night, creeping into the women's barracks with the grace peculiar to a big man, awakening her with a rough hand over her mouth and a whisper in her ear. "Come!" he said. She had been summoned to the service of God. Mutely she rose and followed him into the chill night, without a robe, without shoes or slippers.

In the months before she had sought out this sanctuary, she had read stories in those scandalous supermarket weeklies about Isaiah's "marriages." He was, they had said, the self-proclaimed Prophet of the Second Coming, and Prophets were not bound by the rules of lesser men. She had not believed the stories. Recently, however, she had overhead some of the other women mentioning private audiences with the Prophet, and noticed some of the comelier women looking aside and smiling. Even then she had not believed: Isaiah was a man of God, and what need had he of the consolations of the flesh?

But if the stories were true, if this was the contribution she could make to the Prophet, if she could ease for a moment his awesome responsibilities and comfort his terrible encounters with the Almighty, well, she had given herself to lesser men for lesser purposes. Isaiah had promised that his flock would be saved. She believed that Judgment Day would come upon the world within a few months. And in that Judgment Day, she believed, the sins of the flesh would be melted away and they, the Saved, would be reborn as pure spirit.

She had not struggled when he bound her nor even when he swore because she was too short to tie between pillars and he had to substitute the pitchfork, driving it angrily into the earthen floor with all the strength of his massive back and shoulders. If this was his will and his way, her chosen way was to submit without question. But for some minutes now she had heard him digging in the soft dirt in the far corner of the barn, and when he returned with a damp spade in his hand, she would have screamed if he had not silenced her with an upraised hand.

He tossed the spade into the corner of the stall. "It is not meet," he said, the bass rumble of his preacher's voice bouncing off the bare wooden walls, "for a sinner to share the Kingdom of God."

For a confused moment she thought he was referring to himself. But then she realized that he meant her. She was a sinner, she knew, and all her revelation, all her conversion, all her humiliation of the flesh, all her obedience, had come to this.

Isaiah removed his heavy belt. He unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans, let them fall into the dirt, and stepped out of them. With the belt folded in his hand he knelt beside her and then with a strong, quick movement turned her onto her stomach, twisting the ropes into her wrists and ankles, and ripped her

nightgown up the back.

"How beautiful she is," Isaiah said, as if speaking to himself, or to God. He sighed. "Surely she is a succubus, come to steal the souls of men."

The air was cold on her bare buttocks before the belt descended upon them and she screamed, partly from the pain but even more from the realization that she was damned and that she was going to die.

The religious commune along the northern California coast had seemed like just the place her awakened soul had yearned for. The fog was creeping over the mountain range to the west, and redwoods towered to the north and east. Between them, glowing in sunlight, nestled in its valley like the vision of a pocket Arcadia, was the farm that she had dreamed about since she had first heard of it six months ago. The original quinta with its glistening white walls and red-tiled roof sprawled at the far end of the valley flanked by a newer, rectangular building on one side and a giant barn on the other. Two meadows adjoining the barn were enclosed by white, board fences. Hereford cattle stood in one, lining a feeding trough, their coats gleaming red and white in the sunlight. Magnificent Appaloosas threw up their heads in the other before, in their exuberance, they galloped off around the turf of their enclosure.

Between Shepherd and the buildings, rows of neatly cultivated gardens had reached to her across the valley. Bonneted figures in long dresses had stood and stooped in the fields. Shepherd had sighed. Who would have thought that this kind of paradise could exist anywhere on earth in this year of judgment?

For minutes she had sat there, unwilling to break the spell that this place had worked upon her heart, and then, at last, she had started up the automobile where it sat on the gravel road looking down into the valley and drove her BMW between the fields and up the long drive that led to the ranch house.

Isaiah himself had greeted her. Coming out through the massive front doors, the morning sun turning his white hair into a halo-like nimbus around his massive head, he looked every bit the splendid saint she had seen on television, and when he spoke, his voice so much more impressive than the broadcasts could reproduce, she knew that she had made the right decision.

"Welcome to the kingdom of God," he had said.

He had taken her hand in his. It had felt big and rough and strong. She could trust it to do what was right, and she had wanted to leave her hand there forever. "I have come to stay," she had said, "if you will have me." A great heaviness had lifted itself from her as she said the words. It had been like the moment when she had been born again.

"The kingdom of God is for all His children," Isaiah had said. "Come." He had released her hand—she had felt a moment of loss—and turned toward the doors.

She had followed him through the doorway into the relative darkness of the entryway beyond. The house had smelled of incense. As her vision adjusted, she saw polished floors and rooms opening out on either side of a hallway. To the right was a study lined with books; a massive walnut desk faced into the room from its place before the big front window. She had recognized it immediately. This was where Isaiah's television broadcasts were taped, with the Prophet in front of the desk speaking to the audience of sinners about the end of this world and revealing what they must do to be admitted to the next.

A young woman had approached them from the study. Unlike the women who worked in the fields, she was dressed in a light- blue blouse and darker-blue slacks. She was pretty in a dark, sullen way and pregnant.

"This is Janet," Isaiah had said. "She will show you where you are to live and what your duties will be."

"I'm Barbara Shepherd," she had said.

"We use only single names here," Isaiah had said. His smile had been like a benediction. "From now on you will be known as 'Barbara.'"

He had turned and walked down the hall toward the back of the house like a disappearing angel.

"Okay," Janet had said in a businesslike way, "give me the keys to the BMW. I hope you brought the title with you."

Shepherd had dug the keys from her purse, looked at them, and then dropped them into Janet's outstretched palm. "No, but I can send for it."

"We'll do that right away," Janet had said, turning toward the study and the big desk. "You can also make out your financial statement and the power of attorney."

Janet had slid her swollen belly behind the desk. Shepherd had stood in front of it. "I don't understand," she had said.

"This is a commune," Janet had said, looking up under her dark eyebrows. Shadows circled her eyes. Perhaps pregnancy wasn't agreeing with her, Shepherd had thought. "Everything is held in common. You knew that, didn't you?"

"Yes," Shepherd had said. She had known what a commune was, but she hadn't considered the implications. But she hadn't said that.

"If you want to join, you must turn over all your assets to the commune." Janet had stared at Shepherd out of shadowed eyes as if challenging her to turn and walk away.

"I understand," Shepherd had said. She more than understood. Janet would just as soon get rid of her. "I'll sign whatever you wish," she had said humbly.

Janet's expression had softened.

As soon as Shepherd had signed away all her worldly possessions, she felt immeasurably lighter, as if her immortal spirit had been tied to the earth by everything she had owned and now it was free to soar.

She had put her faith in God and in his earthly representative, and now she could await the Second Coming without apprehension. Or maybe, as the Russellites thought, He was already among them.

Living with three dozen other women had at first appalled her. She had been taken back to her adolescence when as a competitive athlete she had showered with other women, dressed with other women, been sent to bed early and roused even earlier, kept her clothing in a locker.… Then, however, she had been in a formative stage, yearning toward independence but not yet able to demand it, postponing the privileges and responsibilities of adulthood to achieve a goal. And the bodies around her, like hers, had been boyish, unsexed by unrelenting exercise, even menstruation delayed by the effort to be the best gymnasts in the world.

Here the women were often weary from their labors in the field, but they were obviously women. Some were young and pretty, but many were middle-aged and older with the imperfections of their years. But all their bodies and their bodily odors were clearly female. Shepherd preferred hard male bodies to the soft flesh of her kind, including her own, and she had found herself shrinking from incidental contact with the others, trying to find occasions when the shower or the bathroom were unoccupied.

She had not minded the bunk bed so much, and getting into the top one was no struggle for an Olympic athlete, even one twenty years out of competition. The labor in the fields had tired her at first, unused as she had become to hard work and the nine or ten hours a day spent in such toil, and she had collapsed each night onto her bunk, thinking she would never rise again, too tired to notice the rock-hard mattress. But her body had soon toughened and she had regained the condition she had enjoyed as a teenager. She felt that if she had the chance or the desire she might even excel once more on the beam or the uneven bars or the pommel horse. Sometimes she had wished that there were a gymnasium nearby that she could use, perhaps even show Isaiah the skills she could lay before him. But then she had realized this was childish pride brought about by her improving physical condition.

It was then she realized, too, that the whole experience was a mortification of the body for the sake of the spirit, and she began to accept, as well, the proximity, the enforced intimacy, of the other women. The self and all its foolish aversions had to be subdued. She did not abandon modesty, for this was one of the virtues cherished by God, but she showered with the others and did not mind if they glanced at her when they thought she wasn't looking or if they bumped against her back or hip as they showered or came in or out.

What she never quite got used to was the absence of men. Isaiah was the only male presence anywhere in the valley—even the videotaping personnel were recruited and trained from among the women in the commune—and Isaiah was not so much a male as a man of God, unsexed by saintliness, neutered by his juxtaposition to the Afterlife. Others might consider this a feminist utopia, where all were equal, even though the equality was at the low level of self-denial; here were no men to put women down, to set up prizes that only they were equipped to win, to dismiss the efforts of women with a smile or a thoughtless word. But Shepherd missed them, their different look, their different voices and perspectives, the mirror of their admiration; she missed, she thought, the other half of the human race.

She had been set straight about that immediately. Sex and money were the root of all evil. To enter here they had given up both. Where there were men there was competition; individual differences became vanity; individual choices became more important than the basic choice of God over man.

It was, Shepherd thought, mortification of the spirit as well as of the flesh.

Isaiah was not much of a presence, either. As they worked in the fields, the women saw only brief glimpses of his craggy figure standing on the veranda surveying his—no, God's—domain, or getting into one of his Rolls Royces to go on a business trip. It was the moment they waited for. One would nudge another and they would turn their heads to gaze, just for a moment, at the Prophet, and return to their labors with renewed vigor.

Only once had Isaiah spoken to her after their first meeting. It was late afternoon and the women were returning from the fields as Isaiah's long, black automobile had passed, raising a cloud of dust, and the Prophet had emerged from the rear door to watch the line of bonneted women approaching. He had singled her out. With one hand he had motioned her toward him.

"Daughter," he had said, when she stood before him, "remove your bonnet. Ah, Barbara," he said, "the kingdom of God agrees with you. You are looking very well."

The fact that he remembered her—she did not want to make the comparison, but it came unbidden—was like sexual awakening. And his praise made her feel the kind of pleasant weakness, the surrender of her body and her independence to another's will, that for her preceded passion.

"We should have a private audience," she had heard Isaiah saying, as if from a distance, and then Janet, from the nearby veranda of the quinta, had said, "Isaiah!" She said it sharply, almost possessively, and the

Prophet had turned, smiling at Shepherd one last time, and walked up into the house followed by his secretary.

On Sunday mornings they were allowed to enter the quinta and watch, on television, the service that was taped for broadcast from the study only a few yards away. This was what everyone saw, the Saved and the sinners alike, but they knew—*they knew*— that Isaiah was speaking to them.

One Sunday his words had been particularly memorable because he had spoken about his conversations with God.

"God has told me that the end of the world is only months away," Isaiah had said. "The Millennium is at hand. Judgment Day is almost upon us. If that doesn't give you a sense of urgency about Salvation, nothing will.

"When I say 'God has told me,' some of you may think that I am speaking metaphorically, that I have heard him in my heart, and even if you believe this to be true and have resolved to be Saved, you have not heard me correctly. I have heard him the way people hear each other, with my ears. He speaks and I listen.

"In the loneliness of my room, in my walks along the ocean, yes, even when I am with other people, he speaks to me. He says, 'Tell my people that this fair world that they have blackened with their sins and bloodied with their pointless quarrels will be destroyed. Tell them to prepare themselves, to ready their souls, to make their peace with Me, for soon I will walk among them in the flames of Armageddon and take up to Heaven with Me the souls of the Believers and leave the rest to the eternal torments of My Ancient Adversary.'

"I do not ask you to take my word for this. I am a man like you, as filled with error as any when my actions are not guided by the hand of God. Why don't others hear with their ears the voice of God? 'Why don't I hear Him speak?' you ask. And I say, 'You can!' You can hear God speak, just as I do, if you will open your ears, if you will hear as a child hears, listening for marvels, believing in miracles, discarding the skepticism of what we misleadingly call 'maturity.'

"Listen, and you will hear God telling you to commit yourself to the Afterlife. Believe! Prepare for the end! Or gird your doubting soul for eternal torment. And if you believe, as I do, in the work at hand, rid yourself of the material possessions that only serve to drag you down. At the end of this program, you will see an address to which you can send your contributions. Divest yourself of everything you own as an act of belief, and you will float, yes, you will float with God to Heaven on that Judgment Day so close at hand. The money will be used not for this little group of believers but to spread this message, not just to this nation but to all nations of the world, whatever language they speak, whatever beliefs or non-beliefs they profess. For here we have taken a vow of poverty."

And then the program had closed with the vision of the peaceful valley from the ridge at the south where Shepherd had first seen it. Only this time the figure of Isaiah loomed above it, larger and larger, until the camera moved in upon his beneficent features and they filled the entire screen.

As they had filed out that morning, Shepherd had glimpsed Isaiah in the study with the camera lights turned off. He had looked tired and old, like someone giving his life's blood to redeem others, and she loved him with the terrible love that she knew he felt for God. If she could feel like that about God, she thought, maybe she, too, could hear His voice.

In that moment of revelation she saw Janet, even greater with child, hand Isaiah a file folder that, as he opened it, revealed what looked like newspaper clippings. And then, as she passed, Janet had looked up and seen her, and Shepherd had been startled by the look of hatred on Janet's face.

No one came in answer to Shepherd's scream, and after the first outcry she had pushed her head into her own shoulder to muffle the sounds she could not help making. Whatever happened to her she deserved, she knew, and perhaps she would save her eternal soul at the sacrifice of her weak flesh.

Then, mercifully, the beating stopped. Over her own strangled sobs, she could hear the harsh sound of Isaiah's breaths and broken words coming from him as he fumbled with the knots that fastened her ankles. "He's going to let me go!" she thought, and then she made out his muttered words, "I hear Thee. She must be punished like a beast. Not like a woman. She is too foul to use as a woman is used.…"

She knew then why her ankles had been released and her legs spread. She would not be buggered for God! she thought. Perhaps she even shouted the words as she drew up her legs and rolled over. Her feet now were squarely in the chest of the kneeling Isaiah, a look of stunned surprise replacing the glaze of obsession, and she uncoiled her body like an acrobat springing to her feet. Isaiah toppled backward, propelled toward the far wall. She heard a thud as she was rising from her knees to her feet, drawing her wrists behind her up the pitchfork handle until she jumped and they were free.

When she looked again, Isaiah was rising to his feet against the stall partition, shaking his head like a wounded buffalo, and then glaring incredulously at her. She placed her bound hands around the handle of the pitchfork where it joined the tines. As the angered Prophet charged toward her, she concentrated all her strength on the task at hand, as she had in the Olympic competition, pulled the pitchfork from the ground, and raised it just as Isaiah arrived.

His momentum drove the handle of the pitchfork against the wall where it joined the floor and the tines through his chest until they protruded through his back. His face twisted with surprise, and then as a trickle of blood came from the corner of his mouth his expression changed from anger to one of peace and resignation. He stood there, his arms outstretched like a man crucified, until his arms sank to his sides and he died, still standing.

A woman's voice broke into Shepherd's shocked paralysis. "What have you done?" the voice said in a tone of ugly condemnation. "You've killed Isaiah! You've killed our Master!"

It was Janet, her face contorted with anger and grief.

"Your master, not mine. He killed himself," Shepherd said calmly. She was surprised at how calm she was. "He had betrayed his calling and his God, and he killed himself."

Other women had joined them in the barn, gathering around them, staring at the dead Prophet in disbelief, glancing at Janet and then back at Shepherd. No one had panicked yet, but Shepherd could feel hysteria gathering. Not in her. She was serene. She had passed through the fire and been purified.

"She killed him—she killed him—she killed him," the other women murmured.

"You killed him!" Janet said again. Her right hand was on her belly; her left hand pointed.

"You think I got his pants off?" Shepherd said. "You think I tied my hands and feet together?" She held out her wrists, still bound. Blood trickled around the ropes. "You think God would have allowed a real Prophet to die before his time?"

The other women were looking now at their dead leader, seeing him for the first time without the halo of their belief, seeing him dead, without his pants, like any ordinary man.

"Take him down," Shepherd said.

Three of them stepped forward and eased his big body to the barn floor so that he lay on his side, the

pitchfork handle at rest in front of him.

"Put his pants back on him and his belt," Shepherd said, "and somebody untie my hands."

"What are we going to do?" Janet said. Both hands were on her belly now as if she were speaking not for herself and the other women but herself and her baby.

Her hands free again, Shepherd gathered the sides of her ripped nightgown together over her bruised buttocks. "We must report Isaiah's death to the authorities. It was an accident. He came out here in the middle of the night—perhaps he heard a noise—and he stumbled and fell on the pitchfork. No lies. He did hear a noise; he did stumble."

"But what will we do?" one of the other women asked.

Shepherd looked at all the empty faces gathered around her, all the women who only a few hours before had had all their questions answered. Now they were looking for somebody to take Isaiah's place, someone to lead them to the Promised Land, and they were not looking at Janet. They were looking at her.

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# Chapter Thirteen

**October 13, 2000**
**William S. Landis**

Another grain of sand fell from the thin neck of the beaker onto the pile below. Landis had timed it. A grain fell every ten seconds on the average, but none of them, except by chance, was average if he timed it to the fraction of a second. Each was a fraction of a second under or a fraction over, and he could not predict which would drop sooner or later. But a fraction of a second—what did it matter?

Another grain of sand fell onto the pile

The pile below was more significant. It rested on a plastic dish one and a half inches in diameter. By now some 30,000 grains had fallen upon it, and the pile was about an inch high and filled the plastic dish completely. The new grain impacted on top of the pile without disturbing it.

Landis watched, almost hypnotized, for the grain that would precipitate an avalanche. The beaker revolved once a second, a few grain of sand trickled down its long, slightly inclined neck, and every ten seconds one fell onto the slowly growing pile. But when would the pile cascade?

Another grain of sand fell.

"What we're talking about here," Carl Grohe said, "is chaos theory. Some phenomena are unpredictable."

Landis looked at the tank of fluid beneath him. "Like what?"

"Floods, forest fires, earthquakes, novas, the stock market. Well, maybe not the stock market, at least according to some experts."

Another grain of sand fell.

The conversation seemed detached from the real world. The laboratory in which it was being conducted was the customary cluttered, untidy mess of most scientific workplaces, so different from the usual filmed version with its focus on the central apparatus and meaningful icons. The walls were concrete blocks

painted pale green, defining a room about thirty feet square. The floor was bare concrete stained here and there by old experiments and scuff marks. A metal door led to an exterior hallway, and a double door on the opposite wall, to an outside dock. Discarded experiments stood in other parts of the room or were pushed against a wall, undismantled but cannibalized for parts. Some, perhaps, still continued in operation.

Another grain of sand.

But here in the center of the room, Landis was watching sand pile up on a plastic dish and he was sitting in a breakaway chair above a tank of water. At least he assumed it was water. He hoped it was water. Because when the inevitable avalanche occurred, it would carry some extra grains over the edge, a computer would record the pile's weight, and the experiment would begin again. Except that when the pile cascaded, the chair would release Landis into the tank.

"If you can't predict it, what's the use of experiments like this one?" Landis asked.

Another grain of sand.

