



The Leader

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Return of the Aliens

Novella 3

The
Leader

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Ruth Ann Nordin's Books
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The Leader

Novella 3 to the Novel: Return of the Aliens

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Dedicated to my long-time good friend, Melanie Nilles, whose love of science fiction has inspired me to consider writing my own science fiction tale.

Chapter One

Two months later..

Devon knew it was a bad idea to come here. He had no business tempting fate. As long as he stayed away, she would most likely give up on her suicidal pursuit to find out what was going on. And yet, he couldn't stay away. Or maybe it wasn't that he couldn't but more of the fact that he didn't want to.

Whatever the case, one thing was for sure: this was a bad idea. But that didn't stop him from entering the mall, nor did it stop him from stepping into the store where she worked. His gaze drifted up to the camera set at the entrance. No longer did the stores hide the fact that they had surveillance. Now it was all in the open.

Any pretense of privacy was being eroded right in front of everyone, and very few people seemed to notice or care. It was unfortunate. They were trading freedom for security, and in the end, it would be their undoing. But this was the aliens' plan. How nicely it all fit into place.

"Can I help you?" a young blond woman asked as she came up to him.

He wondered if he should ask for her co-worker or just "look". But then, what would he look for in the women's section of a store? Finally, he said, "I have a matter to discuss with someone who works here. She's 5'4", a light brunette, probably in her early 30's." *And pretty.* He willed that thought away.

“Oh, you mean Autumn.”

So that was her name. “Right.”

“She’s outside on a break. She likes to smoke a lot.” She rolled her eyes and giggled.

“Thank you,” he replied, deciding that women as young as the woman in front of him had limited appeal.

His boss preferred those types—probably because they weren’t smart enough to figure out what a loser he was. But then, his boss didn’t want smart; he wanted easy. And the type standing in front of him would fit the bill. Sighing, Devon headed out of the mall through a doorway that wasn’t blocked off by security. He found Autumn sitting alone on a bench a few stores down and took his time in approaching her.

She put out her cigarette but remained sitting. She stared ahead, not seeming to be looking at anything in particular. He wondered what she was thinking. He was aware that they were being watched, but he’d been aware of that ever since he started his job a good seventeen years ago, though he hadn’t been a human guinea pig until seven years later.

He stopped in front of her and realized she had her eyes closed. “Autumn?”

She jerked and sat up straight.

An amused smile crossed his face. “I didn’t realize this bench was a good place to nap.”

“I’m not sleeping,” she denied, even though it was apparent she was dozing off. She gave him a good look. “What are you doing here?”

He sat next to her. He would have asked if he could, but he figured she’d say no. “I came to talk to you. How have you been doing since the explosion?”

Her eyebrows furrowed. “You have a lot of nerve, you know that? You spent all that time warning me to leave matters alone and now you’re digging them up?”

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“I’m not digging anything up. I just thought I’d ask a question.”

“What do you care? You set a bomb, and three people died that day.”

He shook his head. “I told them to stay away from that plant. It’s not my fault they didn’t heed my warning.”

“You’re amazing, really amazing.” She pulled out a cigarette and lighter. He noted the slight trembling of her hands. “One minute you’re telling me I better watch what I say and where I go and the next, you’re claiming to be a good Samaritan.”

“I’ve never claimed that. The goal was to scare people, not harm anyone. Sometimes unpleasant side effects are part of the job.” He mentally kicked himself. Why was he telling her this? He knew better than to reveal anything personal to anyone.

“I find it hard to believe you care about anyone but yourself,” she muttered and lit up her cigarette.

“Well, you’re wrong.” He did care, and that was a problem because it was probably a matter of time before they found out and conveniently replaced him with someone who didn’t. “I do what I have to do.”

“Oh really? And does that thing hovering around you tell you what to do?”

His head snapped in her direction. “There’s nothing hovering around me.”

She shrugged, said, “Whatever,” and took a puff of her cigarette.

The way she casually stated that gave him an uneasy feeling in his gut. “I don’t,” he insisted, unsure if he was trying to convince him or her.

“You must not see it.”

A shiver crawled up his spine. He didn’t want to ask it but felt compelled to. “See what?”

“The black shadow that lurks near you. It’s standing behind you.”

He glanced back. "I don't see anything."

"I know. I didn't see it until those people vanished. Ever since then I've become aware of a spiritual world around us."

"Spiritual? As in God?"

"I think so. It's the only logical explanation for angels and demons hanging around."

"You're a nut."

She glared at him. "You're the one bombing places and I'm the nut?"

"Yes, you are." He stood up. Nothing was behind him. There wasn't anything dark and creepy hovering nearby. She was probably schizophrenic or something. "You should get some pills for those hallucinations you're having."

"I haven't come across a single person who sees them, so I'm not surprised you'd say that."

The way she casually made her comments bothered him. She was either psychotic or telling him the truth. He couldn't believe he wanted to see her. She'd been the first person who had seemed completely human to him; someone who wasn't manipulative or part of the nightmare that had become his life. But she turned out to be a complete nut, and that sorely disappointed him. "Seriously, get some help for that."

Her response was to take another puff of her cigarette.

"And it wouldn't hurt to stop smoking. It's a filthy habit, you know."

She looked him in the eyes and said, "It's touching your shoulder."

For a moment, just a brief one, he thought he felt a cold touch on his left shoulder. Great. Now she was making him imagine things. Deciding not to add more fuel to the fire, he spun on his heels and left.

A waste of his time. That's all it was. One big waste of his time. Spiritual things. A world where demons and angels ran around but no one could detect them, except for a select few like

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Autumn. He shook his head. It couldn't be real. There was no way it could be real.

He returned to his car and got in, quickly looking over his shoulder and to his side. Nothing. There wasn't anything there. And yet...and yet... He shivered and started the car.

How many times had he told people that government conspiracy theories were crazy, even though he knew the truth? He lived the truth every day of his life. He knew things he wished he didn't and had heard conversations he wished he hadn't. Plans were in the works to collapse the worlds' economies so a one world currency would go into place. There were plans to devastate areas through manipulating the weather. Increased earthquakes, tsunamis, tornadoes, hurricanes, droughts... Plans to unite the governments into a one world order. So many things were happening behind the scenes, and God help him but he was a part of it; he was responsible for some of it.

He chuckled and shook his head. God help him? Now she had him thinking of God.

He drove to one of the exits in the parking lot and rolled his window down where a security guard stood. Taking out his government ID, he handed it to the guard who scanned it over.

"Drive safe, Mr. Patrick," the man said with a solemn nod.

Devon took his ID back, nodded in return, and drove off, watching in the rearview mirror as the driver in the car behind him stopped so he could pass through the security clearance. This was the new world people were quickly being thrust into, and by the time they woke up and realized that it wasn't because of their safety but to control them, it would be too late.

He came to a stop at the red light and rubbed his eyes, suddenly feeling as if the weight of the world was weighing down on him. He didn't know what to do. He was in too deep. He couldn't get out...unless he died.

He placed his free hand on the place between the two seats and jerked. His hand had touched something that could only

be described as an icy mist. Turning his eyes to the passenger seat, he thought he saw a faint distortion in the seat. As soon as he saw it, it disappeared.

His heart pounded anxiously in his chest, and for a good moment, all he could do was stare at the empty seat and wonder if what he thought he felt and saw was real or his imagination going wild. He'd seen a lot of things in his time, but he'd never experienced something like this. In that brief instant, his very core had shaken with fear.

A horn honked behind him.

Directing his gaze to the light, he saw that it had turned green. With a deep breath, he pressed his foot to the accelerator and drove through the intersection. He glanced at his passenger seat. Nothing. He tentatively touched the seat next to him. Nothing.

He released his shaky breath. Nothing. It'd been nothing. Just a figment of his imagination. Yes, that's all it was. Nothing more.

But no matter how hard he tried to convince himself, he was deathly afraid that Autumn was right.

Chapter Two

Alex took the pill out of the orange bottle, once again wondering if this was a good idea. But did he have a choice? If he stopped taking his prescription, then the alien would be back. It hated him. It haunted him. So many people thought the aliens were their friends. It was enough to make him laugh.

How wrong they are, he thought bitterly as he plopped the little pill into his mouth and swallowed the soda. He placed the can on the table in front of the TV and sat back in his recliner. Picking up the remote, he changed the channel. What he needed was a mindless show so he could forget about everything for awhile.

Kicking his feet up and crossing his arms, he relaxed and focused on the sitcom. For fifteen minutes, the husband and wife on the TV show bickered, and he chuckled a few times. Five minutes later and his eyes began to droop. His limbs felt pleasantly heavy, and he gave into the urge to sleep. Maybe it would be better to sleep out in the living room instead of the bed. He'd keep the lights on and the TV going. It was comforting. And he needed comforting right now.

The commercials ended and the show came back on, but he hardly noticed. Caught in the limbo state between being awake and being asleep, he drifted off, enjoying the simplicity of it all.

“Kill her.”

He mumbled and turned his head.

“They’re laughing at you.”

His eyes flew open. No one was in the room with him. Easing out of his chair, he checked the lock on the apartment door. It was bolted. He made it a point to do a thorough examination of his apartment every time he came home to make sure no one was there.

Of course, that didn't keep out the alien. But the pills kept that away. How, he didn't understand. But they worked, and he wasn't about to question it; not after his last encounter when the ghastly thing almost killed him.

So why was he hearing voices? It couldn't be someone hiding in the apartment. It couldn't be the alien.

The pounding of his heart grew faster, and he couldn't determine whether it was from fear or a side effect of the pill. He sat back in the chair which was now upright and placed his head in his hands.

I'm not going crazy. I'm not going crazy.

He rocked back and forth and repeated those words to himself.

"The watchers are watching you."

He lifted his head and looked at the TV. The voice came from there. He was sure of it.

The last three minutes of the sitcom was on. He watched it with apprehension.

The man walked over to his wife and hugged her. "Hey, don't worry about it, honey. You can't help it if they want to rip your brains out."

The audience laughed.

Alex sat up straight and stared at the scene in horror. This was supposed to be a comedy!

"It's the aliens," the wife replied. "They're not what they seem, and they have people working from the inside. They're everywhere. Our neighbors are aliens in disguise."

"You have to be careful what you say and do. They're onto you. You've figured them out," her husband said.

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She went over to the window and glanced out of it. "I can see them moving around in the house. Do you think they assume their natural form w/hen no one's watching?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"I have to go find out."

"No. It's dangerous. If they see you, they'll take out your eyeballs and make you watch as they peel your flesh off and eat it. Then they'll have their alien friends over to barbeque the rest of you, and you'll feel every bit of the pain as they sink their teeth into every organ of your body."

The audience laughed again.

Gasping for breath, Alex scrambled for the remote and turned off the TV.

Silence.

Wonderful, blessed silence.

Still panting for air, Alex wiped his forehead. Sweat literally dripped down his face. His hand trembled. He blinked several times before he realized he was seeing black spots. His pulse quickened, and he was sure it wasn't all fear. This had to be from the pill. The voices on the TV, his physical reaction, the low humming sound tickling his ear drums...

What's happening to me? Why can't I have a normal life anymore?

And so he was back to placing his head in his hands and rocking back and forth. He struggled to take slow and even breaths, but what had begun as a slight tremble through his body became a sudden uncontrollable shaking.

"Kill her," the voice whispered in his head.

He gritted his teeth and tried to hum aloud. Anything to get rid of the voice as it repeated "Kill her" over and over.

A sharp pain sliced through the front part of his brain and trickled down his spine. Screaming, more from fright than from pain, he leapt off the chair and collapsed onto the floor. His head hit the side of the table, and he fell into the bliss of unconsciousness.

Autumn practically sped to the hospital. She burst through the front door and ran to the intensive care unit, unable to believe that Alex had gone into cardiac arrest. When she reached the desk to sign in, they allowed her to put on the gown, gloves, shoe coverings and face mask so she could go in to see him.

It was an unreal experience to see him lying in the bed, a tube going down his mouth and two smaller ones going up his nose. Cords ran under his hospital gown to monitor his heart rate and other vital signs. A series of IVs were hooked up to his arms, and she could only guess what they all did, besides feed him and medicated him.