"The more we find out," Grohe said, "the closer we can come to predicting even chaotic behavior."

"Isn't that a basic contradiction?"

"There may be order even within chaos, what scientists in this field have come to call 'flicker noise.' About 1987 a physicist named Per Bak described it as 'self-organized criticality'—systems that don't settle down to a stable configuration but push themselves to the verge of instability."

Another grain.

"And when do you predict the next instability will occur and I will find myself in that tank below me?"

"Soon. Very soon. Are you getting nervous?"

"It's the waiting. After all, it's only water. Isn't it?"

"Of course. I wouldn't endanger a science reporter and noted author. I wouldn't put acid or knives in there unless I were some kind of mad scientist. But there is, of course, instability in people, too."

Another grain.

Landis had not wanted to attend the fortuneteller's performance, but Carrie had seemed really keen on it. He would have agreed immediately, but he had experienced an odd reluctance to be part of that kind of gathering, the creeping of the skin that he scoffed at in others, including Carrie, and one that he found himself unwilling to mention, unwilling even to think about.

He hadn't liked not wanting to analyze situations.

"I know you don't really believe in soothsayers," he had said. He had stumbled over the word "sooth," because it meant "truth," of which he was sure this fortuneteller had none.

"Of course not," Carrie had said; "it's just an entertainment, and kind of popular these days. But I wish you wouldn't call it that."

"Augury?" he had ventured, knowing it would be worse.

"No."

"Prophecy then."

"Not that either."

"What then?"

"Foreknowledge, maybe. But I like the word 'precognition.'"

Landis had seen the direction of the conversation. "Precognition. To know before. Like prediction. To say before. Then you do believe in it."

"No, no. Only—"

"Yes?"

"There is something to be explained. Dreams. Feelings. Premonitions. I know what you're going to say—to warn before. I mean I don't believe in predictions, but even you must admit that occasionally people get flashes of insight and things happen just like their visions."

He had read Tannen: he knew that men and women used conversation for different purposes. She wanted to socialize; he wanted to report. But he hadn't been able to help himself. He was the supreme skeptic. "Just reconstructions after the fact, I suspect," he had said mildly, trying not to attack her defenses; she would repel frontal assault. "The human mind's greatest talent is self-deception."

"You're saying that I'm deceiving myself?" she said. She was reinforcing her position in spite of his caution.

"Not you—you said you didn't believe it. But the people who do believe in it are ignoring the basic inconsistency of telling the future. Either the future is fixed, in which case it doesn't matter what you know about it, because you can't change it. Or it isn't fixed and there's nothing to read."

"It's not either-or," she said. "People still try to anticipate the future."

"What's left is probability, which is what people like me— and the people who call themselves 'futurists'—try to deal with. Learn enough about the present to make a reasonable guess about what is *likely* to happen."

"Well, I've got tickets and I want us to go," she had said firmly, "and anyway it ought to make good material for that book you're working on."

He had had no answer to that. They had met after his return from space, and she was an attractive woman, intelligent and well read, interested in world events. Their friendship—he didn't want to jinx it by calling it a relationship—was still new, but it could develop, he thought. It could amount to something, this late in his life. So had gone along with as good a humor as he could muster. And that was how he had found himself in the middle of a packed audience in the largest auditorium in town.

The decor was old-fashioned grandeur, red-velvet walls and red-velour seat cushions and crystal chandeliers, but the ambience was contemporary angst. For a moment, as they had sidled their way between clots of people, Landis had entertained the hope that many had come, as he had, as analysts of millennial folly, but the hush of anticipation soon had convinced him that he was surrounded by believers.

The evening had begun calmly enough with the appearance on stage of Dame Nostra, a regal woman in a long, floor-length black gown. She had stood for a moment, gazing out into the audience with dark, almost black eyes, silver hair framing her pale face so that it seemed as if her eyes were even larger and

more penetrating. On the bare stage, against the dark backdrop, it had looked unnervingly as if her head were hanging unsupported in mid-air, and when she spoke, her low, dynamic tones, magnified magically so that they seemed to fill every corner of the auditorium, had vibrated the chandeliers and penetrated to the bone.

She had launched her performance calmly, talking about the nature of precognition—like Carrie, she preferred pseudo- scientific resonances to those of the supernatural—and even had described, disarmingly, the paradoxes of foreknowledge to which Landis had referred. But then, like Carrie, she had cited anecdotes of precognition and paused dramatically after each revelation of its fulfillment before asking, "And how does science explain this apparent prescience?" And then, after another pause, she had answered, "Coincidence." Eventually the audience had picked up the response with her, chanting "coincidence" in a compelling antiphony.

If he had not been analyzing his own reactions, Landis might have joined in the chorus. As it was, he could not help but notice that Carrie's lips had begun to move and then that she was chanting with the others. She was, he had thought with dismay, farther into this phenomenon than he had imagined. He had been willing to go along with her curiosity about the supernatural, but he was not ready for her total immersion.

He had missed the transition, but Dame Nostra had moved with apparent smoothness into a discussion of her own experiences with precognition, beginning with the incidents of a sensitive child and the growing realization that not everyone had these flashes of terrifying insight. At first she had tried to hide them, to avoid the unwelcome isolation such difference brought her and then to avoid the pain that her revelations almost invariably brought to others. But finally she had come to realize the insatiable hunger people had for knowledge of what was to come, and had begun telling some of them, who could handle reality, the truth.

"Or sooth," Dame Nostra had said. It was almost as if she had listened in on Landis's conversation with Carrie. "For 'sooth' means 'truth,' which is why the earlier sensitives, those who have my gift, or curse, were called 'soothsayers,' because they told the terrible truth."

Others she had offered sybilline obscurities, penetrable if anyone wanted to figure them out, comforting if that was what they wanted. But this was the fateful year of the second millennium, and it was time to dismiss dissimulation. No more riddles. It was truth time.

Truth time had begun with a few general predictions for the rest of the year, some startling in their specificity. Landis had jotted them down in the darkness, because an usher had made him check his recorder as they entered. He had hoped he could read his notes later. And then she had asked for questions from the audience.

They had been the usual sorts of things: love, marriage, children, money, success, accomplishment.… Dame Nostra had fielded them all, some with names and dates. Landis had suspected confederates or a data bank whispering information into her ear as people gave their names and addresses. He had read dozens of exposés by stage magicians describing how such tricks were performed.

And then he had found himself at the microphone, scarcely remembering how he had got there, trying to distance himself from the person who stood in front of the audience—and from Dame Nostra. He had heard himself saying, "What everyone wants to know—no matter what they ask—is when they will die. My name is William S. Landis. When will I die?"

The words had hung in the air like the words written on the wall in the book of Daniel. An expression of something like pain had passed across Dame Nostra's face. "All want to know, but few ask for fear of

the truth. For what good will it do them to learn that their days are numbered?"

Again she had seemed to pick a word from his mind— "numbered" from the meaning of "mene." He had shaken his head. It could have been nothing but the topic and the Biblical echoes.

"Are you sure you want to know, Mr. Landis?" she had asked.

"Of course."

Her eyes had seemed to look through him at something beyond, and when they had focused again on him she had the look of someone who had seen something unpleasant. "Your life will end on December 31 of this year," she had said.

Landis had stood at the microphone, frozen in place, not believing and yet shocked by her certainty, until someone had pushed him aside and asked the same question.

"December 31, 2000," she had said as if she was as surprised by the answer as the questioner, and again in answer to a third question and a fourth until the date seemed to be graven into a stone that hung around the neck of every person in the audience, around, indeed, the neck of the world.

A gravestone.

Carrie, it seemed, had not only obtained tickets to the performance but an invitation to the reception afterwards at the home of the wealthiest family in the city. It was an estate on the edge of town, approached by a long driveway winding through rolling lawns and sculpted trees and shrubs, and a valet service at the end of it. Landis had got out of his unchauffered car, smelling the clean air scented with grass clippings, and wondered again at Carrie's social standing. They had spent their evenings together at restaurants and theaters, the two of them.

The hostess, a Mrs. Barclay Stone, had greeted them at the door and expressed recognition of his name when he introduced himself, though her handshake with Carrie had been perfunctory. "So, our famous local author and futurist," she had said. "So glad you could make it, particularly after your question this evening. You and Dame Nostra should have a great deal in common."

That was what ordinary people thought, Landis had realized, confusing speculative thinkers with the credulous and the con artists. But he also had known that Carrie had used his name and reputation through her network of contacts to obtain the invitation, and he had wondered what that portended. Of course, he had thought wryly, if he had been Dame Nostra, he wouldn't have had to wonder.

The Barclay Stone house was built like a southern mansion; the veranda with supporting white pillars extended the whole width of the front. The entire first floor had been thrown open to the guests, with a bar in the living room on the right, a buffet laden with food—no cold cuts for the guests of the Barclay Stones—in the dining room on the left, and waiters threading their way among the guests with hors d'oeuvres and glasses of champagne.

Just like in the movies, Landis had thought. The 18th- century English middle class had learned how to behave by reading novels; Americans received their social educations from film. "Is she a believer?" Landis had asked Carrie, nodding toward Mrs. Barclay Stone.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," Carrie had said stiffly.

"Does she believe in the validity of precognition?" Landis had asked carefully. "Or is she entertaining Dame Nostra's guests as a social obligation to the community?"

"I have no idea," Carrie had said.

Landis would have liked to have asked Mrs. Stone herself, but could think of no polite way to do it. He had wondered, however, what would lead the privileged to buy into the end of the world.

Dame Nostra had not arrived yet, apparently, and Landis had spent an uneasy half hour conversing with people he did not know and with whom he had nothing to say. Carrie, on the other hand, wandered from his side and Landis saw her across the room in animated conversations.

"Mr. Landis, sir," a voice said behind him, and Landis had turned to find a young man at his elbow summoning him to an audience in the library, a room behind the living room that he had not yet investigated. He had known it was a library because the young man had told him so. It had walnut wainscoting halfway up the wall and a desk, but no shelves and no books. Half seated on the desk, with a glass of champagne in her hand, was Dame Nostra, talking to two men in tuxedos, one of whom, it had turned out, was Barclay Stone. Dame Nostra had been brought in a rear door to avoid disturbing the other guests, he had been told, but he thought it was to save herself a barrage of meaningless social amenities. Instead, she had people brought to her one at a time.

She had seemed much smaller up close than when she had dominated a stage, and from that stage an entire audience. But if anything she had been even more impressive. Her figure was slight and her face had seemed fragile, but her eyes had burned from it like the eyes of a tiger from ambush.

"So, William S. Landis," she had said, "we have much in common."

There it had been again, a confusion of states of mind that Landis had found more terrifying from Dame Nostra than annoying.

"Apparently," he had said, deliberately misunderstanding, "we are both going to die on December 3l."

"We both deal in futures," she had said.

"I cannot match your certainty."

"You disapprove of certainty?"

"I cannot believe in it."

"And yet you came to the theater tonight."

"It meant a great deal to my friend," he had said, and then, recognizing the lack of civility, added, "but once I got there I was fascinated by your performance. And by the audience response. Many people would like to believe that somewhere there is certainty."

"And you do not?"

"I live with what is, not what I would like to believe."

"You are such a materialist, William S. Landis," she had said, "and on another occasion I might discuss with you your inconsistencies, your own willingness to believe in the immaterial, but for now let me ask what you would do if you had visions that came true time after time?"

"No doubt I would feel differently," he had said. "But why haven't you announced the end of the world before?"

"This is the first time I have seen it," she had said, and, as it had on the stage, a look of pain had briefly

altered her expression.

"How can that be? The future is the future."

"True. But it unfolds a piece at a time."

"And what unfolded this one?"

"Who can say? The visions come to me unbidden. I can neither turn them on nor turn them off. Often it is a little thing, as insignificant as a sneeze or a falling leaf. Perhaps it was your asking the question."

"You mean that my asking when I would die destroyed the world?"

"Perhaps. But maybe not. It is such a little thing."

"No one had ever asked that question before?"

"No one. I do not even ask it of myself. But now the question has been asked—and answered. For me as well as for you."

Then he had understood why she had winced. Or maybe it was the vision of universal destruction rather than her own that disturbed her. But that was granting her honesty, and strange powers. Landis had shaken his head defiantly. "The world is sturdy, and the future is sturdier. There are billions of people and the momentum of the millennia, and one man—or one woman— weigh little against those."

"We live in a world of Heisenberg uncertainty," she had said, "and sometimes macroscopic differences can turn on small- scale events. Be careful what questions you ask, William S. Landis: You might get an answer."

In the car going home, Carrie had said, "You wish you hadn't embarrassed yourself with Dame Nostra."

"Who says that?"

"It was all over the party. You had to argue with her. Who knows what she will think of you."

And of Carrie, Landis said to himself. "What she would have thought if I had not spoken to her: nothing."

"I don't think we ought to see each other for a while," Carrie had said, as if she had read his mind. "If the world is going to end in a few months, I don't think I want to spend it with a skeptic."

So, Landis thought, Dame Nostra's revelation had claimed its first convert and its first sacrifice.

Another grain of sand fell onto the pile. The mound held, and Landis looked at Grohe, whose face held a look of bored anticipation. It was, no doubt, the look of someone who spends long hours watching inconsequential data accumulate while waiting for a sudden and unpredictable change of state. Not unlike the condition of the world as it awaited the millennium.

Television had made much of Dame Nostra's performance, and newspapers had carried banner headlines, some of them breaking out their "end of the world" type, before they had all grown sheepish and followed Dame Nostra's prophecy with scientific rebuttals, and then with the customary indifference of yesterday's news as it had faded before the next scandal or the next revelation of corruption or stupidity. Carrie, though, had acted on her desire to cool their friendship, and Landis knew that even if she returned after the turn of the millennium, their relationship would never be the same. She could never admit her credulity, and he could never forget it.

Another grain fell. It knocked a grain off the top of the pile. They bumped several more, and each of them bumped others until the avalanche of grains reached the edge of the dish and one fell off the edge.

The motor cut off abruptly. The beaker stopped revolving. The grains of sand stopped falling. The chair lurched.

And stopped.

Landis looked down at the water just below and then at Grohe.

"You don't think I would really dunk a reporter, do you?" Grohe said, grinning. "But you believed I would, didn't you? And that was as good."

"Yes," Landis said. "The joke's on me." But he wasn't thinking about the experiment. He was thinking about chaos theory and about Dame Nostra. Perhaps his life had been changed by an event as inconsequential as attending a performance. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe the fate of the world did hang on an event as inconsequential as the fall of a grain of sand.

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# Chapter Fourteen

**October 24, 2000**
**Paul Gentry**

Paul Gentry listened to his wife's breathing. The air came in slowly, softly, and after a long pause a gentle exhalation. During the pauses he had time to wonder if the end had come. In the silent moments he found himself wishing it were over and then feeling guilty that he should wish dead this one-time center of his existence, who had drifted to its periphery and now was drifting beyond the periphery of life itself. Was he wishing her gone for his own sake, so that he could get on unencumbered? Or was he only hoping for an end to her suffering, for her body to stop clinging to what was beyond retrieval?

He was a realist about this, as he was about so much else, and he knew that the two wishes were knotted together inextricably. And he knew that her death would not end his guilt—he had not been a good or faithful husband. He had traveled whenever he could, he had sought his fame and passion elsewhere, and he would always know that he had cheated her of his commitment. His only comfort lay in the fact that he had never betrayed her at home. Everywhere they had lived he had been a model of domestic solicitude and fidelity. She had never known.

He did not keep secrets from himself, however. His guilt would not deter him from his continuing pursuit of success and pleasure.

Gentry listened to her uncertain respiration and looked at the face on the thin hospital pillow. It was a face that had grown old with him and now was beyond age, locked in a struggle that made irrelevant the frets of everyday existence. "Let go," he said.

He looked down at her body. Her arms lay motionless outside the sheet, folded down neatly once. Her left arm had been kissed by the Aesculapean snake that delivered potions intended to heal and others intended to magic away pain. The intravenous tube led past a valve to a dented plastic bag hanging from an arm at the head of the bed. He lifted his gaze from her face and the sterile hospital pillow. The walls were painted a neutral cream. To his left was a window admitting warm autumn sunlight, to his right a narrow lavatory and shower stall. All of it smelled of alcohol and strong soap and disinfectant, and the only sound, with the door closed, was the broken rhythm of his wife's breathing.

Behind him was a television set on a bracket high on the wall where it could be watched from the bed by a wakeful patient, or from the adjacent armchair by the mobile ill. Gentry reached over his wife to the remote control hanging by a thick wire from the headboard, and clicked it on. As the set came to life, he flicked the channel to CNN.

"…has reported what appears to be a supernova in the Canis Major constellation. Early observations are unable to determine the distance of the giant sun that has exploded. The first observations coincide with the location of the nearby star Sirius, but may have come from a star far beyond. In the unlikely event that Sirius has exploded in a nova, or even a supernova, the consequences would be serious, perhaps even fatal, for life on Earth. But the public should not be alarmed, astronomers say: Although Sirius is less than nine light years from Earth, the involvement of this brightest star in the night sky is remote, since Sirius is not the kind of star that scientists have expected to turn nova, much less supernova. So please stay tuned to this station for later information, as well as instant news about the world today."

The report continued from Atlanta with occasional remotes from the Middle East, from the former Soviet states, from Latin America, and from the Far East, but Gentry was looking out the window where the sunlight was still benign. If Sirius had exploded 8.8 years ago, the light from that spectacular heavenly fireworks would now be arriving on Earth, and the gamma radiation and X-rays would be close behind. If that didn't finish off humanity, the cosmic debris would do so when it arrived in a few years. If it was Sirius.

The door swung open and the day nurse came into the room. Her face was flushed and her steps were quick. Instead of going to her patient, she came directly to Gentry. "Dr. Gentry, have you heard the news?"

"About the supernova?" Gentry asked. He had noticed her on the way to his wife's room; in fact, he had been attracted, as he always was, by youth and a clear complexion, in this instance suffused by a rosy glow beneath the skin that he always found irresistible. He had stopped to ask unnecessary directions. In the process he had introduced himself and enjoyed the look of recognition that came into her eyes. Her name, he had noticed from the metal tag pinned to the white uniform just above her right breast, was "Sharon."

"Is it serious?" she asked.

"It might be," he said. "The chances are still small, but if there is anything you have been putting off for a better time, it might be a good idea to consider it now."

"Oh, Dr. Gentry," she said. She seemed unable to go on.

"The best thing about it," Gentry said, "is that it won't matter to Angel." He nodded toward his wife. "The end of Earth, the end of the universe—every day the universe ends for somebody."

"Oh, Dr. Gentry," she said again.

No doubt she had handled many life-and-death situations for other people, he thought, but this cosmic crisis was beyond her capacity.

Gentry stood up. As if it were an invitation she had been awaiting, she came into the protection of his arms. Even through his suit and her white nylon uniform, he felt the warmth and resilience of her body, so different from the chilly, nearly motionless figure of his wife only a few feet away. Sharon held him, he felt her shoulders and legs trembling, but over her blonde head he saw his wife open her eyes.

Gentry had waited outside the domed assembly hall of Ariel Village. He had made his speech to the New

Agers and he had no patience with the mysticism of the speakers that would follow. He had heard enough of spectral beings from Alpha Centauri speaking their cryptic wisdom in strangely clipped Irish accents from the lips of a middle-aged American, and spiritual entities who concerned themselves with humans even though they had no time in their reality. He had walked out of the hall as a bodiless creature of uncertain origins named Lazaris had said in a high, thin voice, "No. In a word, no. This is not the ending. This is the beginning."