She stood at the threshold of the white room and gulped back her tears. Of all people to end up like this, why did it have to be Alex? He wasn't even thirty. What were the chances he had a heart attack?

With uncertain steps, she moved forward and gingerly touched his hand. "Alex?"

Of course, he wouldn't respond. He was unconscious. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, unable to get enough air under the weight of the mask, but the action steadied her emotions enough so that she didn't burst into tears. She squeezed his hand, willing him to live. Hadn't there been enough loss over the past year already?

Opening her eyes, she took another good look at him. There seemed to be some color in his cheeks. That was good. And his breathing was steady. He'd pull through this. He had to.

"It's me. Autumn," she softly said, wondering if unconscious people had any awareness of things that went on around them. She leaned forward and brushed aside a lock of hair that had fallen to his right eye. "I don't understand anything that's happening. Overnight, the world's changed, and I don't recognize anything anymore. You and Alicia are the only ones I have left.

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I've never felt more alone in my entire life. Please don't die on me."

She choked on her last word as her tears fell. She couldn't successfully wipe them away with the mask on but did her best to clear her vision. When she did, she noticed the angel standing at the other side of the bed. Once again, he looked just like an ordinary man. He had neatly trimmed blond hair and wore a brown suit. She glanced at the nurse who glanced into the room. She wondered if the nurse would notice the angel, but the nurse smiled at her and went to the next room.

Autumn turned back to the angel and dared to ask, "Will Alex live?"

"Yes."

Giving a grateful sigh of relief, she wept some more.

"He must not take any more pills," the angel warned.

Sniffing, she swallowed and asked, "Is that what did this to him? Did those pills give him a heart attack?"

"He didn't have a heart attack. That's how it looks, but it's not what happened. He was spiritually attacked."

"By what? By one of those...things...I saw at Area 51?" A chill raced up her spine as she remembered the dark shadowy figure with the horns and red eyes. "A demon?"

"A demon is a disembodied spirit seeking a home. That one wants him."

"Are the aliens demons? Is that why he sees the alien in his apartment?"

"They appear as they will but there are no aliens as you think of them. It's all an illusion to make you believe the lie when it comes."

"What lie?"

"Watch the Middle East."

Before she could ask anything else, he vanished. She tried not to let this frustrate her. For once, he was answering some of

her questions. She should just be glad he did that much. But she wished he would have answered more.

Turning to Alex with renewed hope, she squeezed his hand again. “You’ll be alright.” Then she laughed. “Thank God you’re going to be alright.”

Chapter Three

Devon sat beside Vanessa who slept in a bed at the hospital. He rubbed his forehead. It didn't surprise him that she tried to commit suicide. He'd thought of it often enough. If it wasn't for the fear of what might or might not lie on the other side, he would have done it long ago. He recalled his enthusiasm when he first started working for the government. Giving a bitter laugh, he rubbed his eyes, a sense of weariness seeping into his bones. Vanessa had had the same look of optimism and hope. They signed up to help improve humanity, but they were systematically destroying it.

Vanessa groaned and her eyes fluttered open.

Devon jumped out of his chair and went over to her. "Vanessa?" he softly asked, worried about her state of mind.

She turned her frightened eyes to him. "Why didn't you tell me? The Illuminati...they plan to destroy most of the population and—"

He pressed his hand over her mouth. "Don't. Don't say it. They may not kill you, but there are things worse than death," he whispered. He glanced around the room. Who knew who...or what...was watching and listening? "It was a bad dream," he said in a louder voice. "You're awake now. Everything's going to be fine." Bile rose up in his throat at the lie, but he forced the words out, knowing if he didn't, things would be worse for her...and for him.

Tears formed in her eyes and fell down her cheeks. Had she known what she was getting herself into, she never would have gone to the job interview. She didn't have to say it. The message was in her eyes.

Looking away in shame and regret, he reached across the bed and grabbed some kleenex to wipe her tears away. This was stupid, of course. No amount of wiping tears would make the stark reality they were in disappear. They were all sitting ducks. All they did by cooperating was extend their lives a little bit longer with the hope they might find a place to hide and avoid the plans of the world's elite before they succeeded in cleansing the Earth from the billions of people they deemed unworthy of living in the new Earth they planned to establish.

A nurse walked into the room. "Oh good. You're awake," she told Vanessa with a smile. "How are you feeling, honey?"

Vanessa turned her eyes to the window and remained silent. Another tear slid down her cheek.

"It's been a rough time," Devon said on her behalf, realizing how shallow the words sounded. The nurse wasn't in on this. She had no idea what was going on or about the things that were planned. Devon took a deep breath and faced the nurse. "She needs to rest."

The nurse nodded in sympathy. "Poor thing." She took out a needle and got ready to insert something into the IV that was in Vanessa's arm.

Devon stopped her. "What is that?"

Surprised, the nurse said, "It's something to help her sleep. She needs her rest."

He caught sight of the words on the needle and relaxed. It wasn't anything harmful. "I'm sorry." Then he backed away so the nurse could inject his co-worker with the drug to make her sleep. "You'll be fine, Vanessa," he said, wondering if she got the

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hidden message meant to assure her that nothing poisonous was in the substance.

Vanessa didn't look his way. She just continued to softly cry.

With a heavy sigh, he said, "I'll be back in a couple hours. I have to return to the office."

Since she didn't respond, he left the room and headed down the corridor. How he wished he didn't have to go through this. He wished even more Vanessa could get out, but she was stuck now. She was as much a prisoner as him.

Up ahead, he caught sight of Autumn walking toward him. He hesitated. He could slip down another corridor. She hadn't seen him yet. Her gaze was lowered and she seemed worried. He wondered why she was here, and more than that, he wondered why he wanted to talk to her.

He saw a flash of white blink beside her. She stopped and said something. Devon frowned. It seemed to him that she was talking to someone, and though he couldn't see it, he noted the distortion in the air. There was a current that emanated from the spot she directed her attention to, and that current could only be described as a soothing warmth. Whatever it was, Devon noted there was no evil in it, unlike the sensation he'd experienced in the car that day he'd seen her at the mall.

Her gaze went from the thing beside her to Devon.

Unsure of what to do or say, he stayed still.

She looked back at the thing and shook her head.

Even if Devon had no idea what was going on, he knew that she had no intention of communicating with him. As if to make it final, she turned around and found another corridor to go down.

Devon released the breath he'd been holding. He shouldn't have been surprised. The last time he saw Autumn, he called her nuts and told her to see a shrink. And yet, he felt an

overwhelming sense of disappointment. With a heavy heart, he stepped forward. He had to go to work.

As he passed where she'd been, the warmth pressed in on his awareness. He turned to the source, wondering if this was a part of his imagination, but there was a prickling icy sensation that dug into his arm on his other side.

He waited for a second and stared long and hard at the air where the warmth flowed. Then a blurry image with white extended wings came into view. The image didn't clear, no matter how many times he blinked, but he heard a distorted male voice coming from it.

"What? I don't understand you," he told the thing.

The sharp icy pain in his arm made him wince, but he was determined to make some sense out of this apparition before him.

"You don't..." the thing began.

"I don't what?"

"...don't have to..."

Devon rubbed his arm, aware that it was going numb, as if someone was squeezing it. "I don't have to what?" he demanded, willing the thing to finish its sentence.

"...be a pawn."

Then the icy thing lashed out and the warmth departed.

Devon examined the area where he'd felt the freezing air, but he could not detect anything, either good or bad. Scanning the empty corridor, he wondered what the white-winged thing meant.

You don't have to be a pawn.

His gaze went to the camera hiding in the circular fixture that hovered down from the ceiling. Further down the hallway, in front of the stairwell door, was another camera masked over by an identical fixture. Did the thing mean what he thought? That it referred to how the government had been treating him and Vanessa like pawns? If ever there was a definition of pawns, it was them.

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With another look around the hallway, he headed for the exit, in a hurry to get out of there.

Chapter Four

Alex didn't want to leave the hospital. It was the first time since the vanishing that he was able to get a good night's sleep, even if the bed wasn't very comfortable. The alien wasn't here. It didn't hover over his bed and threaten to kill him. He didn't hear voices or a strange humming sound. He felt no fear. He wished he could stay there forever.

But he couldn't, and on the day he was due to go home, he sat in front of the overnight bag Autumn brought over for him a few days before and tried to find the motivation to zip it up. He hated his apartment. But more than that, he hated being alone. If he wasn't alone, the alien wouldn't bother him at all.

Someone knocked on the door, so he called out, "Open."

Dr. Reyes opened the door and smiled. "How are you doing, Alex?"

"Fine, all things considered." He tried to laugh but it came out in a half-hearted chuckle.

"Obviously, the last prescription had a serious side effect." The psychiatrist sat in the chair across from him. "Did you notice any problems before the heart attack?"

"No. Things were okay before then."

"Usually, if there's a problem with medication, it should appear within a couple days of taking it, and you were on that for two months, right?"

"Yes. I took two pills a day like you said." The last thing Alex needed was for the doctor to think he'd been skipping his

medication. He wiped his hands on his jeans and took a deep breath. "I didn't skip any days."

"I believe you, Alex. I want to make sure I know exactly what your symptoms were."

"Right." Alex shifted in his chair and cleared his throat. "Well, let's see. I fell asleep watching TV. Then I heard a voice. The people on TV were saying things that could not have been in the script."

"So you're saying that you heard voices from the TV."

"Right."

"And one of these was the same voice you heard before that?"

"No. It was a different voice. And the voices on the TV were the actors. They were talking, but they were talking about aliens eating people. But it was a TV sitcom, you know? And the episode was about the woman snooping on her neighbors. It had nothing to do with aliens."

"Oh, I know the episode you mean. You're right. No one in the show mentioned aliens."

Alex ran his hand through his hair and sighed. "Right. Yeah." *I'm losing it. I'm going crazy. He's going to confirm that.* Maybe it would be a good thing. If he was in a mental ward, maybe the alien would leave him alone.

"After you heard these voices, what happened?"

Alex shrugged. "Um...I heard a sound."

"What kind of sound?"

"A humming low sound. Kind of like white noise."

He nodded. "Anything else?"

"I don't remember much. I was hot all of the sudden, like I'd just stepped into an oven, and I couldn't see well."

"Things got blurry?"

"Maybe. I'm not sure. I think there was a sharp pain in the back of my neck, and it felt as if my mind was being ripped

open. It all happened so fast, and the next thing I knew, I was in the hospital.”

“Those don’t sound like the symptoms of a heart attack,” Dr. Reyes commented with a frown. “And it doesn’t match the side effects that are possible with that prescription. Do you drink alcohol or take any other medicine?”

“No.”

The man leaned forward, placing his elbows on his knees and said, “Level with me, Alex. I need to know what’s going on for your well-being. Do you take drugs?”

“What?” Alex practically shouted, hardly believing his ears. “No! How could you even think that?” He fidgeted in his chair and ran his hand through his hair again. “No, I don’t take drugs, and I never have.”

“It’s okay. I didn’t mean to upset you. I just had to ask. You know, to cover all my bases.” He sat up straight. “I can’t explain why that happened to you, but it’s not because of the pills. Nothing in any of the trial studies reported any of those side effects. I think you’re safe going back on the pills. I’m going to write you another prescription. I believe you’re due for a refill anyway.” He stood up and wrote on a pad he dug out from his pocket. He ripped the piece of paper and held it out to him.

Alex stared at the piece of paper and hesitated. Which was worse? Could it be that the pills were not responsible for this hospital stay? Finally, he took it. When he picked up his prescription, he would carefully read the list of possible side effects.

“And I think we should look into doing some psychological evaluations. It’s possible we could be dealing with a mental illness.”

Alex swallowed the lump in his throat. He expected this. Glancing up at his doctor, he asked, “Will I go to the mental ward?”

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Dr. Reyes smiled. “No. Most people with mental disorders take medicine that enables them to cope in the real world. You are mentally capable of going about your life.” He patted Alex on the shoulder. “Be sure to see me for a visit in two days. If you have any complications before then, give me a call. Okay?”

Alex nodded and stared back down at the paper.

Once the doctor left, he tucked it into his pocket and got to his feet. He needed to get to it and check out.

Another gentle knock came from the door.

A relieved smile crossed his face. “Hi, Autumn.” After the stress and horrors of all he’d been through, he needed a friendly face.