But Gentry believed in getting a check in his hand before he left the site. Knowing the poverty of many groups, especially the universities, he insisted on it, and Julie MacGregor, the founder of the village and the leader of this group, had promised to pay him immediately after the session.

Anyway, this was a peaceful part of the world in which to spend a few moments at rest. He needed rest. He had been pushing himself hard all year; the millennial fever would cool down soon, and he would have to find another handle on catastrophe.

Here in Baca, Colorado, the air had been clear and cool in this bright October before the end of the millennium. To the south, the land rose to Black Mesa in Oklahoma. Some 120 miles and 1600 feet in elevation to the west was Trinidad, and beyond that the gray parapet of the Rocky Mountains, and to the northwest Colorado Springs and 14,000 feet of Pikes Peak.

Surrounded by the rusty high-plains desert and the great mountains that lifted from them, Gentry had pondered the western hubris that tried to enslave the eternal land to a human conceit about a few revolutions of the planet out of so many. In this spot, in the two centuries or so it had tried to shape the land, humanity had made little difference. "The earth abides," he had muttered. And then his gaze had drifted to this green park carved out of the semi-desert, with its domed buildings sitting in it like toadstools, and above to a plume of smoke from the massive Four-Corners Power Plant not far away. "These ants may yet bring down the sky," he had told himself. Even the desert that looked so permanent could be made to flower or to blow away; even the mountains that were the consequence of great continents colliding held within them the seeds of their own destruction.

At that moment, as the swish of the assembly hall doors had disturbed his contemplation, Gentry had had a feeling of impermanence, as if massive forces were at work in the reaches of the planet beneath his feet.

People had passed, chattering. Gentry had looked up, his mood shattered. Why should these foolish people be carefree when the world might be ending?

Gentry had turned and made his way past the glass doors into the walkway that circled the arena. Tables lining the walkway offered cheap salvation: Viking runes, Tibetan bells, herbal teas, colored candles, solar energizers, occult books, pamphlets, tape recordings, computer programs, and, most of all, stones and crystals. Before his talk Gentry had fingered citrines, tourmalines, amethysts, topazes, rose and blue quartz, black onyxes, obsidian, and ordinary pebbles rounded by tumbling in Rocky Mountain streams. Gentry had seen some outside imbibing the sun's rays and others in bowls of water. The water, he had been told, was soaking up energy from the crystal. Gentry had even seen a crystal wand that could cure diseases of the mind and body. They had all been attractive enough, in their different ways, but he had felt no sympathetic vibrations, no healing or soothing powers.

He had looked through the books as well:*Natural ESP* ,*Shambhala* ,*Synchronicity* ,*Cosmic Crystals* , *Crystal Healing* ,*Perfect Symmetry* ,*The Mayan Factor* ,*Sympathetic Vibrations* ,*Creative Thought Remedies* ,*Animal Dreaming* ,*Creative Visualization* ,*Easy Death* ,*The Unquiet Dead* ,*The Case for Reincarnation* —they went on and on through a series of books ghosted, literally, by a 35,000-year-old warrior who had once lived on Atlantis, and a series written by a live actress in which she related her discovery of the spirit world and found her way to recognition of herself, and everyone

else, as God.

Gentry had gone past them all, through the doors into the arena itself, where a man dressed in a khaki military shirt over a white shirt was addressing the assembled audience. His eyes were closed as if in communion with unseen spirits, and his arms were outstretched as if to embrace the universe. He looked a lot like a salesman praising the psychic benefits of his product.

"We must honor prophets like Dr. Gentry, who came here to warn us about the end of the world," he had said, "but let others worry about what that means to them. To us it means not an end but a beginning. We have lived before and we will live again. If not here on Earth then in another, better form. Perhaps as spirits refined by fire to a better understanding and an experience that defies description.

"You are God. You are, each and every one of you, part of the Second Coming."

The audience had responded with scattered upwellings of agreement like a fundamentalist congregation. But questions and dissent had emerged as well. A woman's voice had called out from somewhere in the audience, "What about the UFOs?"

"No one with any access to the records and a mind that has not been closed to the evidence can doubt that extraterrestrials have visited the Earth and that they come from more advanced planets than ours to share their wisdom with us. We have only to look around us, at Stonehenge and the pyramids and the Mayan ruins and the ancient landing field at Nazca in Peru. Some of you have been contacted by aliens, or by the spirits of aliens, who have promised to take the faithful away in spaceships on the day the End arrives, that you will be saved not just in spirit but in body as well. I have no quarrel with that. Your truth is your truth, and my truth is my truth."

Gentry had been about to make his way to the platform, to expostulate with these simpletons, to burn away their foolish illusions with the cleansing flame of his end-of-the-world rhetoric, when he felt a tap on his shoulder.

"Dr. Gentry," a young man's voice had said, "Julie wants to see you."

"And I want to see her," Gentry had said.

The controlled anger in Gentry's voice had made the young man turn and look at him, but Gentry had not cared.

Julie MacGregor's office was in the administrative toadstool—the New Agers were big on domes, because they said energy spiraled upward. A picture window behind the desk offered a mesmerizing view of the mountains along the horizon, perhaps even Pikes Peak on a clear day, and beyond the manmade oasis the ruddy semi-desert of southeastern Colorado. Just as dramatic were the office furnishings: a clear glass table top, uncluttered by papers or equipment, supported on exquisite pillars of what looked like rose quartz, and an executive chair behind it molded from lucite. In one corner of the office a spotlight was focused on an imposing chunk of amethyst held aloft almost invisibly by a glass arm. In the other corner was a white-leather sofa with matching easy chair behind a coffee table whose top seemed to be a single slab of rose quartz.

MacGregor had had her back to the door, looking at her million-dollar view, but she had turned when Gentry entered. As dramatic as the office was, it was only a setting for the woman who occupied it. She had worn a turquoise sweater, violet sweat- pants, and green ankle-high sneakers, and a sizable crystal had dangled from her neck. Although she was more than 65, her hair was still red and she still had the body of a dancer and the presence of an actress, and she had focused on Gentry the full impact of her green eyes and the certainty of her beliefs.

She was one of the few beautiful women Gentry had met for whom he felt no desire, perhaps because he felt, instead, a vague sense of intimidation.

"Ah, Dr. Gentry," she had said, "I have your check." She had held out a discreet business envelope. "And our thanks."

He had taken a step forward to accept the envelope, taken it in his fingers, and hesitated. "Why do I feel used?" he had asked.

"I'm sure I don't know, Dr. Gentry," MacGregor had said, her eyes opening wider. "I sense the visceral emotions of your yellow chakra. That's good. That's even better than the sexual pulsations of your orange chakra. Let it out."

"I feel," he had said, his bass voice reverberating in the room with so much to reverberate against, "like the front man for a con game who doesn't know until too late that it's a con game. I scare your customers to death and your operation moves in to rescue them—for a price."

"We offer them hope, Dr. Gentry, and a way to face the uncertainties of the future. What do you offer them?"

"Reality."

"Your truth is your truth—"

"And my truth is my truth," Gentry had finished. "I've heard that before. What does it mean?"

"It means, Dr. Gentry, that we all see different parts of reality, or reality in different ways. You preach your reality— that the world is coming to an end, and there's nothing that anybody can do about it, unless, if the impersonal disasters of the universe don't kill us, your audiences are willing to do what most of them can never do, which is to change their ways of life. We offer them a way of coping with that reality—a view of a universe that is more benign, more human. And we *can* get them to change their lives."

"But what you get them to change won't save them."

"Will you save them, Dr. Gentry?" she had asked gently. "No, Dr. Gentry, you feel used because, if you are right, the tables have been turned. Instead of using other people, instead of doing well out of preaching misery and despair, you have played a part in a process in which you have been useful in spite of yourself. Like the old fire-and-brimstone preachers, you terrify the congregation and we save them for eternity.

"If you're still angry, however," she had said, extending a manicured hand, "perhaps you'd like to return the check."

"I don't think that would make me feel any better," he had said. "But I can assure you that I'll be more careful in the future."

MacGregor had stood up. She was even more impressive standing. "That isn't why I asked you to see me, however. I'm afraid I have bad news. We had a telephone call for you when you were unavailable. Your wife has been taken to the emergency room of the hospital. Her condition is critical."

He had stopped, moved from confrontation to concern in a way he had not expected. "Thank you," he had said. He had turned to leave. "How soon can I get a flight out of here?"

"I have instructed that my personal jet be placed at your disposal," she had said. "It will be ready as soon as you are. I'm sorry to be the one to give you the news, but I thought it might be better from me."

"I didn't expect this," Gentry had said, "at least, not so soon." He had thought his wife might live out the year.

"Dr. Gentry," MacGregor had said, "I know you have difficulty accepting comforting thoughts, but perhaps you might pass along to your wife my sympathy and the message that death is only a temporary state. We all have lived many times before, and we will live many times more, elsewhere if not here.

"What might help your wife—"

"Angel," Gentry had said.

"—Angel, is to cleanse the third eye of negative thought patterns."

"The third eye?"

"The one behind the forehead."

"The pineal gland?"

"The third eye," she had said. "And it wouldn't hurt you, either, Dr. Gentry." She had lifted over her head the crystal on its golden chain that had been around her neck, walked to him with the grace of a dancer, and put it in his hand. "Give her this."

"She will appreciate it," he had said and turned and left behind that psychic production, that monument to humanity's power to transform everything, including itself.

Angel's hand rested in Gentry's calloused palm. It felt like a bundle of bones held together by parchment. Sharon had turned, perhaps when she felt his body stiffen, and pretended to be brushing lint from his shoulders before she straightened her patient's covers, adjusted the drip of intravenous fluid, and left, not looking back. Angel's eyes looked at Gentry and she tried to speak.

"I'm here," he said. "You don't have to say anything. I bring you the personal best wishes of Julie MacGregor." She liked even second-hand contact with celebrities. "She sent you this." He pulled the crystal from his pocket and put it over her head so that the crystal rested against her bony chest. For a fleeting moment he entertained the notion that the crystal might magically transform her cancer-ridden body into something like that of Julie MacGregor, but it only lay there, scarcely moving with her shallow breathing.

She tried to speak again. He leaned his ear close to her mouth. This time she spoke clearly. "It's—all—right," she said.

He nodded. "Yes, it's going to be all right."

She rolled her head slowly from side to side. "I—know," she said. "It's—all—right."

"You know?"

"I've—always—known."

Gentry sat back. For a moment he could not look at her face and then he forced his gaze to return. Her face seemed incapable of movement but her eyes were asking for his understanding.

"You've known," he said. "I've tried to keep that part of my life separate. It had nothing to do with you."

Her head moved forward just a bit. "I—know," she said, and then she shut her eyes and her breathing faltered and resumed and faltered and stopped.

Gentry held her hand for several moments before he reached over and pressed the button twice that summoned help that came, as he knew it would, too late. Nurses and a doctor bustled in, too busily, too full of life, and looked at the blue wristband that said "No Heroic Measures." Sharon closed Angel's eyes and folded her hands across her chest, looked at the crystal and then at Gentry, and left.

Behind him Gentry heard the CNN anchor woman saying, "Scientists now have determined that the supernova reported earlier was not Sirius, and CNN regrets any alarm that its announcement may have caused. But we live in a dangerous universe in which knowledge of what lies out there may be our only defense. Our perceptions of danger may reach beyond our ability to cope with it, but CNN believes that too much information is better than too little. It will continue to keep the public abreast of all events as they occur. Better to feel completely informed, even of troubling or ambiguous happenings, than to feel that bad news is being concealed. . . ."

The news, and the world itself, faded into dusk and Gentry sat with his wife's body, feeling regret for her and for himself, until the day shift ended, and Sharon returned and took him back to her apartment and comforted him far into the night.

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# Chapter Fifteen

**November 6, 2000**
**Elois Hays**

The broadcasting building stood like a white monolith in the Garden of Eden. Palm trees guarded the wide green lawn, and its sweep was interrupted by red and yellow flower beds and bisected by a curving white driveway. Tucked discreetly behind the building and screened by blossoming bushes was the parking lot. No matter how much fertilizer kept the lawn green and the flowers brilliant or how much weed killer protected the domesticated flora from the attacks of its uncultivated competitors, the picture was ecologically correct.

Tall windows in front of the building opened on an entrance lobby that reached the structure's full three-story height. Most of the space behind the lobby was devoted to television studios, administrative offices, and equipment. From the top floor, executives could glimpse the blue Pacific stretching to the endless horizon, and on good days the spouts of whales.

The radio station, on the other hand, was tucked away in a back corner of the first floor. It consisted of a small studio big enough for the host and the equipment for playing commercial tapes, a table for his coffee cup and scattered papers, a couple of microphones hanging on flexible arms from the ceiling, and a guest or two. Facing the host, and separated from the studio by a glass window, was a room full of equipment and a technician who also answered the telephone for call-in shows.

It had boiled down to this, Elois Hays thought: In little more than 100 years, Marconi and his Nobel prize and the mass production of radios, networks and their news operations, entertainers, and programs, and the transformation of the leisure habits of a world, the vast technological and economic enterprise had been reduced to these two little rooms and their cheap voices. She wondered whether it was the marketplace or simply human nature that transformed dreams into trinkets. What would come next? What new development would turn television into a dime-story ornament?

Or maybe it would endure. The theater had survived, and perhaps it would last another few hundred years if only the world could get past this millennial barrier.

Why was it a barrier, the host was asking her? And what did *The North Wind* contribute to people's concerns about the end of the world?

That was easy enough, and her actress's contralto made her answers seem better than they were. Even over the radio she could project her intensity. By comparison the talk-show host's customarily dominant baritone seemed like querulous nagging. She didn't want to put him off, so she pulled back, reduced the timber of her voice, threw in a few pauses. His name was Jerry Minton; she called him "Jerry" every time she answered a question.

She had done this many times before, answering the same questions so often that they seemed as familiar as a script. Yes, *The North Wind* was about catastrophe and people's fears of the approaching millennium, but one way to deal with fears was to act them out, or watch others act them out for you. That was the psychological basis for drama therapy. *The North Wind* and the other programs and articles and books and movies about the year 2000 were a way of developing healthy attitudes toward an uncertain future. No, she didn't think drama's principal function was to minister to neuroses; it answered people's need for art, to give the muddled world of experience an aesthetic order, and theater was a way for an audience, if not to create art, to participate in its creation.

Yes, she had been in therapy herself. Actors and actresses lived unnatural lives. They worked nights and slept days and found themselves the focuses of too much undeserved admiration and envy. What they did and how well they did it affected the lives and careers of too many others. The theater attracted people who needed to lose themselves in being someone else, and their private lives, for that reason, were often complicated and frequently messy. When they weren't being someone else they tried to escape being themselves; they drank too much, doped too much, slept around too much, married too much, and looked for answers too much outside themselves.

During the commercial break, Minton relaxed into a more personal mode. "You're a real pro at this. You really make me look good, you know? Sometimes guests would rather have a leg sawed off than answer a simple question, and getting them to say something meaningful about themselves is like extracting state secrets."

"I've had a lot of experience," Hays said.

"And you're such a great lady of the theater," Minton went on. "Nobody'd know it, just to meet you. I don't mind telling you, this is the high point of my radio career."

He was a plump, ginger-haired man in his late thirties or early forties, probably with aspirations to be a television news anchor that never would be fulfilled because his voice was better than his appearance, and he had as much charm as a drilling rig. On this tour Hays had met many like him.

"You're making me feel old," she said.

Minton shook his head knowingly. "You're a very attractive woman, and you realize it—a sexy lady no matter what the calendar says. Here we go live again," he said, his voice and posture assuming their on-the-air demeanor.

"Welcome back to the Jerry Minton show," he said. "We're talking to that famous actress of stage and screen, Elois Hays— though not much screen of late, eh?—movies are such a downner. She is appearing this week at the Griffith Theater in a play as contemporary as the millennium itself, *The North Wind* .

"Now if I may, Ms. Hays—or should I call you Mrs. Witherspoon?"

"Call me Elois. I don't need any man's name," Hays said.

"Especially a man such as George Witherspoon, is that right? I mean, are the grocery-store tabloids correct in their stories about your husband's philandering?"

Hays gave Minton the Lady Bracknell stare from *The Importance of Being Earnest* .

"Not only with young women, of course," Minton went on undeterred, "but if the stories are accurate with young men as well—some say with the author of the play in which you are performing?

"Well, Elois, what does a woman of the world, the first lady of the theater, do about a husband who cares no more about her reputation than his own?"

God damn him, he was going to make her answer or shove his microphone down his throat and stamp out of the studio. She felt her carefully crafted surface shatter and anger boil up between the cracks like molten iron from the center of the Earth.

On the way to the Deep Sea Drilling Project, Dennis Gregory had told her that George had scheduled her for two more promotional interviews. Over the roar of the helicopter's rotors, Hays had thought the publicist had said "four." How many? she had objected, knowing that she was the touring company's greatest asset, knowing that she did the promotion bit well and could face the ordeal one at a time, but quailing at the prospect of an endless series. More than two was endless. Handling unpleasant chores one at a time was her way of coping, just as the trip to the local scientific operation, whatever it happened to be, was her way of keeping sane in a world determined to drive her crazy. Her natural curiosity about the universe around her might be the equivalent of someone else's romance novel, but science was a great spectator sport, maybe the best around. And if she were lucky she might come across something that she could discuss instead of the usual pointless personal questions that talk-show hosts preferred to ask celebrities.

"No-no," Gregory had said. "Two, not four. And both in Hawaii."

"I still don't understand," she had shouted, "why we are performing in Guam and then doubling back to Hawaii."

He had shrugged, as if to say that they all knew the vagaries of bookings and theater availability. Or of George, she had thought. Who knew what assignations guided his scheduling of this world tour? Or what anxieties in his aging loins sent him in search of more exotic flesh?

After that shattering encounter in Hampdon's hotel corridor, Hays had walked through her days as if they indeed had been numbered. She had felt alive only when she was on stage being someone else and had only begun to revive when, whatever his motives, George had announced that the show was going on tour. Broadway's flirtation with millennialism had been brief, but the rest of the world was less jaded. And, whatever George's motives, the tour had done well, playing to full houses throughout the Midwest, the South, the West, and now the Pacific, with George scheduling her days for promotion and his nights for God knew what. Somewhere along their path had been Tokyo, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, and at the end of the tour, in the week between Christmas and New Year's Eve, were a half-dozen final performances on Broadway. Although she didn't like using the word "final."

"At least," Gregory had been saying, "you get to see another part of the world—and this hole in the ocean floor that you're so keen on."

Guam had been strange. They had performed *The North Wind* four times already to brown-faced people who had never seen snow in their lives, much less a glacier, once to a mostly white audience of Navy officers and men from the base up on the mountain. But it had been the Guamanians who had shivered and applauded, and the Guamanians whose tensions had peopled the island with ghosts and ghostly terrors.

But then the Guamanians were more religious and more conservative, and fundamentalism, with its millennial apprehensions, had imbued these last few months with the anticipation and the dread of Judgment Day. If the world were to be destroyed, why not by mountains of ice? Fire the Chamorros knew all about. But ice?

Hays had emerged from the theater late one night to find a group of Guamanians around a giant bonfire in a nearby park, as if its roaring flames could drive away the ice giants from the north. Some of them had been dancing with natural abandon, the Polynesian part of their heritage emerging, in this time of crisis, from its Spanish and Filipino components, in quest of an unmediated relationship with the supernatural.

Other stories in the newspaper or the bi-lingual radio station had hinted at rites closer to the primitive in the more secluded portions of the island, at animal and even human sacrifice, but Hays hadn't believed them. The Guamanians were too civilized. She had guessed that the accounts were reflections of what might be happening in the truly isolated parts of the world, areas of Africa, perhaps, or Mongolia, or New Guinea—places she had never been but about which she was willing to assume the most outrageous ceremonies.

The world definitely was coming apart. No one who paid attention to the news could doubt that. In a dozen parts of the world, neighbors were fighting because they had different religions or even different interpretations of the same religion, or their ancestors had once occupied the same lands. Organized crime had become better organized and more ruthless. Murders were up, robberies were soaring, rape was epidemic. After a modest decline during the early '90s, drug use of all kinds had exploded. Episodes of mob violence proliferated in the major cities of the world, and mass slayings by armed lunatics occurred almost daily. Civilization was turning out to be a fragile skin over a vat of molten metal.

Then the Army helicopter had settled on the landing pad at the stern of the *JOIDES Resolution* .

The ship had the outline of an ocean-going vessel, but in the middle was an oil-well derrick. From it extended a couple of Erector-set booms. Nearby on the deck were racks of aluminum- alloy pipe.

The scientist in charge, an implausibly youthful looking woman with the implausible name of April Sowers and short hair bleached blonde by the tropical sun, had explained that the ship was picking up the project abandoned by the *Glomar Challenger* . They were drilling a hole through the Mohorovicic discontinuity to the mantle beneath, a near part of the Earth that the creatures who inhabited its surface had never seen, never touched by drill, whose only evidence came through reflected waves of sound. She didn't call it the mantle at first, but the "lithosphere." She shifted to "mantle" as a concession to Hays's lay vocabulary.

For the past few years the *Resolution* had been drilling cores from various places on the ocean floor, dating them, tracking the movement of the floor, coming to an understanding of the geologic processes that created new floor. Molten fractions of the mantle's basalt, the scientists theorized, upwelled at the oceanic ridges and pushed the floor toward the continents where it dived under their edges, lifting them into mountain chains or stripping away vast stretches of coast, producing earthquakes and volcanic eruptions.

Hays had shivered with terror and excitement, thinking of the impermanence of the Earth's surface, not

unlike in principle the oceans that covered much of its surface. She had thought all that was over, back in the primitive beginnings of the world, but the solid land on which she spent most of her days actually was only a thin raft floating on a sea of hot mush. She had not known then whether she had been shaken more by fear or by awe at the grandeur of the concept.

"But now we're going to try to tap the mantle itself," Sowers had said, "here where the crust is thinnest."

The*Resolution* , she had said, held itself with computerized engines over the deepest place in the world, the Marianas trench, 210 miles south of Guam. They floated over more than 36,000 feet of water, five miles, straight down. Mount Everest, if they could lift it and turn it upside down, would fit into the trench with more than a mile to spare.

Hays had shivered again to think of the depths beneath her feet. She might sink for hours, for days, and never touch bottom. What light would reach her then in those still, stygian waters? What sound could vibrate those compacted molecules?

The Moho discontinuity, that sharp line where the crust met the mantle, seemed to lie from ten to forty miles below sea level. At the bottom of the Marianas Trench, Sowers had said, five miles below sea level, the crust was thought to be only three to five miles thick. Instead of drilling through eight or nine miles of crystalline rock, like the deepest well of the world in Russia's Kola peninsula, the*Resolution* could simply lower its lightweight, aluminum-alloy pipe through those miles of ocean before the turbine engine at the bottom had to drive the bit into rock. The entire string was lifted only to recover core samples or to replace the bit or repair the turbine.

The secret to success was forecasting the weather. The ship had to remain in the same spot in spite of wind and waves, but a storm would overwhelm the capacity of their engines to compensate. Hurricane winds would force them to remove the upper few hundred meters of the string, mark what was left with a radio beacon and a buoy, and hope to recover their place later. So far the process had worked. They were nearly five miles through the crust; they might even reach the mantle before the year was over.

All this had been communicated as the tour had progressed, a fascinating display of technology in action. Here the breakthrough in humanity's relationship to its environment had come to a focus: James Watts's improvement of the steam engine in the middle of the 18th century had brought humanity to this point. Here it could send exploring rockets into the universe in preparation for spreading its seed beyond the limits of the Earth, and probes into the depths of its native planet. Instead of a scattering of tribes tolerated by supernatural powers and subject to punishment or extermination at a godlike whim, humanity had become matter contemplating itself, that which exists to understand the rest.

And yet Hays's exaltation had been underlain by unreasoning terror, like the buried fears of her childhood forcing themselves through ancient channels to erupt at the surface. The image of the*Resolution* 's bit breaking through the Earth's crust into the as-yet-untouched mantle was like the ego forcing its way into the id. Who knew what monsters lay in wait? Who knew what damage they might do, unleashed?

Hays had known where the images originated. She had remembered the stories she had read as a child, of exploration gone astray, of experiment gone awry, of the unsuspected strangeness of the universe striking back at human hubris. She had remembered stories about alien creatures awakened from long sleep at the bottom of the sea by submersibles or atomic explosives or deep-sea mining operations, and another about the planets themselves as eggs laid by a birdlike creature almost as big as Jupiter and about desperate drilling operations to kill the chick at the heart of the Earth before it hatched. And she had remembered all those movies about the monsters or gases or lava unleashed by scientists who did not think seriously enough about the possibility that they might be wrong, that they might not be able to anticipate the unpredictability, the outright malevolence, of nature.

The Japanese were good at personifying (or creaturefying, she had amended) the dangers that lay unsuspected behind the placid assumption that rationality had prevailed, but the Americans were better at clothing modern terrors in the lab coats of everyday science. Contemporary fairy tales—compiled by the brothers Grimm, not Hans Christian Andersen.

"Don't you ever worry," Hays had said, "about what might happen when you break through?"

"You mean that the job might be over?" Sowers had responded, deliberately misunderstanding. "There will always be new areas to explore, new knowledge to discover. Today's scientists find humility a great deal more appropriate to their state of knowledge than hubris."

"What if you should unleash a flood of lava?" Hays had persisted, wanting to force reassurance from Sowers's lips.

Sowers had laughed. "You've seen too many sci-fi movies."

Hays had flinched at this too-accurate reading of her state of mind.

"What we'll get is more like a flood of information that we never expected. Not lava. The drill hole is too small, for one thing, and the mantle itself already is erupting at the mid- oceanic ridges. Nothing new there. We do worry about fouling the Marianas trench with gas or oil, and we've been ready to plug the hole at any moment we struck a pocket or deep reservoir. But so far we've been lucky, or there are no hydrocarbons that deep. We did run across a pool of molten sulfur early, like the Bertha Rogers well in Oklahoma. But we were ready for that.

"No monsters," Sowers had concluded. "Only knowledge. That may be shattering enough."

Hays thought about Sowers and her search for information as Minton's question bored through her outer layer of assurance. And then from deep within her she felt rising to the surface not the hot lava of anger and resentment but a new sense of herself, independent of George, independent of any of her husbands or the casual lovers she had taken in her younger days. She could, she thought, define herself.

"Well, now," she said, scarcely pausing after Minton's question, "that has nothing to do with me, you know. George Witherspoon and I married for the usual reasons, and are separated for the usual reasons and will be divorced soon for the usual reasons."

"Are you announcing divorce proceedings?" Minton asked, his nose in the air like a cat scenting meat.

"I'm not announcing anything," Hays said coolly. "You have asked me an inconsequential question, and I have answered it in the same spirit. I'd like to talk about something important. With the world approaching an event in its struggle for survival, at a moment in time that we humans have awarded a significance beyond the ordinary, surely we can find something to discuss more vital than someone's marital status.

"Just a few days ago, for instance, I watched a ship floating above the deepest spot on Earth drilling a hole that may reach through the planet's crust to the mantle beneath, and I realized—" And she launched into a description of the Mohole project that had even lubricous Jerry Minton so enthralled that he forgot to ask any more questions about scandals in Hays's life. Indeed, the news of her divorce proceedings made only a paragraph on the entertainment page of the local newspaper.

But when Hays left the studio, she felt as if she had started a new play. It would be the drama of her own life, and the most challenging role she had ever accepted. She might be lost for awhile, looking for the playwright, trying to remember the lines and her motivation; she might often be afraid; she would not be

able to dismiss her terrors, particularly her fears of the future, so easily. But she felt now like Sowers, looking for new knowledge. She could never be certain of what might lie undiscovered below or above, but she could be sure that it would be wonderful if unsettling, and that, whatever it was, she could cope with it.

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# Chapter Sixteen

**November 19, 2000**
**Sally Krebs**

The giant cement statue of Christ the Redeemer, spotlighted against the night sky like a vision of Judgment Day, dominated Sally Krebs's imagination more than the mystery of her companion, and even when she looked away, the afterimage remained, like the figure on the cross that had hung on the wall of her bedroom when she was a child. Sitting on the veranda of the Jockey Club, sipping an after-dinner brandy, she had felt as if a cold hand was clutching the pit of her stomach. Something terrible was about to happen.

People she had interviewed over the past months had told her that they lived with apprehension every waking moment of their lives, and she had not understood until now. She recorded too much catastrophe to consider it anything more than the raw material of her trade; to know that the world is built on calamities is to deny them their power to terrify.

She had always felt that journalists were different from other people because their addiction to information of all kinds gave them an experience of the world as panorama rather than closeup, as process rather than event. Yet she could not repress a shiver. Something was slouching toward this beautiful city to be born, something she had not yet identified but she knew was related to the guerrilla movements springing up here and there in the world, in Latin America, in Africa and the Middle East, in the remains of the Soviet Union and its former allies, and in the Orient as well. The End of the World was producing an end-of- the-world extravagance among those who could not share the abundance displayed on television screens everywhere.

The image of the good life had been made available through the magic of satellite transmissions but not the substance. Communion without transubstantiation; today's religion of consumption offered its rewards only to the Elect.

"You shiver," Raul said at her right shoulder. "Are you cold? You must take my jacket."

"No, no," Krebs said. "It is quite warm." She could not visualize the elegant Raul in shirtsleeves, although she was sure he would remain just as elegant and possibly even sexier; to her, men in shirtsleeves had always seemed erotic. In any case, Rio had been warm, in the mid-70s during the afternoon, and humid, although here, near midnight, the temperature had begun to cool.

"It is the excitement, then," Raul said. "The thrill of the great event. That for which you made the great journey to the south."

Their dinner of chateaubriand (from Rio Grande de Sul, the waiter had said proudly, where the best beef comes from), asparagus and *chuchu* , chayote squash, and a heart of palm and tomato salad, had been accompanied by several bottles of Portuguese wine. Brazilian wine was just as good, Raul had said, but Portuguese wine had the cachet of the old country. The waiters had brought the food to the table on a tray, offering seconds at a nod or the wag of Raul's finger Had it not been for the shadow of her unrevealed assignment, the CNN cameraman, with his camera on the floor beside his chair, seated

discreetly three tables away, and the escort of ragged Bolivians lurking somewhere near, she would have felt like a tourist, privileged to have been shown both the best and the worst of Rio. She had spotted a few of their guards earlier, each of them carrying at least one concealed weapon, she suspected, and she wondered why the police had not detained them. But she possessed information that the police did not.

"They call themselves the 'Dark Road,'" her boss had said, "and they are planning something dramatic to make their case before the world. After a great deal of soul-searching, we notified the State Department, but they say it's nothing. Well, we think it's worth the time and expense to check it out."

"We don't often get invited to a revolution," she said to Raul.

"Not a revolution. Perhaps not even the beginning of one," Raul said. The words came out like quicksilver, making her self- conscious about her own blunt, mid-western speech. "Perhaps the beginning of the beginning of a revolution. If we are lucky."

"Or if the world is unlucky," Krebs said, in spite of herself. "Don't we have enough problems without creating more?"

"The tradition of the American press is support for the underdog," Raul chided gently, laughing at her behind his dark eyes. "Or at least neutrality."

"If I am neutral, I am neutral for civilization," she said. "And I am neutral against chaos. In chaos too many people get hurt, these days maybe the whole damn human species. That's the one great virtue of the U.S. system. It allows us to have change without chaos."

"The rest of the world learns only the worst from your country," he said. "For us the way of desperation. When all other hope is gone, there is only chaos."

"But why did you take a chance on CNN? Surely you must have been concerned that plans might leak?"

"Have they?"

"Not from me," she said. "But CNN is a big organization."

"We took that chance. And if we lose, after all there is only me, and perhaps a few others, and the movement will go on."

"You'd gamble your life on that? Just for a little publicity?"

"Revolutions have changed. Now the news is everywhere and even the remotest village may have a satellite dish. Revolutions are fought in the television studios of the world."

She took a big sip of the brandy in front of her, as if the burning in her throat could restore her to reality. "And what if I refuse to take your pictures? What if I don't want to add your revolution to the troubles of the world?"

He shrugged. "You would risk your job to protect the guilty?"

"It's going to be that big?"

"It will be so dramatic," he said, "that your tape will be viewed all over the world. And you will be the only one who will have it. You will become famous."

He was teasing her, this man without a last name who had flaunted his machismo before her like a toreador's cape, this Latin gentleman of wealth and position who had taken for his own the plight of the

favela poor and the landless peasants.

"And if I decide to carry out my assignment," Krebs said. "What is it that I should instruct my cameraman to tape?"

Raul looked at his watch, a wafer-thin gold Rolex. "It is almost midnight. You might wish to focus your camera up there."

She followed his negligent wave. He was pointing at the giant figure of Christ the Redeemer atop nearby Corcovado peak.

On the interminable flight from Miami, the tune of *Flying Down to Rio* had kept running through her head and as she looked out the window beside her she could imagine scantily-clad girls dancing on the wings of a propeller-driven airplane and Rogers and Astaire, in their first roles together, dancing the *carioca* . It all had been part of an era of innocence. Between two World Wars, to be sure, and in the depths of the Depression's massive loss of faith, but without the awareness of the ways in which the human species could really destroy itself and maybe even destroy the planet that had given it birth, and long before the arrival of the oppressive fears of a millennium almost at hand.

The eternal drone of the jet engines had become part of her existence, and she had damned the economies of an organization that sent off its staff in coach. She had flown first-class only once, and then by accident of an overbooked coach class, but she imagined what it must be like ahead—good meals with real china and silverware and wine, with plentiful free liquor before and liqueurs afterwards, and room to stretch and move around and even ascend the 747's spiral staircase to the lounge. She had tried to straighten her legs once more under the seat ahead and then had stood up and stretched her back in the aisle before lurching down the narrow passage between the two seats on the side and the row of eight in the middle to the nearest horizontal row of stinking, littered toilets where she had to stand in line.

The long ordeal in the air had been an unreal beginning to an unreal experience. After eight hours aloft, passengers began to get a little crazy, as if this cramped world, measured in inedible meals delivered on plastic trays, was all the life there was, and existence without vibration, with the solid ground beneath and the sky above, was the fantasy.

Then the sun had come up like a red god born from the sea, and Krebs had seen beneath the wing the astonishing green carpet of the Amazon jungle extending from seashore to the horizon on every side, and, appearing under the wing, the great ribbon of the Amazon itself, cutting a broad, brown swath through the green to Marajó Island at its mouth, bigger than Switzerland and Delaware combined. She imagined the smell of the rain forest and the chatter of monkeys, the rustle of agoutis, the slither of anacondas, the screech of macaws. That Edenic vision had redeemed the whole long trip.

But as had she studied the landscape more closely, Krebs had seen the cruel muddy patches where the jungle had been cleared and tiny buildings scattered here and there like the toys of wanton children, and the ravines where the tropical rains had washed away the thin soil. Toward the western horizon she had seen wisps of smoke rising toward the cloud-dotted blue sky, where new portions of the rain forest were being razed, and she had felt a revulsion at the despoiling of landscape she had come to think of as hers, earned by her admiration and her ordeal.

She had thought she understood the desires of the Brazilians to transform their nation and their lives by putting to use the vast resources that could make Brazil an economic power in the world. She had known that the official rate of deforestation was less than half of one per cent annually and that the other nations of the world had exploited their natural resources without public protest. Her own country had cut down its native forests to build houses and create farms, and then built cities on the farmland. Where were the

Sierra Clubs then? But times and morality changed.

Deforestation was not a problem when an entire continent was almost empty. Pollution did not exist when nature purified the air within a few hours and the water within a few miles. Overpopulation could scarcely be more than a theory when the majority of children died in infancy, and a family could always light out for the frontier. But what was reasonable behavior in one century became irrational in another, and the greatest problem the world faced was the survival of old patterns into eras when they no longer worked.

In any case, the deforestation of the Amazon basin would pay off only in disappointment. The rain-forest soils would never support agriculture, and the last great rain forest on the planet, with all its untapped resources, would have been sacrificed for nothing. The rational solution would be for the developed nations of the world to compensate Brazil for leaving the Amazon untouched, but the Brazilians were too proud to accept charity and Krebs held out few hopes for rational solutions to any of the problems of the world.

Instead the scene below had seemed to sum up for Krebs the sorry state of the world—unbearable beauty trembling on the brink of extinction.

And then the flight began preparing for its landing in Rio de Janeiro, So Sebastio do Rio de Janeiro.

The Aeroporto International do Galeo had been like international airports anywhere in the world: wide expanses of concrete and glass crowded by people anxious to be elsewhere, but this one had been clean and new and conveniently arranged in two buildings, each one of them two half circles separated by motorways. And the faces had been browner, the clothing, more colorful, and the odors, spicier.

The Bolivian who had met her had been a surprise; he had looked slender because he was tall, but Krebs had had the feeling that under his tan sport coat and off-white slacks was a well- muscled body. His dark hair had been as curly as a Roman god's, his brown eyes had been warm and knowledgeable, and his face had been so beautiful she had caught her breath.

"My name is Raul," he had said, "and you must be Sally Krebs, news producer for CNN," and, as soon as they had collected her luggage and had instructed a taxi driver how to follow them with the cameraman, they had been off in a limousine waiting at the curb. The limousine had been long and black and polished, but the chauffeur, like the taxi driver, had looked as if he had experienced a lifetime of trouble.

They had toured the broad avenues and older streets of Rio, passing through or around the hills that sometimes ran clear to the sea. They had toured the broad, white beaches of Copacabana and Ipanema with its palm trees and their blue expanse of the southern Atlantic and their tanned, beautiful people in bathing suits. The cameraman had a picture of the*maté* -man with his chrome-plated tea-barrel threading his way through the dozens of soccer games on Copacabana Beach, and a bather in a bikini with his head stuck in a plastic orange telephone stall along the mosaic pavement. They had passed by one of the great seaports of the world, with its rows of giant freighters automatically loading and unloading their cargoes, and the rich suburb of Botafogo with its beach sheltered from the Atlantic surf. They had stopped in the old city to promenade along the Ruo do Ouvidor from the market place to the church of So Francisco de Paula. They had viewed the old city palace of the fugitive Portuguese sovereign Dom Joo VI, the Monroe palace, the cathedral, and the church of Our Lady of Candelaria with its twin towers and graceful dome. They had seen the cliffs of the perpendicular mountains held together with band-aids of cement. And they had taken a cable car to the summit of Sugar Loaf, that landmark for generations of sailors hungry for land and the sensual delights of Rio, where they had seen much of the city spread out before them like a rich man's toy, and the funicular railway to the statue of Christ the Redeemer on Corcovado, the peak called Hunchback, where, up close, Krebs had felt dwarfed by its immensity but

curiously blessed by its outspread arms.