“Are you ready?” she asked, looking concerned.

“I guess.” He zipped up his bag and swung it over his shoulder. “Can we stop by a pharmacy to get my prescription filled?”

She waited for a long moment, as if carefully weighing her words. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“Dr. Reyes said they had nothing to do with my heart attack.”

She bit her lower lip. “I don’t believe you had a heart attack.”

“The emergency doctor said I had one.”

“Doctors can be wrong.” She shrugged. “What would happen if you don’t take the pills?”

“It could come back.”

“The alien?”

“Yes.”

With a heavy sigh, she studied his expression. “It’s not an alien, Alex.”

“Then what is it?”

She hesitated for a moment, shifted from one foot to another, and finally said, “It’s a demon.”

He laughed. "That's old-time superstitious nonsense."

"Is it? You said the thing attacked you and gives off an evil vibe."

"Yes, but the aliens aren't the good guys they're pretending to be."

She shook her head. "The demons are masquerading as aliens."

"That's really farfetched. Weren't demons around since Jesus' time? If these things were going around pretending to be aliens, then why haven't we seen aliens before now?"

She stood still for a moment and thoughtfully replied, "Well, there was Roswell."

"Okay. Fine. That was in 1947. That wasn't way back in the past."

Shrugging, she admitted. "I don't know why they're doing it now. I just know they are."

"And you know they're demons because...?"

"You're going to laugh, but... Well... There's this angel I've been seeing ever since we went to Area 51."

She was right. He couldn't stop the chuckle that rose up in his throat. "I'm sorry, Autumn. I mean, I get that the aliens aren't what they seem, but there's nothing weirdly spiritual going on. These are just things from another planet that aren't the good guys they're pretending to be."

"How can you be sure?" she asked.

"Because then there'd have to be a God, and there is no such thing as God. Now look, the idea of other life forms on other planets is realistic. Given the multitude of planets out there, there's bound to be something."

She bit her lower lip and glanced uncertainly out the window. "I used to believe that."

"And...?"

Shaking her head, she returned her gaze to him. "I've seen too much, been through too much... I see them, Alex. I see an

angel and I see dark shadows hovering around certain people. These shadows are sinister. They call themselves The Watchers.”

“See? There you go.” Relieved to have made his point, he scanned the room for any of his belongings he might have missed while packing. “The aliens would be our watchers. That’s what they’ve been saying. They planted us here and have watched our development as a species.”

“But wouldn’t that make them good?”

“Not if they have don’t have good motives. That’s what this is about. Why are they watching us? What do they plan to do with us? Not all parents are good to their children.”

She pressed her hand to her forehead. “I don’t understand it. Nothing’s made sense since Marianne disappeared.”

“That was the same time the aliens showed up.” And the same time the alien began hovering over him while he slept at night. He shivered, hating how drastically his life had changed...and not for the better. “I know. Nothing has made sense. It’s like one day our lives were in order, and suddenly we’re spinning out of control.”

“Yes. That’s exactly how it feels.”

He sighed. “Look Autumn, you’re my solid connection to any normality that was once in my life. I don’t want to upset you. Can we agree to disagree about the spiritual thing?”

She nodded. “Yeah. In times like this, we need to stick together. You know, as friends.”

“I agree.”

Appearing relieved, she held out her car keys and asked, “Are you ready to go home?”

No. He wasn’t. But he’d take the pills and be fine, if the side effects listed on the information sheet didn’t include the symptoms he’d experienced that put him in the hospital. If Dr. Reyes was right, then he would take the pills because he couldn’t

Ruth Ann Nordin

stand the thought of having to deal with that horrible alien ever again.

Chapter Five

Devon drove Vanessa home a week later, once she was put on medication to help with her bouts of depression, as her doctor termed it. It fit, Devon thought. Who wouldn't be depressed in their line of work? He glanced at her. She was huddled in the passenger seat, looking small and alone. He remembered her first day at work. She'd been full of life and energy. He had no idea they'd start exposing her to the deeper levels so soon.

They must be getting desperate. It was the only explanation why they were speeding up their plan. The aliens weren't supposed to show up this soon. They were supposed to wait for another ten years. *But what if they aren't aliens?* What if they had a more sinister identity?

He recalled the icy sensation on his arm and shivered. He hadn't felt it since, but he'd become aware of something that seemed to be close by. He often saw some slight distortion in the air around him. At one point, he swore he saw a black shadow fade in and out of his vision.

I'm going nuts.

Swallowing the lump in his throat, he glanced back at Vanessa and asked, "You want to talk about it?"

She continued to stare out the window, her head resting against the glass. "85 to 90% of the world's population is marked to die, and we're on the list."

"We don't have to be. There are still places to hide."

Laughing bitterly, she asked, “And where would that be? They have cameras and listening devices everywhere.” Then she stopped and looked at him. “Are they listening to us now?”

“No. I have a way to block them. They think we’re listening to the radio.”

She sighed and turned her attention back to the window. “Why did you call the ambulance? Why didn’t you let me die?”

“Because I have a hiding place in Alaska. I’ll take you with me when it’s time to hide. I have plenty of food and water stored up there. When they start taking people to the internment camps, we’ll head out. That’s when things will get ugly.”

For the first time since he’d found her by the empty bottle of pills in her office late that Saturday night, a hopeful look crossed her face. “You really have a place you can hide?”

“Yes. I’ve been carefully stocking supplies there. It’s a small cabin in the middle of nowhere. There’s no plumbing or electricity, but it’s somewhere to go.”

“It beats what the Illuminati have planned.” She wiped the tears that trickled down her cheeks. “All this time you think the government is there to help its people, but it’s not. You sign up to help people but you find out your mission is to scare them into obedience. And all for what? So they can control our lives and then get rid of those who resist? We’re like a bunch of lab rats to them.”

“Not everyone in the government is corrupt.”

“No. But a lot take bribes. I have to wonder if most of them even know as much as we do.”

He shrugged and turned onto another street. “Politics and money go hand in hand. He who has the most money controls what happens at the higher levels.”

“And no one can stop it?”

“How? The world leaders, the Bilderbergs, the Trilateral Commission, the United Nations... Even the aliens are in on it.”