A feeling of peace had spread through her, such as she had not known since she was a child, and she wished she had taken the time to go inside the cathedral to cross herself and perhaps even to enter the confessional and unburden her sins to a priest who could not understand English but could give her absolution anyway. But even then, under the spell of the giant figure in a foreign land, she had known that absolution did not come so easily. First she had to forgive herself, and that was difficult, not because her sins were so great but because a concern with individual salvation in a world that might not see another year, much less another millennium, had seemed peculiarly self-centered.

That had been her last moment of tranquility. Raul had taken her from the residences of the fortunate to the favelas, the shanty towns built of abandoned bits of wood and metal and cardboard, scattered through and around Rio. Just as they had seen and taped the sunny views of the city, Krebs and her cameraman had recorded the lives of the poor and the homeless, the adults drudging in a bit of soil or nodding in a patch of shade, the children, their thin faces hungry for food or money, surrounding the strangers and their shiny vehicles with their grimy hands outstretched. The smell of urine and feces and of rotting food had been almost unbearable. Raul had scattered cruzeiros like royal largess, but Krebs had held back, telling herself that she needed to retain her journalistic objectivity although she had realized later that this was only an attempt to insulate herself from the misery she was unable to alleviate.

"Where do they come from?" she had asked Raul later, knowing the answer but wanting to voice her protest anyway.

"From the land, drawn to the promise of the city."

"But surely they would be better off where they are?"

"They do not see it that way. Maybe if they owned the land, but they are only peasants, and between rent, taxes, and weather, they have no hope. And now there are generations that have known nothing but this."

"But what will become of them?"

"The young ones will go into prostitution, the boys as well as the girls, or into drugs; the old ones and many of the young will die of disease or of malnutrition, or of both; a few will escape through crime, or athletic or artistic ability, or luck. That slender possibility is what keeps them coming."

The conversation had paused while they sipped their dark Brazilian coffee at a cafe back along the Rua do Ouvidor, where Krebs had indeed entered the church of So Francisco de Paula and blessed herself with holy water but had found nobody there to hear her confession. "You had a purpose in showing me these things today," she had said, "in my weakened condition."

"I could say that you were more susceptible," Raul had said, "but the truth is that events are not. What is scheduled to happen is timed for the day of your arrival. We regret your weariness—your jet lag—but a more leisurely schedule would allow time for discovery by the authorities."

"And the favelas?"

"What you have seen today symbolizes the gulf between the poor and the rich. Here within this city we can see living side by side the forces that can tear the world apart."

"And you're going to give those forces a little help," she had said skeptically.

"Charity is the bribe wealth pays to poverty; welfare is governmental charity aimed at keeping rebellion

just below the level of explosion. But eventually inequalities raise pressures too high, and a timely revolution is like a safety valve."

"The state of the world may be more fragile than you think. Mixed with the other millennial concerns, your revolution may destroy the whole vessel."

"Well, we shall see," Raul had said cheerfully. "We shall have a late dinner this evening, and at midnight what you have come for will happen. Meanwhile, I will take you to your hotel and give you a chance for a siesta so that you will be fresh and ready to record history."

As they had parted in the lobby of Copacabana Palace Hotel, Raul had taken her shoulder in a strong right hand. The touch had almost unhinged the backs of her knees. "You find me sexy," he had said. It hadn't been a question, and she hadn't known whether to admit or deny it. "Mostly it is the allure of power you feel," he had continued. "You are a desirable woman and I would find much pleasure in making love to you, but I want you to know that I am as celibate as a priest. I am wedded to the revolution."

As he had parted from her, the imprint of his hand still burning her flesh, she hadn't known whether to laugh or to cry. Instead she had gone to her room and collapsed, only to dream of a whole city going up in flames, of mobs careening through smoke- filled streets, and bullets screaming all around her in the night.

The spotlighted figure on the peak seemed to move, to rise in the air as if some new Assumption were at hand, as if a humanity's aspirations for eternal life had put on the fragile reality of flesh, had become what it represented, and now was ascending into the heavens whence it came. Then the sound of the explosion assaulted their ears, and Krebs realized that the terrible event she had dreaded was happening and she could not look away. The guerrilla group that Raul represented, the Dark Road, had chosen the dark road indeed. It had blown up the giant statue of Christ the Redeemer.

For a moment the figure climbed before it pitched forward slowly, and, like Icarus shedding his feathers, crumpled to the ground in fragments beyond their line of vision. All they could see was a cloud of smoke and debris rising in the spotlights the statue had vacated.

The first words Krebs spoke were to the cameraman. "Did you get it?" she asked, and then to Raul, "What a stupid thing to do. It will alienate everyone, even your followers."

He shrugged. "You hated it, didn't you? I hated it. But we must destroy in order to build. We must free ourselves from our unreasoning attachment to the past. We must destroy the symbols that enslave us."

At that moment she saw Raul for what he had claimed: He was the priest of a new religion, and in order for that religion to succeed, he had to tear down the old one. As sirens echoed from the hills and the staccato sounds of automatic gunfire seemed like the sound effects for a horror movie, she understood that what she had seen in him was only a reflection of his unattainability. He had given himself to an ideal and he had nothing left for any woman. The virtue of the myths he dealt in were irrelevant: People could dedicate themselves as completely to folly as to truth. And as she turned away from this romantic revolutionary and her own romantic illusions, she realized that she had stumbled across another truth about the condition of the world in this millennial year.

That was how she edited the tape. She removed any scenes that included Raul, and dispatched it, an hour later, to the Atlanta office. Later she discovered it had become the centerpiece for a roundup of the atrocities committed that night around the world and for the terrorist attacks in Uruguay, Venezuela, and Peru, in another Georgia and Azerbaijan, in South Africa and Israel and the Sudan, in Laos and the Philippines.… It was the best of times; it was the worst of times; it was a time of revolutions, and Krebs's

tapes had recorded the most dramatic event of them all.

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# Chapter Seventeen

**December 7, 2000**
**Murray Smith-Ng**

The view was spectacular. The sky was a bottomless lake inverted overhead, the redwoods towering in the distance were green-helmeted guards, and here on the cliffs above the white- capped surf of the Pacific the gulls circled and the dried, brown grass rustled in the ocean-scented breeze. But Murray Smith-Ng could think only of his predicament.

"We're not asking you for miracles," Victoria said. She was a tall, slender young woman with dark hair and dark eyes and a spectacular chest that she displayed in a low-cut, tightly fitted blouse tucked into her blue jeans. "Just to practice your profession."

Smith-Ng still wore the clothes in which he had been abducted from the streets of San Francisco, the dark-gray suit with the white shirt and the red and blue regimental tie. His kidnappers had offered him other garments, but as long as he was in academic regalia, so to speak, he had a finger-hold on the real world.

"You overestimate my abilities, young woman," he said. His voice wavered on "abilities," but he hoped she didn't notice. The illusion of cool confidence might be his only hope. "I am a mathematician, not a fortune-teller."

She sat with her back against a flat upcropping of rock. In her right hand she swung a wooden staff idly back and forth as if to orchestrate her remarks. She seemed totally at ease, and yet she had removed from her waist-band a blue-black, large-barreled automatic and placed it by her side. "But," she said, "you predicted the eruption at Papandayan."

She mispronounced the name, as he had before he arrived in Java, but he knew what she meant because she had mentioned it before. Now he wished he had never heard of Papandayan or Java or the Ring of Fire. He regretted it more than he had when he stood on the rim of the erupting volcano, though the event had made his reputation, and the audience of scientists at the conference had sat in respectful silence as he presented his paper and wrote his equations on the blackboard and afterwards gave him an unprecedented round of applause.

"A stroke of luck," he said.

"Nonsense," she replied. She nudged him closer to the cliff edge with a well-aimed poke of the staff into his right buttock.

He knocked the staff away. "Don't do that!" The surf breaking on the beach below looked like jagged rocks, and he wouldn't be surprised if they concealed rocks just as jagged, ready to grab and mutilate his body when it fell. Vertigo made his stomach weak. "Heights make me dizzy," he said. "Maybe a consequence of my Java experience."

"All the more reason to do as we say," Victoria said, prodding him again.

"I won't be any good to you dead," he said. He hoped he was firm, like Humphrey Bogart telling Sidney Greenstreet that torture wasn't an effective threat unless they were willing to kill him, but his voice may

have quavered when he thought of death. He was no Sam Spade.

"You aren't any good to us anyway if you don't tell us when Armageddon is going to arrive."

Smith-Ng watched a young man, clad only in a towel, make his way down the narrow path that snaked down the side of the cliff to the narrow beach below. He was the man called "Reggie," who seemed to be the leader of these crazy survivalists. Smith-Ng watched the play of muscles in the young man's back and legs with a fascination he could not have explained.

Victoria prodded him again, and he swung around to face her. "Armageddon is a religious term. You can't translate apocalyptic language into scientific language. The Bible is your only source of information."

"But there's a difference in interpretation," she said seriously. "There's the premillennialists and the dispensationalists, and who knows who else."

"Not only that," Smith-Ng said, "there's the Seventh-Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church Universal and Triumphant and a dozen other churches and sects and cults, all of whom claim to have a special insight into the end of everything."

"One of them has to be right," she said stubbornly.

"Every one of them has been wrong regularly and consistently. William Miller, who founded the Seventh-Day Adventists, predicted the world would end in 1833, 1834, 1843, and 1844; Charles Taze Russell picked 1914, when Christ, who had been reborn in 1874, would be forty years old, and his followers became the Jehovah's Witnesses; Mother Shipton chose 1881, 1882, and 1991; Elizabeth Clare Prophet picked 1987 for California to fall into the ocean and 1990 for the end of everything; and Marian Keech gathered together her group on Dec. 20, 1954, to be taken away by flying saucers before the worldwide Flood. None of this has anything to do with science."

"Look," Victoria said, swinging her staff gently in her hand, "I'm the nice one. Some of the others want to beat it out of you."

"That's what I'm talking about," Smith-Ng said. "You can't do science with someone ready to shove a knife in your back—or a stick. When I predicted Papandayan I had data about tectonics and temperatures and earth tremors to put into my equations about volcanic eruptions, along with established correlations. There's no data about Armageddon, and anything I told you would be nothing better than a guess."

"Well, now," Victoria said, "there's economic figures, wars, armed uprisings like the one in Brazil and other places around the world, weather, politics, anything you want. We've got computers, you know."

He had seen at least one of them, all right, and he would be willing enough to give them a prediction if he was certain he knew what they wanted. But he was only a short, fat, near- sighted professor on the wrong side of middle age, and he had the terrible suspicion that if he gave them the wrong answer, they would kill him just as surely as if he refused to go along with their madness.

He was reminded of another catastrophe that had occurred on this date. This might well be his Pearl Harbor. His thoughts searched desperately: If this were one of his equations, what would the answer be? But he knew, with an elevatorlike surge in the pit of his stomach, that personalities and individual desires had nothing to do with catastrophe theory and that he was going to have to figure this out without the help of mathematics.

When they had picked him off the street outside the conference center, still flushed from the success of

his presentation, he had been so shocked by their strength and teamwork, one on either side, hustling him along, that he scarcely had had time to protest before he was inside the black sedan with its smoke-colored side windows and it was already on its way toward the Golden Gate Bridge and highway 1. On a happier occasion he might have enjoyed the scenery of the northern California coast, the redwoods and the cliffs and the blue Pacific stretching infinitely into the west. Instead he fretted over what his abductors intended to do with him until, after several hours, the highway had left the coast to join the Interstate and a blindfold had been fitted over his eyes. He had found that comforting.

The two men in the back with him had refused to tell him why they had kidnapped him, and the woman driving the automobile had said only that if he insisted on asking questions they would have to gag him. But the blindfold had assured him that if they didn't want him to identify their destination they must plan on releasing him afterwards. Though the thought of what came before "afterwards" had been enough to keep him apprehensive.

The car at last had swerved, had rumbled on unimproved roads and stopped before bumping over some kind of barrier, and had finally come to a halt. The blindfold had been removed, and Smith-Ng had been struck by brightness. The blues and greens and whites and browns had overwhelmed his capacity to interpret them. As his vision cleared, the dazzling impact had not lessened but the sensory impressions had separated themselves into sky and grass and cliffs and trees and buildings.

Instead of being expelled from the Garden of Eden, he thought wryly, he had been abducted to it. To his left, over a rise of white cliff, was the Pacific. To his far right, towering above the long, bare rise of redwoods, were the peaks of mountains, no doubt the Coast Range. In front, across an expanse of brown bark, flower beds, and graveled paths, was a mansion masquerading as a log cabin. Although it was only one story high, Smith-Ng could see wings extending behind the broad front that faced him. The only incongruous elements were the windows that looked more like gun ports and the two-story towers at each corner of the building that looked as if guards stationed there could control the entire cleared area.

And then his captors had urged him out of the car and toward the cabin while the sedan itself had vanished behind the building. As Smith-Ng had been ushered through a door that looked like wood but revealed a thick metal edge, he had had a glimpse behind him of the barrier now closed over the graveled road on which they had entered. The gate was made of metal bars, and it met, on either side, before they disappeared into the surrounding redwoods, a stout chain-link fence that had looked as if it could be electrified.

But where would they get electricity? he had time to wonder before he was thrust into the entryway of the cabin, and the size of the place unfolded before him. Big rooms had opened on either side. To the right had been a library with shelves filled with books from floor to ceiling and tables and chairs scattered across polished wood floors. On one of the tables Smith-Ng had seen a modern computer. To the left had been a living room carpeted in a tan berber; in the middle was a huge wooden coffee table surrounded by brown leather chairs and sofas. Doors farther down the hall had promised more rooms.

Reggie had been waiting in the living room. "Here he is, Reggie," one of his abductors had said, before they both had turned and left.

Smith-Ng had appraised Reggie, as he had felt himself being studied. Reggie was tall, lean, young, athletic, confident. Beside him Smith-Ng had felt even more physically inadequate, and it had seemed to him that he had lost another competition when he spoke first. "I don't know what you think you can gain from me that's worth a kidnapping charge, but you should know that I am an impoverished, recently divorced academic, and nobody would pay a dime to get me returned."

"Kidnapped?" Reggie had said, smiling. "You must have misunderstood. We want to retain your services as a catastrophe theorist. My people are sometimes too impetuous."

"Blindfold and all?" Smith-Ng had said. "That wouldn't look too good in court."

"That would be hard to prove, wouldn't it? Particularly when we have your E-mail acceptance of our proposal."

They had planned far enough ahead to fake that too. Smith- Ng had considered the complicated matter of proof and the ways in which his character could be attacked, as well the time and money a court case could consume. Time and money meant a great deal to him, perhaps nothing to these madmen. "Since there seems to have been a misunderstanding," he had said at last, "I presume that I am free to go?"

Reggie had surprised him. "Of course," he had said. And then, after a pause, "But you might have difficulty finding your way back, and something might happen to you. There are bears and hunters and stray bullets, as well as dangerous paths from which people have been known to fall to their deaths. And all our transportation is out-of-commission at the moment. Perhaps you'd be willing to stay overnight and make an early start."

Smith-Ng had considered his options. It hadn't been the lions and tigers and bears he had been concerned about but the distance he would have had to travel, alone and on foot, and "the stray bullets," as well as the fall to one's death. These people could easily fake an accident.

"Perhaps we can reach an agreement. If I can perform my services, your transportation might be miraculously repaired."

"You are a perceptive man," Reggie had said. "That speaks well for your professional competence. What we want of you is your prediction about Judgment Day, about Armageddon."

Smith-Ng had allowed his incredulity to appear, but choked back the natural response, "You're out of your mind." If Reggie were indeed out of his mind, like Jim Jones and David Koresh, he might decide, like those two, to take his followers with him, and anyone else who happened to be there at the time.

"While you're thinking about it," Reggie had said, "let me show you around the place."

Smith-Ng had never taken a house tour with less motivation. And yet, in spite of himself, the sheer wonders of the place had overwhelmed his apprehensions. The cabin was like a guest lodge, with perhaps two dozen rooms in each wing, joined by a big dining hall with a long table across the front and two even longer tables extending at right angles, like an English college commons. Behind it was a big kitchen equipped with mixers and beaters and shiny pans hung from a rack above the preparation table, a couple of big refrigerators, and a restaurant-sized stove flanked by microwave and traditional ovens. The stove and traditional ovens, Reggie had said, could be adapted to burn wood.

Behind the kitchen was a pantry room, with freezers and thoroughly stocked shelves, and behind that, in the enclosure embraced by the two wings, was the source of the electricity, an array of photoelectric cells. Reggie also had pointed out the units on the roofs of the cabin wings and said that electricity was stored for overcast days and nighttime in ranks of batteries. Gasoline-powered generators were available for backup.

"With most of the world concerned about the end of everything," Smith-Ng had said dryly, "you have a big investment in permanence."

"That's why we're survivalists," Reggie had replied. "Fools trust chance. In times of crisis wise men

prepare for the worst." He had seemed to make an impulsive decision. "I'll show you."

He had led Smith-Ng to a metal plate set in concrete in a cleared area beyond the photoelectric array. He had inserted a key. When he had removed it, the plate had pivoted upward on concealed hinges like some stone doorway into a world of fantastic revelation. Reggie had led him down a steep metal ladder into a concrete room with a circular metal staircase on one side and an open elevator on the other. Reggie chose the elevator, which descended past dark rock walls for minutes before it arrived at the bottom and they stepped out into what seemed like a near-duplicate of the lodge above, including the kitchen and the stocked larder. This one, however, had been carved out of rock, apparently hundreds of feet below the surface. And here there were dormitories instead of individual rooms, and an armory stocked with more weapons than Smith-Ng had ever seen in one place. Automatic rifles were racked against one rock wall; four machine guns and a dozen mortars rested in a corner; hand guns were stored in plastic cases and wooden boxes were stacked high against a wall. Some of the boxes had "hand grenades" stenciled on the sides; others said "ammunition" identified by caliber.

"We will defend ourselves," Reggie had said, "against the people who chose not to prepare for a worst-case scenario."

"Or take over when government collapses?"

"Someone will have to," Reggie had said simply. "Better us than the mobs."

"The cost of all this is unbelievable," Smith-Ng had said.

Reggie had shrugged. "Nothing, really, compared to William Randolph Hearst's San Simeon retreat, and some of our backers could have bought out Hearst with a year's income."

"And what happens," Smith-Ng had asked, "if all this falls into the ocean? If the catastrophe is a massive earthquake?"

"We are survivalists," Reggie had said, shrugging. "We have other places as well equipped as this. You'd do well to help us. Not only will you be well compensated, you might be offered an opportunity to seek refuge here when the time comes."

"To join you?" Smith-Ng had said, not hiding his incredulity.

"There are compensations other than mere survival," Reggie had said. "Let me introduce you to one of them."

They had ascended back to the surface, and back to the living room where Victoria had been waiting. Smith-Ng could not imagine that this cool, competent, voluptuous young woman was a reward to be offered for extraordinary services, but the thought that she might offer herself, that she might take charge of his body and mold it to her own sensuous desires, had turned his flesh cold. He could not decide if it was desire or apprehension.

These survivalists wanted a prediction, Smith-Ng thought, standing on the cliff edge above the Pacific, unable to retreat because of his uncertainty about what Victoria might do, unable to respond to their demands for fear that the wrong prediction might set off this cult into a paroxysm of murder and suicide. As self-possessed and confident as they seemed, their behavior suggested a deeper uncertainty that he feared to aggravate. Instead, in good academic fashion, he delayed.

"This place is built for dozens," he said, "but I've seen only five or six. Where are the others?"

"Off earning a living, of course," Victoria said. "That's one reason we need you. When do we call them

in?"

That was true. This place could support its complement of survivalists for years, but after a few uneventful months morale would begin to deteriorate. Their catastrophe would be that there was no catastrophe.

"What's the big deal?" Victoria asked. "On one side you get payment; on the other"—she poked him again with her stick; it was, he thought, like a threat of rape—"you get the deep blue sea."

"As to the rewards—" he began.

"Money," she said. "That's no problem. A down-payment up front with a retainer for weekly updates. Promise of a place in a refuge if you want it. And if you can get there in time. And some immediate pleasure." She smiled and stretched lazily. "You look like you haven't had much recently."

"You'd do that," Smith-Ng asked, "for the good of the group?"

"Maybe I like short, pudgy, middle-aged men," she said.

Smith-Ng nodded at Reggie making his way back up the cliff side from his morning swim. "Wouldn't Reggie care?"

"Reggie?" She laughed. "You don't know Reggie."

He didn't want to explore that remark's implications. He had made up his mind. He would have to give them what they wanted, what he was sure now they wanted.

"Okay," he said. "I'll do what I can."

He brushed past Victoria and her stick and her automatic and led the way to the lodge and the computer he had seen in the library. He switched it on, opened a file he labeled "Catastrophe!," and confidently typed in his equations. Here he was in charge, and Victoria and Reggie and the goons who had abducted him were at cliff's edge to be poked. He referred to international data banks for stock-market trends, economic indicators, unemployment data, factory closings, interest rates, wage-price movements, financial-institution failures, strikes, lock-outs, bankruptcies, foreclosures, fluctuations in exchange rates, commodity prices, oil and gas shortages, imbalances of trade, assassinations, political instabilities, coups, terrorist attacks, and third-world nuclear capabilities. With Victoria's breath warm in his ear and her left breast pressed against his right shoulder, he inserted values in his equations and sat back while the computer did the calculations.

"We will have this stuff checked, you know," Reggie said, from behind.

Smith-Ng half-turned. Reggie was still in his towel, like a young god. "So I presumed," Smith-Ng said, "but I should caution you that there is no one, in my small field, or outside, who will be able to understand more than a small part of what I have just done for you."

The answer came up on the screen in the form of a graph with hills and valleys. Smith-Ng's fingers moved mystically over the keyboard, and the graph twisted to present itself in a simulation of three dimensions. Now it looked like an Escher landscape. Once more his fingers performed their magic, and the hills and valleys were painted with colors that transformed the landscape into a fairyland without fairy folk. But somewhere there was a pot of gold.

Reggie grunted. "What does it say?"

"Forget Judgment Day," Smith-Ng said, looking back at Victoria and then Reggie. "Forget Armageddon. What this says is that the chances of worldwide economic collapse are forty-seven per cent over the next thirty days, sixty-five per cent over the next three months, eighty-three per cent over the next year."

"Never one hundred?" Reggie complained.

"If you want certainties talk to prophets."

"What about other catastrophes?"

"I've already done calculations on volcanic eruptions, nuclear war, asteroid collision, supernova and solar explosion, a new ice age, the greenhouse effect, plague, pollution, and overpopulation. It would be easy enough to download them into your computer, even to superimpose them on this graph. But their variables are greater, and they would merely add levels of uncertainty."

"Golly!" Victoria said, breathless before his expertise.

"Gee," Reggie said.

"I've programmed your computer to adjust the readings for the various sources I've tapped, as they change, and the probabilities will be automatically adjusted, probably increasing. See here and here and here." Smith-Ng pointed out the peaks and valleys, swathed in their various colors, and how their trends could be interpreted.

By the looks on their faces, he knew he had won. He had given them what they wanted, scientific confirmation of their dreams. The problem was not catastrophe but the people who had a vested interest in catastrophe. Howard Ruff was right, if Western civilization didn't fail, they would be terribly disappointed.

He had also introduced a variable into the equation that was his insurance policy against the survival of Western civilization and the outrage of the survivalists: No matter how much new data refined the graph, catastrophe always would be pushed at least a month into the future.

And if by some chance he was wrong, and civilization did collapse, he might have a refuge here against the night.

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# Chapter Eighteen

**December 25, 2000**
**Barbara Shepherd**

Everything in the commune had gone so smoothly since Isaiah's death that Barbara Shepherd felt uneasy. She still dreamed of the prophet; he was standing as she had seen him last, his arms outstretched, the tines of the pitchfork emerging from his back, his eyes sad, judging her. But the days were perfect.

The weather had been magnificent with plenty of northern California sunshine alternating with rain at just the right moments. The crops were bountiful, the horses and cattle were thriving, and the television audiences had responded to her with an enthusiasm that suggested an unfilled need for a female religious figure, maybe even a matriarchal God. Perhaps the ancient Greek cult of the white goddess spoke to something fundamental in the human psyche.

Even the women whose daily existence she had shared were blossoming under the new regime. With the

easing of Isaiah's monastic rules, meals had improved, field labor was less obsessive and intermingled with other tasks, and Shepherd had inaugurated a series of classes for the women's new leisure hours. Some of them needed lessons in reading, but others enjoyed classes on literature, painting and sculpture, crafts, agricultural and domestic arts, history, women's studies, scripture, particularly the scripture of apocalypse, and philosophy. That was Shepherd's favorite, and she enjoyed seeing the faces of her students brightening with unfamiliar ideas.

Janet had resisted the changes with every ounce of resentment in her swollen body. But even she had surrendered to Shepherd's leadership the day the communal dining table had been inaugurated. At dinner Shepherd had asked Janet to stand and announced that she would be the person to whom they all should turn for decisions about the everyday operation of the commune. And then Shepherd had walked to Janet's side, had put one arm around her waist and a hand on her pregnant belly, and had said, "Janet's baby will be born on Christmas Day." Janet had treated it as the Second Annunciation, carrying her burden with an unfamiliar pride and even pleasure, and deferring to Shepherd as if she were indeed the Angel Gabriel.

It was the kingdom of God on Earth, the Garden of Eden without the serpent, in spite of the fact that here it was, December 25, and Janet had not yet felt a contraction. Shepherd had never felt so happy, so needed, so complete. At last she was living up to her name. And yet she could not enjoy it.

In the first place, there were no men. There could never be any men or the entire enterprise would collapse. That was why all the feminist utopias killed off the men in one way or another. Occasionally, one of the younger women came to Shepherd in the night, looking for comfort, and Shepherd took her into her bed and held her, nothing more. And yet Shepherd wondered if "nothing more" might turn into something she might not like, if she, too, might need comfort, if she might grow to appreciate the softness of women.

That was part of it. But mixed in with it was the reality that their little corner of peace and contentment wasn't cut off from the rest of the world, and the rest of the world was dying from terminal anxiety. Murder, rape, violence, robbery, immorality, terrorism, serial killings, mass slayings, war and the threat of nuclear destruction, plague, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, weird weather, threats from space, insurrection, and unrelenting fear about what the end of the year might bring. Six days more before the terminal date, and the world was falling apart. Here they were sheltered, protected by the hand of God. Isaiah might have seen it as a sign of heavenly favor; his little band had been blessed. But it didn't feel right to Shepherd. She had not been born again simply to be pastor to those already saved.

And that was part of it. Mostly, however, she felt uneasy about good fortune, as if she didn't deserve it, as if once the wheels of fate were running too smoothly she had to throw a sabot into the machinery. She had transformed tranquility into chaos too often not to recognize the symptoms. That was why, in the end, she had agreed to admit the reporter from this check-out- stand tabloid.

"I want to thank you for the freedom you have offered me to look around and to talk to people," he said. The reporter was a "he"; that was important.

"We have nothing to hide," she said.

"So it would seem," the reporter said. He was not particularly young nor was he particularly virile or good looking. He was short and bespectacled and balding and casually dressed, though without the chic of those who dressed casually as part of the face they presented to the world, or the defiance of those who deliberately violated decorum. He was simply dowdy. But he was a man.

"This place is unbelievable," the reporter said. His name was Dan, but Shepherd determinedly thought of

him by his profession; it was like naming kittens: Personalize them and you couldn't let them go. "The world outside is falling apart, and here everything seems normal. Better than normal."

Shepherd nodded from behind Isaiah's desk. She still thought of it as his desk. It was built to his scale, not hers, and she looked like a child playing in her father's office.

"I'd like to set down roots here myself," the reporter said wistfully, and then added quickly, "but I know that's not possible. The only thing—"

"Yes?"

"I've spoken to Janet. When I leave I'd like to take her with me."

"She's welcome to go, of course. Any of my flock can leave at any time. But what makes you think Janet wants to go with you?"

"She's different from the rest of you."

"She's about to give birth."

"That, too, and I'd like to provide a home for her and her baby. That's a laugh, isn't it?" He didn't look as if he felt like laughing. "Janet is sensitive and vulnerable and—I don't know."

"Skeptical," Shepherd supplied.

"Yeah," the reporter said. "She's got a mind, you know? She asks questions. Wants answers. Kind of like me."

"We'll have to see what Janet wants," Shepherd said calmly, although she realized that Sam might be the serpent she had admitted into her little Eden. Men always ruined things.

"One other thing," the reporter said. "I think you killed Isaiah."

Shepherd's television appearances had opened with a long shot of the valley in all its sunlit splendor and peaceful beauty, focusing in slowly on the barn and a small, black stick figure standing on the peak of its shingled roof. As the camera got closer the figure resolved into a person, and then into a woman, and then into Barbara Shepherd herself. When she almost filled the entire screen, Shepherd went into her Olympic routine, using the rooftree as if it were a balance beam, and ended with a backward flip.

The scene dissolved into Shepherd seated on the edge of Isaiah's desk, looking into the camera. "That was foolish," she said. "As foolish as the time and effort I put into the Olympic competitions so many years ago. But I was risking my life to make a point: without faith life is meaningless. We can see in the world around us evidence of that inescapable truth. People are dying not because of the violence around them but because they lack faith. They live in terror of the future. But those who have faith find meaning in everything they do; they live unafraid, confident that whatever happens they are saved, not dreading but anticipating Judgment Day and the Rapture."

It had not been a performance. She had had enough of those, on stage and in front of cameras. For this she had learned no lines. She had said whatever came into her mind, put there she knew not how. She had not heard the voice of God, as Isaiah had said he had, but she had felt the words welling out of her, and they were good words, wise words, comforting words. Not threats but promises. Promises from the heart. She hoped they were the words of God, but they were, beyond a doubt, the words of a daughter of God.

Afterwards she had felt emptied of whatever had been poured into the vessel she believed herself to be. As an antidote to her own feeling of satisfaction, she always turned on the living room television set to a news channel for an injection of reality. Sometimes one of the other women joined her, but most of them had cut all ties with the rest of the world. Janet, to whom she had become oddly attached, joined her frequently, however, and they listened in silence to accounts of turmoil and desperation.

The crazies in the big cities were still stalking the dark city streets like the living dead. By day they turned back into ordinary people. The transformation was more frightening than the zombie performance. Crime, particularly violent crime, was on a parabolic curve like the ascent of the space shuttle. The shuttles still flew, although they were patched and shabby; serious space travel was awaiting the arrival of the air-to-space plane. Meanwhile citizens looked up enviously at the rocketships thrusting themselves into the clean, cold void. They were tied to their homes and possessions, stocking weapons and barring windows and doors against the depredations of those who stole for drugs and killed for pleasure, while accidents multiplied on the streets and trash accumulated on the curbs. Civilization was dying in its own wastes.

The Earth itself seemed to be trying to rid itself of the pests that were destroying their own environment, and the environment of every other living thing along with them. News of new volcanic eruptions came almost every day. Sunsets were spectacular, but dust in the upper atmosphere created hot spots and cold spots in strange places, and too much rain and snow in some regions of the world and too little in others. Tornadoes and hurricanes exceeded all previous records. Forecasters had virtually given up predicting anything beyond the next 24 hours.

Earthquakes shook the planet's crust like a child's rattle. Forest fires raged beyond control. Floods ravaged villages in China and India and Bangladesh, and cities in North and South America, while Europe and Africa suffered from the worst drouth in the century. Millions died but world population continued its inexorable increase toward the Malthusian limits of starvation, plague, and war.

The heavens themselves seemed to be conspiring against the upstarts who had dared to consider themselves the masters of time and space. The sun broke out in spots like a child with chickenpox. Scientists talked about solar flares. New comets had been spotted, some as bright as Halley's, and at least one of them was estimated to pass within half a million miles of Earth. It could be seen clearly now without the aid of a telescope. Shooting stars were more frequent than during the August Perseids, and astronomers speculated that this might imply the possibility of more massive asteroid strikes. Meanwhile, the sensational elements of the press were running articles about the possible arrival of hard radiation from a nearby supernova, death hurtling inexorably Earthward whose first warning would be its arrival. Running second among unseen assassins was the possible arrival of a massive black hole ejected from the center of the galaxy.

When Shepherd could take no more, she had turned off the set and sat staring at the gray square reflecting her reality, the room and herself and, often, Janet.

"So," she had said, "harbingers and portents."

"Like contractions," Janet had said, "only some of them are false."

"That's true. We won't know until it happens. The universe is pregnant with the end of things, and these signs tell us that the time is near."

"I know I should rejoice in the fulfillment of apocalypse," Janet had said. "The way you tell us. I am not a believer the way you are, but I can't help but be sad for my baby, who may have only a few days to live if you and the others are right."

Shepherd had smiled at Janet and reached out to pat her hand. "This world is only preparation for the next. Imagine being translated to that life after death without the opportunity to sin or to grieve."

"With all its pain and grief, I wouldn't want to have missed out on it." Janet's dark, pregnancy-swollen face had looked remote and thoughtful.

"Nor I," Shepherd had said, "but that's because we have nothing to compare it with—only our anticipations of the Afterlife. Anyway, your baby may be the Messiah who will lead us into the Promised Land. After all, this will be a virgin birth."

They had looked at each other and laughed, and afterwards they had settled down to discuss the details of the next week's schedule. Then it was Shepherd who had looked thoughtful, as if planning for the week of Christmas to New Year's had exposed concerns she had tried to bury.

"Sometimes lately you seem far away," Janet had said.

"I'm sorry," Shepherd had said, looking responsive.

"No, tell me. You know all my troubles."

"Your troubles are my troubles," Shepherd had said.

"And the other way around. Let me help."

"If only you could," Shepherd had said. "I've agreed to allow a reporter to do a story on our little group. He'll be here—"

"He?" Janet had echoed.

"—tomorrow and stay a few days. Talk to him. Show him whatever he wants to see. Let him talk to whoever he wants."

"But why?" Janet had asked. "He'll lie about us, make us look like silly fools."

"Maybe," Shepherd had said. "Maybe not. Call it my hair shirt. I'm sorry if it gives you problems. Sometimes I get these self-destructive urges."

"Even now?"

"Less now than before. Maybe this is the last one. Maybe there won't be time for any more."

"That's it, isn't it?" Janet had said. "The time. Like mine, yours is growing short."

"You're right," Shepherd had admitted. "Time has its finger between my legs, and I feel the tension growing. I may not belong here. Like Paul before his mission to carry the gospel to the Gentiles. You don't need me—"

"Oh, we do!"

"—and somewhere else there may be Gentiles who need to hear the truth, to whom I might make a difference."

"Your place is here," Janet had said firmly.

"I had a vision once," Shepherd had said, "but it didn't last. It was just a moment of revelation, and I have

been searching for it ever since. I thought I had found it here, but I was wrong."

"We were all fooled by Isaiah," Janet had said. It was the first time she had admitted that Isaiah was not a saint, as if she was willing to sacrifice her last illusions to Shepherd's need. Or her own.

"I wish," Shepherd had said, "I heard God speaking to me, telling me what to do, like Isaiah."

"Isaiah was lying about that, too." Now that she had taken the first step, Janet had been willing to go all the way.

"I don't think so. I think he did hear voices, but it may just have been the other side of his brain. I wish it were true. I wish I had the certainty I had just for a few seconds. But maybe it, too, was just a message from the other side of my brain. I wish I didn't have to guess."

"What?"

Shepherd had shrugged. "Who the Gentiles are."

And then Christmas had come upon them, with its celebrations and feasts and exchange of simple gifts, and it had all been fulfilling in a way that rose up in Shepherd's chest with almost unbearable yearning, like the memory of Christmas when you were young and life was simple and you got the one thing in the world you really wanted and saw from the expression on your parents' faces that you had made for them exactly what they wanted, and you were so happy you thought you would die. Even with Dan present with his automatic little camera and his almost invisible recorder.

Shepherd felt a sense of relief that the subject was out in the open. She was more concerned about what the little man had said about Janet leaving. "I realize that your paper specializes in rumors and gossip and outrageous lies. Maybe that's why I responded to your request after turning down so many others. I guess I wanted to expose our way of life to the worst scrutiny I could imagine."

"Now, wait a minute," the reporter said. "We're both in the entertainment business, you and I."

"I suppose you'd think that," Shepherd said. "The difference between us is that I believe in what I'm doing."

"And I don't?"

"Not in the truth. Just in the entertainment. Anyway, you know we have resources, we can afford the best lawyers, and we will if necessary."

The reporter got up nervously and leaned over the desk. "But it wouldn't do your image any good to have it dragged through the courts. Why don't you tell me what really happened? Maybe I can slant it your way, make it sound, say, justified."

"The more we are persecuted, the stronger we get," Shepherd said. "'Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor' is the ninth commandment, and *The Book of Common Prayer* speaks of 'our enemies, persecutors, and slanderers.'"

Shepherd's calm more than her words shook the reporter beyond speech. "In any case," she continued, "if the world ends in less than a week, where will you be then? With another sin on your conscience and nowhere to publish it."

"Janet—" he muttered.

But just then a knock on the door preceded an urgent voice saying, "Barbara, come quick. Janet has gone into labor."

The reporter had followed her down the hall to the room that had been prepared for Janet's delivery, but Shepherd stopped him outside the door. "This is our baby. You can talk to Janet afterwards if you wish, print whatever lies you wish, but this is our business, and you will stay here or I will have you ejected."

The reporter stopped where he was told, as if frightened by the intensity of Shepherd's concern. Shepherd slipped through the doorway and went quickly to Janet's side. Janet already was focused on the process happening inside her abdomen, but she recognized Shepherd's presence by a squeeze of her hand. And then the ancient ceremony of renewal progressed quickly, far too quickly for the doctor to arrive, and Janet's reluctant womb expelled its nine-month burden into the waiting hands of the middle-aged women who drew it forth, and it was a boy, squalling but soon quieted when the umbilical cord was tied off and severed and the infant was washed and wrapped in a baby blanket and placed in the arms of his mother.

"You look like Mary," Shepherd said, smoothing Janet's hair off her forehead.