Her lower lip trembled. “What are we supposed to do?”

The Leader

With a resigned sigh, he said the only word that had echoed through his head for years. “Survive. Hide, wait, survive. People are taking measures to hide. I’m not the only one. We have to be our own hope.”

She closed her eyes and rested her forehead against the window.

“When the time comes, you can go with me to Alaska. You don’t have to lie down and die. You have a chance.” She didn’t answer, so he added, “Just let me know if you’re interested, alright?”

She nodded but continued looking out the window.

How he wished she didn’t have to go through this. How he wished none of them did. He longed for innocence. The time when he was young and thought the world was a happy place where people wanted to help each other. Sure, there were a few bad guys, but the government was there to help protect and preserve freedoms. It’d all been an illusion. Once he got his job, he became aware of so many things.

He rubbed his forehead and thought he saw a shadow in the backseat when he looked at his rearview mirror. It vanished as soon as he saw it...or thought he saw it. Maybe he was going crazy. Maybe he was seeing and hearing things that weren’t there.

He glanced in the mirror again. Nothing was in the backseat. Breathing a sigh of relief, he turned onto the street where Vanessa lived. Once he carried her suitcase to her apartment, he asked her to call him if she needed anything.

“Okay. I will,” she softly replied, glancing around her living room as if she’d never seen it before.

“I mean it. About that place in Alaska.”

She nodded but refrained from making eye contact.

Unsure of what else to do or say, he gently closed the front door and left.

In the dark room lit only by thirteen candles stood the Bilderberg Group, one hundred and thirty of the most influential people around the world. They surrounded a man who had his eyes closed as he rested on the table in the center of the room. They wore cloaks and chanted. The power shifted through the room, subtle at first but undeniable.

The thing formed, dark at first but grew lighter until it assumed the image of a man and stepped forward. "The Master's DNA."

He held his hand out and one of the Bilderberg members stepped forward. He handed the needle to him.

"Soon. Soon we shall inherit the Earth," the creature said, carefully concealing its black wings lest the others see them. With slow methodical steps, it went over to the man lying down. "Our leader. What was started in Eden, let it now come to completion. Let that which God tried to destroy be achieved. Let man become as God, knowing both good and evil and having the power denied him for so long."

He injected the man with the DNA, and the Bilderberg group held their breath in expectation. Finally, all that they'd worked for and sought was about to come to pass. The air was thick with tension as they watched, waiting to see if their Leader would accept his host.

A subtle shift wavered through the group, making them aware something was there, but they were unable to see it. It, however, wasted no time in assuming its host's body and settled comfortably into it. The man had been trained to accept the Leader, and now the Leader was merging into a physical existence.

With a smile, the Leader opened his new eyes and sat up, seeing things through the eyes of a mortal, feeling things only a man could touch and being confined to a third dimensional world of existence. The limits were binding but necessary. The time had come. The final battle would be soon. He must act in haste.

The Leader

He stood, quickly adapting to the fragile body that was moment by moment wearing down. Mortals. Such frail things. Quickly snuffed out. Disposable. Weak. Pliable. Perfect for his purposes, for as long as he intended to keep them around.

The one with the carefully concealed black wings who had injected the DNA into the Leader's new body gave the Leader a knowing smile, hiding a chuckle as the Bilderberg members stared on in awe and worship.

The Leader smirked at the black-winged fallen angel before saying, "Be gone. Your purpose is served."

The creature faded into a faint blue mist until it left no trace of its presence.

The Leader took in the simple humans who claimed to be the best of all mankind and said, "Engage the war between Israel and Iran. It's time I arrived."

Chapter Six

Autumn turned to Alicia two days later at work. They stared at the iPhone in Alicia's hand and watched the morbid details on the news via the internet.

"Why aren't the aliens stopping this?" Alicia asked, looking at her friend.

Autumn, who felt frozen in fear, could only stare at her. "This is World War III, isn't it?"

Gulping, she returned her gaze to the phone and watched the video on the live news feed. Israel and Iran were actively preparing to strike each other, but the question was who would do it first. There was no longer a question of if they would go to war but when. And here Autumn and Alicia were sitting in a department store as if this Christmas season was going to be like any other.

"Maybe it's just talk," Alicia weakly said. "How many times have we been hearing about a breakout over there?"

"Yeah, but this time troops are getting ready."

"The aliens have to intervene. They can't let us destroy ourselves. They have to stop it."

Autumn knew her friend was trying to convince herself of this since she spoke to herself. Not knowing what else to do, Autumn watched the news on the iPhone. Hampton had been warning them that a Middle East breakout was going to occur at any moment, but up until now, she'd hoped he was wrong.

The Leader

“Tensions are mounting as Israel is asking the United States to be an ally. So far the president hasn’t given an answer. It looks like if Israel engages in an attack, it might do so on its own,” the newscaster announced.

Autumn decided she’d heard enough. “Mind if I smoke?”
“No. Go for it,” Alicia replied.

Autumn stood and numbly grabbed her coat from the employee lounge before she went outside. It was undeniable. Her life had become a horrible nightmare that never got any better. One bad thing happened right after the other, and it was becoming clear that things were only getting worse.

She reached the bench outside and sat down. Her hands shook and she didn’t know if it was from the low temperatures or from her nerves.

A warmth came from her right, a warmth which by now had become familiar enough to be comforting. She knew no one else saw the angel as it appeared next to her, but she spoke aloud anyway. So people passing by to enter the store might think she was nuts. So the security guard who checked IDs might glance over and think she was off her rocker. So whoever manned the security camera that scanned the entrance might take a look at the recording and think she was a loon. So what? What did any of it matter anymore?

She lit her cigarette and inhaled before she spoke to the angel who decided to show his white wings today. “Is it possible that I can die from lung cancer before I’m nuked into oblivion?” she asked, realizing her joke was too morbid to be funny.

“You will not be nuked,” the angel assured her.

She looked at him, noting the peaceful expression on his face. “I guess if you’re immortal, you can’t fear death.”

“Death only frightens you because it’s an unknown.”

“You don’t know fear, do you?”

“I do, just not on the same level you do.”

“What do you have to fear?”