"Every new mother looks like Mary," Janet said. "But you were right. He was born on Christmas. Do you think—?"

"Nothing is certain, but everything is possible. Treat him as if he were and perhaps he will be."

"Life will never be the same."

"Never," Shepherd said, smiling. And then, more seriously, "The reporter wants you to go with him when he leaves."

"Him." Janet dismissed the notion with a weary movement of her head. "Just because I talked to him. He's an unhappy person."

"He's a man." They both laughed. "I'm glad you're staying," Shepherd continued. "That makes easier what I've got to do."

Janet looked up, alarmed, forgetting even the baby in her arms. "What's that?"

"I've discovered who the Gentiles are." Shepherd pulled a square card from the pocket of her skirt. She put it in Janet's hand. "It's an invitation to the Twenty-First Century Conference in New York, and what they call 'the end-of-the-world ball.'"

"You can't leave us," Janet said.

"You will get along just fine. I'm leaving my flock in your charge, Janet. I've had my vision. I'm setting off for Rome."

"We'll die."

"I've had a vision about that, too. You will be strong, Janet. You have your baby, and the women will gather around, and on New Year's Eve you will assemble here to end the millennium and maybe, I think surely, usher in the true kingdom of God. I will think of you and wish I could be with you, but we will all meet again."

"I'm afraid," Janet said, clutching her baby until it squealed in protest.

Barbara took back the invitation and patted Janet's hand, took one last wistful look at the baby, and turned toward the door and whatever fate awaited her in New York. Her vision had told her the meaning of the millennium—it was not catastrophe that had driven the world to the brink of its own destruction but the fear of catastrophe.

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# Chapter Nineteen

**December 31, 2000**
**The End-of-the-World Ball**

9 p.m. William Landis stepped out of the express elevator that had transported him, like a redeemed sinner, from the lobby of the World Trade Center to the bar and restaurant at the peak of this manmade mountain, this towering skyscraper, this one- hundred-and-ten-story monument to international networking and the power of commerce. As the year 1000 had reached its end, believers had gathered on mountain tops to await the Second Coming; one thousand years later, skeptics had built their own mountain and assembled at its summit to celebrate a moment consecrated in their forgotten faith.

For this occasion the entire top floor of the World Trade Center had been taken over by the Twenty-First Corporation for its end-of-the-millennium celebration. The tables had been removed to form a ballroom and the main bar was supplemented with smaller tables around the periphery. Between the bars were buffet tables laden with food that featured a wide variety of cuisines prepared by Manhattan's most famous chefs. On the periphery of the room wide windows during the day had offered views of a winter storm over New Jersey, clouds over Coney Island, smog over midtown, ships in the harbor, and helicopters flying below. Tonight the sky was clear, and the stars shone down in all their awesome splendor.

This evening everything was free. The occasion must be costing the Twenty-First Corporation a fortune, Landis thought, not only for the food and drink but for the rent of this prime location on the restaurant's most profitable evening of the year. The public relations benefits could not possibly be worth the costs. Landis made a mental note to add to his final chapter, when he got back to his hotel room and his portable computer, a paragraph or two about potlatch and the earning of status by ostentatious gifts and entertainment. Or maybe the richest corporation in the world knew something he didn't know and was spending its resources in a final "you can't take it with you" gesture.

Just outside the elevator doors stood a Gothic arch carved from ice. It dripped, but the drips were caught by clear plastic and led to reservoirs at either side. On the arch had been engraved, as if in marble, and the letters outlined in black to make them readable, "Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate."

Landis looked at the inscription, and wondered how many other guests would read, and recognize, Dante's Latin. On the other side of the arch, a naked young woman wearing a black mask ran squealing from a fat and sweaty satyr. Landis felt a brief chill as he stepped through the archway. Hell had frozen over.

On the other side of the arch a young man in the quietly elegant blue-and-white corporation uniform accepted the engraved invitation Landis extended to him. A woman who was passing the entry stopped and stared at Landis. She was in her early forties, perhaps, and behind her gauzy mask and pale make-up, and a simple crimson, calf-length cocktail gown, was a face and figure that promised remarkable beauty.

"You're William Landis," she said. "The writer. I heard your talk this afternoon."

He was of medium height and slender, with blue eyes and brown hair, and he was dressed in formal black. "Guilty," he said.

"I'm Elois Hays," she said.

"The actress? I saw your play night before last."

"Guilty," she said. "You're not in costume."

"This was a costume ball?"

"You know it was. The end-of-the-world ball." She put a hand on his black-silk sleeve.

"Then I am," he said. He looked down at her hand and covered it with his.

"You were supposed to dress up as your favorite catastrophe," she said accusingly. "What catastrophe do you represent?"

"Ladies first," he said.

"I'm radiation sickness," she said.

"No sores?" he asked. "Leave it to the good-looking women to choose a catastrophe that does not diminish their beauty."

"Leave it to the men to be grotesque," she replied. "Or refuse to participate."

"Well, as for that," he said, "I am in costume. I decided to come as Satan."

"Where are your horns," she said, "and forked tail?"

"I'm a modern Satan. No external stigmata."

"No mask either."

"The devil doesn't need a mask. But then, I'm more of a devil's advocate."

"For what?"

"For hope. I'm not sure this is the end of the world."

"What makes you think that's hopeful?"

A masked and costumed couple brushed past them, entering the ballroom. The man was dressed like a Visigoth, the woman like a captive Roman, her robes artfully ripped to display tempting expanses of rosy flesh.

"Is the thought of the world's survival that wearisome?" Landis asked.

"Not to me," she said. Her pale hands were an art form. "Though I wouldn't care very much, I think. But what better time to end the world than the conclusion of the second millennium?"

"Is there a good time for catastrophe?"

"If you've spent as many year as I have on the stage, you would know that timing is everything. No one should linger after her exit line."

The naked young woman raced past them again. She was giggling. The satyr was farther behind and panting heavily.

"They're at it already," Hays said.

Landis looked at his watch. "If the world is going to end in three hours, even the minutes are precious."

She tucked her hand under his arm. "Is that your philosophy? Eat, drink, and be merry?"

"It's one of them," he said. "I think we all have a bit of that feeling. Particularly on an evening like this. Besides, who are we to criticize these others? I don't know about you, but I'm not without sin—or at least a hope for sin."

She made a ruefully attractive face. "For one thing, that fat satyr is my former husband. For another—well, I've always been fascinated by intellectual men."

He patted her hand. "And I by actresses. But you're a real actress, and I'm only a popularizer of other people's ideas."

"Perhaps we should both have faith," she said.

"In this place where Dante said we should abandon all hope? But if you will be my companion for the rest of the evening, perhaps we will find faith or hope before it is over."

9:15 p.m. Persistent reports of Russian troops assembling on the border of Georgia have just been confirmed by United Nations surveillance satellites. Earlier announcements by the United States met with skepticism by a number of nations and denials by the new Russian right-wing leaders. An emergency meeting of the Security Council has been called, although any action voted by the Council is certain to be vetoed by the Soviets. This comes at a time of continuing revolution or guerrilla warfare in half a dozen Latin American nations, the never-ending religious wars of the Middle East, undeclared wars in Southeast Asia, and the reports of Chinese Army maneuvers near the Russian border. Out of any one of these could come a provocation that might lead to an exchange of nuclear missiles.

9:30 p.m. The open floor was almost as big as a football field. It might have dwarfed some groups, but there were many dancers, most in costume. Strangely, no orchestra played, and each couple was doing a different step to a different rhythm. It was like a medieval drawing of the dance of St. Vitus.

Paul Gentry studied them from his position with his back to one of the broad windows framing the night. He was a tall, dark- complexioned man with gloomy features and eyebrows like black caterpillars. He wore a dark business suit and a rope shaped into a noose dangling like a tie from his neck. "I beg your pardon," he said to a slender, blonde woman standing nearby, "but could you tell me why those people are behaving like idiots?"

She turned and held out a small, sealed, plastic bag. Gentry took the bag and looked at it. Inside were a pair of earplugs with dials. His eyebrows moved up.

"You put in the earplugs and dial whatever channel you want," the woman said. "There are fifty channels, half for music, half for voice. You can listen to your favorite music or news or discussion, or the commentary to what you see on the screens."

She waved a hand at the glowing theater-sized screens spaced around the room above the temporary bars and in the spaces between windows. One showed places and streets that seemed Parisian; they were filled with people and revelry. A second presented motionless groups gathered on high places; many of the people were staring at the sky. A third displayed throngs in oriental apparel and appearance,

while others framed mob violence or church services or quick cuts of missiles and tanks and people dying in battle. One seemed to be portraying various kinds of threats to the continuation of human existence, from the icy majesty of advancing glaciers to the waterless sands of deserts, from the abandoned children of crowded slums to the slime of polluted rivers and seas. Here and there, scattered among the others, lines of letters scrolled up screens with news about impending catastrophes like the words written on the wall at Belshazzar's feast.

It must have seemed to the dancers on the ballroom floor as if they were located at the center of the world, as if from the top of this artificial mountain they could see around the entire globe. But none of them seemed to be paying any attention.

"Of course," the woman said, "the views from other parts of the world are tapes sent back earlier. What with the record number of sunspots and solar flares, electronic communication with the rest of the world has been cut off."

Gentry handed the unopened bag back to the young woman. "No, thanks," he said. "I'll spend my last hours in this millennium doing my own talking and seeing." He looked back toward the dancers. "But isn't it typical of our times that they are all individuals, together but separate, each dancing to his or her own music?"

"You're Paul Gentry, aren't you?" the young woman asked. "The—"

He shrugged his heavy shoulders. "Ecologist. Environmentalist. Give me whatever name you think fits."

She smiled. It was an expression that transformed an otherwise businesslike face. "How about propheteer? That's what *Time* called you."

"If you like," he said. "And what is your name and occupation?"

"I'm Sally Krebs, and I'm in charge of a camera crew for CNN." She was wearing a yellow jumpsuit that could have been either evening wear or a uniform.

"Where's your crew?" he asked in his sardonic baritone.

"They're around. You just don't see them. What's wrong with individualism? Aren't people better off?"

"Materially, perhaps, but actually not in any meaningful sense. In most periods of the past, people have had enough to eat, and they have enjoyed a much greater sense of security."

"We can destroy ourselves," Krebs said, "but we can choose not to do so. Surely our ancestors faced perils like flood, plague, and barbarians over which they had no control at all. That must have given them the terrible fear that they existed at the whim of supernatural forces."

"They accepted these calamities as part of the natural order," Gentry said. "The security I am talking about is being part of a sturdy social matrix that is capable of surviving the blows of nature or of fate."

"But not," Krebs added, with a sly smile, "of technology."

"True. Science and technology could be created only by individuals, and once created could not be stopped until they brought us to this point. To this." He waved a hand at the ballroom. "The idle rich consuming their idle riches. Is this the finest accomplishment of Western civilization?"

"Maybe it isn't very serious," Krebs said. "But it's not contemptible, either. Today people have what no one ever had before: choice."

"When people can do anything, they find that nothing is worth doing. People are social animals. Like wolves and monkeys, we belong in groups, and when the groups are gone, and the reason for the groups is gone, we find that the reason for humanity is gone."

"What you see here is just a small part of life," Krebs said. "The ceremonial part."

"Ceremony is a group function we have lost. We get together as individuals making gestures at group feeling but discover that we cannot really surrender our individualism."

"The group should determine what we think and feel?"

"The group thinks. The group feels. The group survives."

"Why exalt the group above the individual?"

"What leads to the destruction of the species—indeed, if our best scientists are right, to the destruction of all life on earth—is automatically wrong and evil."

"So that is your favorite catastrophe!"

"Self-destruction every time," Gentry said. "That's why I wear this noose." He fingered the rope around his neck.

"I thought that was to make it handy for the lynching party."

"Me?" he said in mock surprise.

"No one is going to be happy when your jeremiads come true."

"We stand on different sides of most fences, my dear," Gentry said, "but on this one we stand together. You know what they do to bearers of ill tidings."

"That's my profession."

"And pointing out the consequences of human folly is mine."

"You've done very well out of preaching catastrophe."

"And you've clearly done well out of reporting it."

She laughed. "It's no wonder people find you fascinating. Your ideas are so unrelievedly pessimistic that anything that happens comes as a relief."

A slow smile broke the dour lines of his face. "My dear, I'm glad you find me fascinating, but why are we standing here talking when we could be making love?"

Krebs laughed. "I said 'people,' not me. Besides, I'm working."

"You won't always be working."

"We've been filming and recording this conversation," Krebs said. "May we have your authorization to telecast it?"

Gentry smiled. "Everything I say is on the record. Including my final suggestion."

"End of interview," she said into the air.

"But not, I hope, the end of our relationship."

She offered him the possibilities of an enigmatic smile.

"The only time we have a certain grasp on reality," Gentry said, "is when we hold each other, pressed together flesh to naked flesh."

9:45 p.m. The reputation of environmentalists is not what it used to be. Like the boy who cried "wolf," they have shouted "catastrophe" once too often. From *Silent Spring* to *The Population Bomb* and *The Poverty of Power* , their texts have raised specters that, though frightening, turned out to be only skeletons in the closet. Undeterred, Paul Gentry, the most prominent of the breed today, recently called attention to a substantial die-off of plankton in the Gulf of Mexico, a sharp decline in krill production off Antarctica, an increase in radiation to which the average citizen is exposed in his lifetime, and an increase in acid rain after the small reduction that followed governmental restrictions on coal-fired generating plants in the early years of this decade. He has lots of other data, but it all adds up, he says, to death by pollution in the next century. In the next decade, he says, we should expect such problems as decreasing agricultural yields in a period when water has become scarce and fertilizer has become almost prohibitively expensive, a decrease in an already limited harvest of seafood, and an increase in the wholesale destruction of wild life. That is, he says, if we don't destroy ourselves first.

10 p.m. Murray Smith-Ng stood at the seafood buffet loading his plate with shrimp and salmon. He was short and round, and his gray eyes glittered. He was dressed in the dark cloak and conical hat of a medieval astronomer, but his face had been darkened as if by a severe burn. Nearby but at a respectful distance, like a well trained dog awaiting his master's signal to be fed, was a young man dressed in the scorched rags of a nuclear survivor. They displayed to good advantage his slender legs and muscular chest. His name was Lyle, and he had been a student in Smith-Ng's seminar on catastrophism.

"Dr. Smith-Ng, may I help you to some of this lobster?" Lyle asked.

Another young man, dressed in imitation furs to look like an ice-age savage, paused in the process of picking up a plate. "The Dr. Smith-Ng?" he asked.

"I'm sure there aren't any others," Smith-Ng said.

"The catastrophist?"

"The only one of those, too."

"Maybe you could answer a question that's always bothered me," the young man said.

"If I can," Smith-Ng said.

"I thought catastrophe theory was a mathematical discipline."

"Oh, it is," Smith-Ng said, setting down his plate to wipe mayonnaise from his chin. He picked up the plate again. "At least, that's how it started. Gradually people began to see practical applications for the mathematics, and that's where I did my work."

"What kind of applications?" the young man asked.

Smith-Ng popped a shrimp into his mouth. "Read my book, young man."

"Like volcanoes and meteor strikes," Lyle said impatiently. "Plagues and wars. Tornadoes and earthquakes."

"Some processes are continuous," Smith-Ng said around a mouthful of poached salmon. "They can be charted as familiar curves: straight lines, sines, hyperbolas.… Some are discontinuous. They start suddenly and break off just as abruptly."

"Like chain reactions and critical mass," Lyle said. "And the dinosaurs."

Smith-Ng gave Lyle the look of respect reserved for the good student. "And other life forms," he said. "The dinosaurs are simply the most dramatic. For a century after Darwin published his theory of evolution, scientists believed that evolution proceeded at the same even pace: as conditions changed, certain secondary genetic characteristics were selected to cope with them. Scientists of that kind were called 'uniformitarians' or 'gradualists.' Then, with the discovery that certain species, and at some periods most species, disappeared simultaneously and, in evolutionary terms, almost overnight, evolutionists all became catastrophists."

"If you had read *Catastrophe: Theory and Practice* , you'd know that," Lyle said.

"The discontinuous process is more prevalent than we ever suspected," Smith-Ng said, "although there was evidence enough around. Learning, for instance. Everyone had noticed that no matter how much you learned, you were still in a state of ignorance until something magical happened and all you had learned suddenly fell into place. Everyone had observed the plateau theory of learning but pretended that learning proceeded smoothly."

"It was the same way with catastrophe theory," Lyle said. "Suddenly everybody was a catastrophist."

"Some earlier than others," Smith-Ng said.

"But don't the times have something to do with it?" the other young man said.

Smith-Ng lifted his face from his plate.

"I think I read that somewhere," the young man said.

"Some ideas seem to have a better chance in certain periods than in others," Smith-Ng admitted cautiously.

"Now I remember," the second young man said. "In a series of articles William S. Landis has been writing about catastrophe, he quotes a theory about 'steam-engine time' that he attributes to a fellow named Charles Fort."

"'In steam-engine time people invent steam engines,'" Smith- Ng said. "And he applies that to catastrophism. 'In catastrophic times, people invent theories to explain catastrophes.' But what you've got to understand is that Landis's book is catastrophism masquerading as uniformitarianism. It merely pushes the origin of the catastrophe back to the mystical. The questions remain: What changes the times? What brings about the sudden acceptance of this theory or that? I prefer to put my faith in something I can measure."

Landis and Hays had stopped nearby, unnoticed, to listen to the conversation when they heard his name. "The question is, Smith-Ng," he asked now, "what catastrophes do your theories predict for the end of this evening?"

"You must be William Landis. I recognize you from your photographs," Smith-Ng said genially. "Of course you would be here. This will make a great concluding chapter for your book."

"If it all doesn't conclude here," Landis said. "But what's your prediction? Surely you have run everything

through your equations."

"As for catastrophes," Smith-Ng said, "I predict all of them. But not for quotation."

"You certainly won't be quoted if you are no more precise than that," Landis said and smiled.

"You heard my talk this morning," Smith-Ng said, "I saw you in the audience. And that was for the record."

"You were talking in terms of centuries," Landis said. "Can't your theory do better than that?"

"And you want to pin me down to hours? Ah, Landis!" He waggled a pudgy finger at him. "But if you insist, I would hazard a guess that the world will end promptly at midnight."

Lyle chuckled appreciatively.

"But how?" Landis persisted. "That's too quick for a new ice age or the hothouse effect. Meteor? Nova? Nuclear war? Can't you pinpoint it a little better than that?"

"By the Second Coming, of course," Smith-Ng said and laughed. But he sounded as if he would be pleased if his theories were proved correct, no matter what happened to him or the rest of the world.

Lyle eyed him as if he were the end of Lyle's world.

10:15 p.m. The mathematician who titles himself a "catastrophist," in a speech today to the fancifully named "Twenty-First Century Conference" at the Twenty- First building in New York City, called attention to what he termed "a sharp rise" of one-half degree in the world's average temperature over the past decade. The speaker, Dr. Murray Smith-Ng, noted that the rise in temperature is paralleled by a similar rise in the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere over the same period. He called these increases "catastrophic changes" and an indication of what he called the beginning of the "greenhouse effect" that will turn Earth into an embalmed twin of Venus. Disagreement was registered from the floor, however, in particular from one expert in atmospheric phenomena who said that his measurements and calculations indicated the beginning of a new ice age instead.

10:30 p.m. Barbara Shepherd presided over a gathering of true believers on the roof top of the skyscraper. The weather was comparatively warm for December, but the stars, slightly distorted by the air currents rising past the sides of the building, glittered coldly overhead.

The terrace was protected from the gulfs of space by a waist-high wall. Tracks for the tower's movable window-washing machine ran along the edge of the wall. A turntable occupied each corner. Steam issued from chimney pots scattered here and there about the roof, as if there were a direct connection with the nether regions. In the middle of the roof was a turnip- shaped metal tower and a sixty-foot metal pole for microwave transmissions. The metal pole was studded with ten red beacons.

Shepherd stood on a platform draped in white linen facing the forty-odd chairs almost filled by her audience. She wore a flowing white gown with wide and diaphanous sleeves. When she raised her arms, they looked like gauzy wings. The platform had been placed close to the south wall of the terrace. Sometimes she looked as if she were about to soar above the audience like Gabriel.

Landis and Hays stood in the distant doorway by which they had reached the tower's top. "Has she really lost touch with reality?" Landis asked softly.

"She says that she's finally found it," Hays replied.

"This is the time foretold," Shepherd said, needing no amplification, her voice ringing as if it were the instrument of Gabriel itself. "This is the day of judgment. Scarcely more than an hour remains for the people of this world to repent their sinful ways and accept salvation. Ninety minutes from now the world will end, and everybody will be sent to their eternal homes. To heaven, to hell. It is our choice, each one of us."

She paused, as if gathering her thoughts, and then continued more quietly. "When I was a girl," she said, "I thought that the purpose of life was to shape my body into a perfect instrument, so that it would do whatever I told it to do. And I worked hard, and I came as close as anyone."

"You can't get much close than Olympic gymnastics," Landis whispered to Hays.

"And then I thought that the purpose of life was to understand the way the universe had been created and the laws by which it worked, and I went to school and learned everything I could."

"Can you imagine going from the Olympics to a Ph.D. in philosophy from Berkeley?"

"And then I thought that the purpose of life was to express my creativity, and I became an actress and lived other people's lives for the sake of audiences."

"She was a pretty good actress, too," Hays said, "but she ran out of parts and maybe out of her range."

"Each of those things in turn proved to be folly, and I decided that the only purpose of life was to seek pleasure, and I lost myself in that."

"That was what she was really good at," Hays murmured.

"And I nearly lost myself for all eternity," Shepherd said, "but now I know that the only purpose of existence is to prepare us for the life to come." Her voice lifted a fraction. "And that time is almost at hand. All we need is belief and faith."

"Where do you think all this is leading?" Hays asked.

"I don't know," Landis said, looking at his watch, "but it's getting on toward eleven. Do you want to go join the revels—or perhaps find a quiet spot for some conversation?"

Hays shivered and he put his arm around her shoulders. "It's like a good play," she said. "I've got to see the curtain go down. Anyway, what better place to greet the new millennium than the top of this mountain?"

10:45 p.m. The approaching end to the second millen- nium of the Christian era has produced a resurgence of religion, including increased attendance in formal church services and unscheduled outbreaks of what has been compared to the mania of the Middle Ages, such as speaking in tongues, fits, snake handling, and preaching on street corners. A kind of public resignation to the end of the world, however visualized, has been accompanied by an outbreak of militant fundamentalism in some Christian countries as well as Islamic nations in the Middle East, involving an increase in terrorism, a quest for martyrdom, and the threat (or promise, as some see it) of Armageddon. One of the most unusual public conversions has been that of Olympic athlete, actress, playgirl Barbara Shepherd, who plans a prayer meeting for the top of the World Trade Center during an exclusive, invitation-only End-of-the-World Ball.

11 p.m. The pace of the evening accelerated as the hands of the invisible clock passed eleven in their inexorable progression toward midnight. Food and drink of all kinds was constantly replenished in all the bars and buffets. Drugs were almost as openly available as alcohol, and only slightly less in evidence than

the food and drink; in some of the bars, they were laid out to be smoked, inhaled, or ingested, or, even, with the aid of neatly clad nurses and sterile syringes, injected.

But this was not a junky's paradise. These were the world's leading citizens, and the drugs were available, like the food, only to enhance their enjoyment of this moment that would not come around again for another thousand years. To be sure, a few, out of boredom or terror, or loss of self-control, over-indulged themselves in drugs as some did in food or drink, and rendered themselves insensible to the approach of the millennium's end, collapsed in a corner or nodding in a chair or over a table like any common drunk. One died of an overdose, and another of a cocaine seizure. If the world survived this millennium, the Twenty-First Corporation would be tied up in courts throughout the century from which it took its name.

Some sought their surcease in other ways. Sexual couplings that earlier in the evening had been consummated discreetly in staircases and rooms made available in the floors immediately below, began to overflow into more public areas and to be joined by third and fourth participants as the evening proceeded. In some places the floor became a sea of writhing bodies, as if the protoplasm that had evolved into the shape of humanity was returning, in the space of a few hours, to the amoebalike stuff from which it had come.

"There is more to this of panic than of passion," Gentry said, looking on from the periphery.

Krebs took a deep breath. "I'm beginning to feel a bit of that myself."

Gentry smiled, lifting his eyebrows at the same time. "The panic or the passion? Are you ready to take me up on my offer?"

"And join the anonymous heaps of flesh?"

"I was thinking of something a little more private."

"I thought you were in favor of groups," she said.

"Even primitive societies approved the privacy of some functions."

Suddenly she pointed to the ballroom them. "Isn't that—?"

"I believe it is," Gentry said, tracing her finger to the shape of a tall, lean person in the sepulchral costume of Death itself. "It's the President, all right. It would be difficult to hide that figure and that way of moving."

"By why is he here?" Krebs asked.

"Isn't everybody?" Gentry responded.

"Even you and me, yes," she said distractedly. She spoke into the microphone pinned inconspicuously to her lapel. "Bob," she said, "get a camera on that figure of Death dancing with the willowy lady in green. That's got to be the President, and that's not the first lady. Lloyd can do what he wants with it, but we're going to feed it to him."

11:10 p.m. The New Genes Laboratory in California has announced the development of a hybrid wheat that resists drouth and heat and most, if not all, diseases, including mosaic, but most important fixes its own nitrogen fertilizer with the aid of symbiotic bacteria. The National Disease Control Center in Atlanta has issued a general warning to physicians about a new viral infection, popularly called the Moscow flu, that is affecting large centers of population and particularly schoolchildren. Its victims display many of the

symptoms of influenza but the disease has produced early mortality rates higher than pneumonia, AIDS, and what was once called Legionnaires Disease. A consumer watchdog group blames the new disease on genetic experimentation, and a spokesman for the Preservation of Democracy, on Soviet bacteriological warfare.

11:20 p.m. Smith-Ng had progressed to the meat buffet and loaded his plate with rare roast beef. He still was followed by the two young men. "Isn't that the President?" Lyle asked suddenly.

"Of course," Smith-Ng said, swallowing. "You can tell by the men in dark suits around the edges of the crowds."

"What do you make of that?" the other young man asked.

"Either he thinks he won't be recognized, or he doesn't care," Smith-Ng said.

"Why wouldn't he care?" the other asked. "When the activities at this place get reported, nobody present will be able to get elected garbage collector."

"Maybe the news that he wasn't here would be worse politically," Lyle said. "As if he wasn't invited."

"Now you're beginning to think like a catastrophist," Smith-Ng said. "But not enough like one."

"What do you mean?" Lyle asked.

"What if a catastrophe occurs?" the other young man said. "Then it wouldn't matter, and he might as well enjoy himself." He gestured at the displays of flesh and folly. "Like everybody else."

"And?" Smith-Ng prompted in his best Socratic manner.

"And what, sir?" Lyle asked.

"And what if he knows it?" Smith-Ng concluded with gluttonous satisfaction.

Lyle looked at the figures on the ballroom floor as if he had just begun to consider the possibility that catastrophe theory might turn into reality.

11:30 p.m. The Orbital Observatory adds some new con- cerns as the western world approaches the end of the second millennium of the so-called Christian era: sunspot activity has picked up after the relative quiet of the past decade, an indication, say some authorities, of possible solar instability that might result in a solar flare or even an explosion that could wipe out all life on earth. Nonsense, say other experts; that hot ball of gases in the sky is good for another eight billion years yet. An increase or decrease in its output of a few per cent could be fatal to life on earth, however. The Observatory also is watching a possible explosion at the heart of our Milky Way galaxy that might reach us any day now; or a massive black hole ejected from galactic center could be upon us before we know it. Meanwhile, work is pressing toward completion of the world's pioneer space habitat, which some proponents say is the first step toward insuring humanity's survival, perhaps even its immortality. The good news, at least for some, is that the Observatory now has discovered a second star, other than earth, with planets, and confidence is growing among some cosmologists that the formation of planets, around some kinds of suns, at least, is a normal process.

11:35 p.m. On the highest terrace, Barbara Shepherd's voice had grown more intense as midnight grew closer, as if, indeed, some truth was struggling for expression, some message was demanding to be heard. Members of the informal congregation had shifted uneasily from smiles to frowns, from chuckles and comments to uncomfortable glances at their neighbors, and some had left for more enjoyable

pastimes. Others, as if hearing about what was occurring on the terrace, had arrived to take the empty places, and almost every chair was filled.

"This is the millennium described in Revelations. For a thousand years Satan has been bound and cast in the bottomless pit. Now that millennium has expired and Satan has been loosed to deceive the nations of the earth and to gather them together to battle. Is this not the world we see about us? Deceived by Satan? Gathered to do battle?"

Hays studied the people seated in the chairs. "Are all these people believers, do you suppose?"

"I think they're here for the same reason we are," Landis said.

"And why is that?" Hays asked.

"To see how far she's going to go."

Shepherd raised her wings. "Can we doubt the predictions in Revelations? That fire will come down from God out of heaven and devour us all? Some of you think that when the fire comes down from the sky that it will be missiles and hydrogen bombs raining down upon us, that we will be destroying ourselves, but it will be God's fire and His triumph—and our triumph, too. Because the devil who deceived us will be cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, and we will all be judged.

"If you think that I am afraid to be judged, you are right. I have sinned."

"That's certainly true," Landis whispered.

"I have fornicated, and I have committed adultery," Shepherd said. "I have profaned the temple of my body with drugs. I have born false witness and denied my God. I have broken all of the commandments and discovered others to break that would have been commandments if the ancient Hebrews had known about them. But fearful or not, I welcome judgment as the beginning of the eternal glory to come."

She had been a beautiful woman and she was beautiful now, filled with a passion as real as any she had experienced in the arms of a man. It shook her body as she spoke and made her voice tremble. "In that day of all days, we will stand before the throne of God, we the dead, small and great, and we will be judged by the works written in the book of life.

"The sea will give up its dead, and death and hell will deliver up their dead, and every person will be judged according to their works. And whosoever is not found written in the book of life will be cast into the lake of fire. And so it is up to you. Will you repent before it is too late? Will you write your name in the book of life? Will you join me in life everlasting? Or spend eternity with Satan in the fires of hell?

"Because if you do not believe me, if you do not believe that Satan walks the earth, if you do not believe that the fire of God will rain down on the earth this very night, if you do not believe that this is the day of judgment and that this begins our eternal lives in heaven or in hell, look yonder!" She stretched out one gauzy arm toward the space near the door.

"There stands Satan with his paramour!"

In spite of themselves, the audience turned to look at the figures of Landis and Hays watching the scene with detached fascination. "She recognized you," Hays muttered.

"And you," Landis said.

11:40 p.m. The World Energy Council announced today that the price of oil, which began its present

climb in 1997, has reached $l50 a barrel. For all except special or emergency needs, oil no longer is classified as a fuel. After the panicky hiatus of the 1980s and 1990s, the United States has resumed building nuclear generating plants. The rest of the world, which now boasts 90 per cent of nuclear-generating capacity, never stopped. Generating plants that once burned oil have been abandoned or converted to coal, sometimes in a liquefied form, in spite of the cost in human life and acid rain. Synthetic fuels once more are being pursued. Meanwhile research presses forward into the elusive thermonuclear process for fusing hydrogen. Laboratory operations have demonstrated that the theory works by getting back more energy than is consumed, but so far efforts to scale up the methods to commercial size have proven too expensive. The search goes on, however, since success would solve the energy problems, now pressing hard on the arteries of the world, for the next thousand years.

11:43 p.m. The ballroom floor was crowded now that the magic hour had almost arrived, as if the assembled guests were seeking the protection of numbers or the sacrament of ceremony. The filmed scenes flickered from screen to screen around the walls in dizzying procession until they blurred into a continuous panorama of motion uniting all the places of the world into one frantic montage of anticipation.

Here and there fights broke out between men and between women, and even between men and women, over drunken insults or sexual privileges. Women were raped, sometimes by groups of men, and occasionally a man was attacked by a group of women. Weapons carried for show were put to ancient uses; men and women, injured, staggered away for aid, or dead, lay where they had fallen. Blood seeped into sticky puddles, and vomit and excretions dried upon the floors. Uniformed attendants who had worked diligently at keeping the tables filled and the complex clear of refuse had stripped away their emblems and joined the melee struggling desperately to forget the desperate hour. Here two thousand years of civilization disintegrated into barbarism.

And others went on with their own lives, pursuing their own visions of catastrophe.

11:45 p.m. Vulcanologists have had a great deal to watch recently. Old volcanoes in Hawaii, Mexico, Italy, Iceland, Indonesia, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Chile, and Japan have erupted or shown signs of imminent activity, and new volcanoes have opened smoking fissures. So far none has demonstrated the destructiveness of Mt. St. Helens and El Chichon in 1983, but vulcanologists do not rule out that possibility. One or more eruptions the equal of Krakatau in 1883 or Tambora in 1815 might inject enough ash and smoke into the atmosphere to rival the nuclear winter predicted by many scientists in the 1980s to follow a nuclear war.

11:47 p.m. On the balcony Krebs listened to her earphone and then looked quickly at the ballroom floor. "He's leaving," she said.

"Who's leaving?" Gentry asked.

"The President. As if he's in a hurry. One of the Secret Service men ran over to him and spoke a word or two—nobody could pick up what was said—and he's almost running out of here."

Gentry shrugged. "It probably doesn't mean anything. Maybe he doesn't want to get caught in the midnight crush."

She made a face at him. "You're supposed to be the realist."

"Are you ready then for my realism?"

She looked at him for a moment without speaking, and then she said, "If you were anybody else, I might say 'Yes,' and to hell with the job. But if the world survives I'm going back to the Midwest and find a more meaningful way of life, and you, for all your above-it-all earnest cynicism, you use people—you use

life itself—for your own selfish satisfactions."

He seemed speechless for the first time that night, and then he said, without his customary condescension, "Do you think I don't know that? My cynicism doesn't come out of superiority, but out of fear. I'm afraid. I've always been afraid."

"Maybe so," she said, "but you'll have to live with it like everybody else. I've got to go. I've been told there's something happening on the roof top."

11:50 p.m. Astronomers today announced the discovery of a new comet that promises to be larger and brighter than Halley's comet. The comet, as yet unnamed, may be making its first pass through the solar system, possibly disturbed in its billions of years' orbit in what is known as the Oorts Cloud by a distant companion sun to Sol called by some scientists "Nemesis." Preliminary calculations indicate that the new comet may pass close to earth, but alarmist reports of a possible collision have been dismissed by scientists as "next to impossible."

11:52 p.m. Smith-Ng looked up from the dessert table in the restaurant on the second balcony. "What did you say?" he asked Lyle, who still tagged along behind him.

"The President. He's gone. What does that mean?"

"Maybe nothing," Smith-Ng said, wiping a glob of whipped cream from his upper lip. "Maybe catastrophe."

"Shouldn't we—couldn't we—find some place quieter? More alone?" Lyle's teeth made an uncontrollable chattering sound, and he put his hand on Smith-Ng's shoulder as if he were steadying himself.

Smith-Ng looked at Lyle and then toward the ceiling as if seeking guidance. He placed his hand tentatively over Lyle's. His face approached the young man's as if moved by some external power, and he kissed him with the curiosity and then the intensity of an unsuspected passion he had just discovered. He drew back as if he could feel his world shattering in pieces around him and shook himself. "I understand that something interesting is happening on the roof," he said shakily. "Perhaps we should go find out what it is."

11:54 p.m. On the eve of the Twenty-First Century the United Nations Office of Population announced that the world's population has passed six billion. Of these six billion, it said, more than half were undernourished and one billion were actually starving. These figures, a spokesman said, raise serious questions for world peace as well as for the number of deaths by starvation and disease if world population doubles again, as predicted, in the next thirty-five years.

11:56 p.m. By the time the cameras arrived, the audience had swollen to fill all the chairs and the standing room that surrounded them. Krebs with Gentry behind her had reached the terrace just a few moments earlier, and Smith-Ng and his disciple were only a few steps behind.

The terrace had rippled minutes ago with the news of the President's hurried departure, but now it was quiet with the hushed expectancy of something momentous about to happen, as if by listening hard one could hear the last grains of sand trickling through the hourglass of the universe.

In the ballroom five floors below, the crowd was frantic in its effort to greet the new millennium with life and laughter, like savages at the dawn of civilization trying to frighten away disaster with noise or appease it with celebration. Below Saturnalia was in progress. Here on the roof top a congregation as solemn as that of any true believers awaiting the day of judgment on mountain top was contemplating the eternal.

People were here because of who they were, choosing this kind of celebration rather than other kinds below, because of the occasion and its star-reaching site, and because of Barbara Shepherd. She stood now like a sacrificial virgin, her hymen restored with her faith, her arms outstretched, her hands clenched into fists, her voice lifted in exultation.

"Now has the moment come," she said, "the time arrived, the stroke of the clock about to sound as we listen. Now we must demonstrate our faith or lose all faith forever and be forever damned. Faith can save us yet. Faith will save us. Have faith! Have faith!"

"I'm frightened!" Hays said to Landis.

"What are you frightened of?" he asked gently, tightening his arm around her as if to create a fortress for two.

"Everything," she said. "The world ending. The night exploding. Bombs. Change. Everything."

"Don't be afraid," he said. "Maybe we found each other too late, your sense of the drama of life and my search for its purpose. But if we make it through this night, I have a suggestion: let's create a new world, for ourselves and whoever wants to join us."

"I'd like that," she said. "If we make it through."

"I'm frightened, too," he said. "But it's not catastrophe I'm afraid of. What I fear is our love of catastrophe."

Barbara Shepherd turned and ran toward the back of the platform like the acrobat she once had been. As she reached the middle, she did a flip backward, landed on her feet, and flipped again. The second took her off the end of the platform. For an instant she seemed to disappear from view. Then her figure reappeared, propelled upward with surprising speed, head high and facing the audience with the composed features and confidence of a saint, rising, rising, clearing the railing that surrounded the roof top and floating free in the air beyond it. Her gown fluttered; her arms reached out and, like wings, seemed to support her body in the crystalline air, even to lift it toward the heaven she addressed.

The audience waited, shocked into immobility, shocked out of skepticism, expecting miracles and fearing them, fearing catastrophes and expecting them.

But as the stroke of midnight sounded and maddened noise broke out in the city below and in the ballroom behind like celebration or like explosions and machine guns and the screams and drying cries of victims, and the spinning world seemed to hesitate in anticipation of catastrophe, the figure of Barbara Shepherd faltered in the air before it fell, with growing velocity, glittering, through the night.

The End

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