“The choices humans make.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she was aware that a woman gave her a bewildered look before passing by. Autumn took another puff from her cigarette. “You mean whether or not we’ll blow each other up?”

“No. I mean, whose side you’ll choose.”

“Side? What side?”

“God or Satan. I can only be a messenger. I can’t make you choose, nor can I make you talk to Devon.”

She rolled her eyes, fighting off her frustration. “You’re upset because I wouldn’t talk to him at the hospital.”

“No. I’m not upset. I’m worried.”

“Worried he’ll make the wrong decision?”

He nodded.

She gave a bitter laugh. “I got news for you. He’s already made his decision. He works for them. One of the demons lurk around him.”

“Not by his choice.”

“He’s in league with them. He sets off bombs. He tells the governor to put people back to sleep. He was at Area 51 inserting something behind Alex’s ear.”

“But he hasn’t made the choice.”

She shook her head. “Don’t you see that thing that hovers by him?”

“It’s by him. It’s not in him. There is a difference. Influence and possession are two separate things, and until he makes the choice, it will not leave.”

“Unless he makes the wrong choice, right? Then it enters him?”

“Yes.”

Frustrated, she took another puff. “Why don’t you talk to him like you talk to me?”

“I tried.”

The Leader

She rolled her eyes. “Tried? You’re an angel. That makes you powerful enough to do more than us mortals can.”

“Angels are limited. I cannot will myself to contact Devon. He has to be open to it. He needs help getting there.”

“And I’m it?” She laughed again. “Last time I told him about the spirit realm, he said I was nuts. He doesn’t want to talk to me, nor do I want to talk to him.”

“He needs to talk to you, and he does want to talk to you. He’s trapped. He doesn’t know how to get out.”

She finished her cigarette and put it into the trash can. “What about Alex?” When he didn’t respond, she took a good look at his solemn expression. “Has he made a choice?” she demanded, aware that as her voice rose, her body grew tense.

“No.”

“So why don’t I spend my efforts trying to help him? At least Alex is a nice guy who doesn’t go around hurting people.”

The angel sighed and stared at the man who walked by. “Devon’s open. He wants help.”

“Just not enough so you can talk to him.” She tucked her hands into her coat pocket and fought off the blast of wind that blew around them. “How is it you could talk to me in May? I wasn’t seeking out angels. I didn’t believe in God.”

“You were looking for answers, and you know your sister believed in God. She made her decision. She was sealed.”

Finally. Now they were getting somewhere! She turned to him and asked, “Where is she?”

“It’s not the end, Autumn. It’s just the beginning, but the world is going to pass through some tribulations before it can enjoy peace. Your sister and others who made their choice before the aliens arrived have been spared the tough times to come.”

She rubbed her forehead, closed her eyes, and groaned. “Are you ever going to tell me where she is?”

Silence.

Glancing at the space next to her, she saw that he had disappeared. She rolled her eyes. Naturally. She should probably be grateful that he bothered to answer any of her questions.

“I need to talk to you.”

Surprised, she looked over and saw Devon standing in front of her. Standing up, she said, “I have to get back to work. Hampton will dock my pay if my break goes too long.” She didn’t care what the angel said. She had nothing to say to Devon, nor did she want to have anything to do with him.

“I’ll reimburse you.” Devon stepped in front of her so she couldn’t move forward. “Please?”

“No.”

She tried to step past him, but he grabbed her elbow and whispered. “Fine. Let’s bargain. You want information about what’s going on, right? You want to know what’s going on and why?”

She almost said that she didn’t want to know anymore, but then she remembered Alex and the mess he was in. Maybe Devon knew something that would help Alex. After a quick debate, she nodded.

“Meet me at Sertoma Park by the zoo entrance. We’ll talk there.”

“When?”

“When do you get off work?”

She couldn’t believe she was doing this. If it’d been anyone but Alex, she’d never meet up with Devon. “Seven. I can be there at 7:30.”

“Good. I’ll see you then.”

The shadow appeared next to Devon’s shoulder and snarled at her. In the same instant, the angel appeared next to her. The demon hissed but shrank back until it disappeared.

Autumn decided not to dwell on it. World War III was about to erupt into full force. She had bigger things to worry about than Devon and his problems, whatever those were.

The Leader

Without another word to Devon or the angel, she took her ID out of her pocket and went into the building.

The security guard checked her driver's license, nodded, and handed it back to her. "Have a good day, ma'am."

She tried to smile but couldn't because as soon as she scanned the mall, she became aware of the spiritual world around her. Dark shadows hovered around some people while beams of light hovered around others. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. When she opened them, they were gone.

I don't want to see any of them. I just want to forget this is all happening.

She hurried back to work. The safe and familiar world around her, where she avoided Hampton as much as possible, was the only comfort she got anymore. She hung up her coat and returned to the counter where she took a moment to gather her bearings. She wanted everything to go back to normal. But she had a sinking sensation that nothing would ever be normal again.

Chapter Seven

Devon checked his watch as he waited for Vanessa to get the clean bill of health from the psychiatrist. He sighed and rubbed his eyes. The day had been a long one, and tonight, he would have to fly out to Area 51. First, he had to talk to Autumn and find out what she spoke to in that hallway. Something about it was important. He sensed it was the key to what he'd been desperately searching for but had been unable to find.

Realizing, he'd been staring at the wall, he returned his attention to the magazine in his lap. The headline warned of an approaching war between Israel and Iran. Beneath the headline was the question: *Is this the beginning of the end?* He wanted to laugh at the absurdity of it. If only people knew... This wasn't where the real action was taking place. But soon after he'd begun to work, he learned that the media reported on events that masked the more pressing issues facing mankind.

The front door opened, so he glanced at who was entering the building. As soon as he recognized Alex Cameron, he looked away, too ashamed to make eye contact. Devon's business at Area 51 had to do with what he and Vanessa did to him there. He took a deep breath and pretended to be interested in the article in front of him.

Alex went to the receptionist and checked in for his appointment.

Devon purposely kept his head lowered so Alex couldn't see his face too well. None of the people ever recognized him

The Leader

after the experiments at Area 51, but there was always that chance they'd wonder if they saw Devon before. Devon wondered if Alex went to see Dr. Reyes because of that night. It wouldn't be the first time someone visited a psychiatrist afterwards. Pushing aside an onslaught of self-accusations, Devon checked his watch again.

Alex sat three chairs down from him and picked up a Reader's Digest. Good, Devon thought. Alex wasn't the type of person to make conversation while waiting for an appointment.

Vanessa came out of the office with Dr. Reyes a good five minutes later.

"Here's the prescription," he told her as he handed her a piece of paper. "Remember to call me if you notice any negative side effects, alright?"

She nodded. "Thank you, doctor."

He smiled at her before he looked at Alex. "Mr. Cameron, are you ready?"

Alex said yes, put the Reader's Digest down, and stood up. He glanced at Vanessa and asked, "Have you been here before?"

Vanessa blanched for a moment. "Uh...no." She sounded uncertain and shot Devon a startled look.

Devon slightly shook his head, a message he hoped she'd understand meant that Alex shouldn't know where he'd seen her before. Dr. Reyes glanced from one person to another, making Devon apprehensive. Something didn't seem quite right about the psychiatrist. His gaze lowered to the paper in Vanessa's hand. *She shouldn't take those pills.* Where the thought came from Devon didn't know, but he'd learned that his instincts were too important to ignore.

"Come on," Devon told Vanessa. "I'll take you to the pharmacy."

She nodded and practically ran past Alex who shrugged and turned to the doctor who smiled at him and waved him into the office.

Devon waited for Dr. Reyes to close his office door before he led Vanessa outside. Once they were in his car, he asked, "Can I see that prescription?"

Eyes wide, she nodded and handed the white paper to him.

He didn't recognize the medication, but he knew someone who would. Tapping the steering wheel with his fingers, he wondered how much he should tell her. The less she knew, the better. Obviously, knowing too much would drive her to the point of suicide again. He took a deep breath. "If I pay for it, will you go see a guy I trust?"

She narrowed her eyes. "I'm not into psychics or any weird stuff like that."

"No. This is a medical doctor. He found some implants they put in me."

"Who? The aliens?"

"Yes. You remember our trip to Dulce?"

"Only a little."

"The first time I went there, they put an implant in me."

Her eyes grew wide and he caught a tremble in her lower lip. "Are you saying...?" She brought her hand up to her neck.

"Probably around the same place we injected Alex," he softly replied.

"But I didn't think we were doing anything to hurt him," she whispered, her face growing pale.

He started the car and backed out of his parking space. "I know. You were told he volunteered for the experiment."

"But..." She gulped and shook her head. "I don't understand. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Orders. I couldn't." Just like his mentor couldn't tell him. Then his mentor had an attack of conscience and leaked some of the information to the reporters. Shortly after that, his mentor had a heart attack, or at least that was what the autopsy claimed. "Orders," he repeated, the word barely audible.

The Leader

“What else don’t I know?”

He waited for a long moment before answering. “I can’t tell you.” When she looked like she was ready to demand he tell her, he asked, “Do you want a new partner?”

Understanding lit her eyes. “Oh God.”

Oh God, indeed. He turned onto the main road and shifted in his seat. “All I can do is take you to someone who can remove the implant and any others you might have.” His gaze drifted back to the paper. “And I can tell you that whatever you do, don’t take these pills.”

She turned forward in her seat and stared blankly ahead.

Knowing there was nothing else he could do or say, he proceeded to drive.

Dr. Reyes glanced up at Alex from the doctor’s report. “He says it’s safe for you to take the pills.”

Alex shifted in his chair and ran his hand through his hair. “Yes. He said the pills had nothing to do with the heart attack.”

The psychiatrist waited for Alex to continue, but when Alex didn’t, he asked, “Do you disagree?”

Letting out a long sigh, Alex scanned the wall where the man’s diplomas and awards were neatly arranged. Finally turning his eyes to the doctor’s, he said, “I’m twenty-nine. How can I have a heart attack?”

“Young people get heart attacks. Sure, it’s rare, but it happens. Just like young people get diabetes and cancer. These illnesses that trouble our bodies don’t care what age you are.”

Alex couldn’t argue that point. His gaze lowered to his hands. Despite his better judgment, he’d taken the pills as soon as he got home. Nothing bad happened since then. In fact, his life finally had a sense of normality it hadn’t had in a long time. So what was troubling him?

“Have you had any more trouble with the alien?” Dr. Reyes asked.

“No.” Taking a deep breath, he said, “You know that blond woman that was just here?”

“Of course, I do. I walked her out of the office.”

“Yeah, well, I think I’ve seen her before.”

“How so?”

Alex shook his head. “I’m not sure. I mean, she seems familiar and yet she doesn’t.”

“Maybe she looks like someone you’ve seen before?”

“Maybe.”

Alex didn’t think so, but it was a possibility he ought to consider. Still, there was something that tickled the back of his mind, as if his subconscious mind was trying to tell him something.

“If you’d seen her,” the doctor began, “do you have any idea where it would have been?”

“No. I don’t.” He rubbed his forehead. He couldn’t be sure, but he thought he was developing a headache. “I don’t.”

“It’s okay. Give it time. It might come back to you.”

“I guess.” He let go of the urge to fight through whatever block was in his mind, and his headache eased. *That’s odd.* Glancing at the clock, he realized his hour was almost up. He breathed a sigh of relief.

“Did you read through the list of symptoms to watch out for when you take the pills?” Dr. Reyes asked.

“Yes.” He’d read through it several times and couldn’t find anything that would explain voices from the TV, a heart attack, a humming sound... “Yes, I read the list.”

“Good. Did you also get the psychiatric testing I ordered?”

“Yes, I did that too,” Alex softly admitted, wondering what those tests would find. Was he going crazy? Hearing voices,

seeing an alien that attacked him, and having a heart attack. None of those could mean good things. "I did it earlier this week."

"Good. I'm glad to hear it. We'll get to the bottom of what's going on and take care of it."

"When do you think you'll get the results?"

"In about a week. I'll give you a call when they're in and we'll talk about things then."

Alex nodded. He glanced at the clock and breathed a sigh of relief when he saw his time was up. "I see it's five."

He looked at his watch. "So it is." He stood up and led Alex to the door.

After Dr. Reyes turned the knob, Alex walked passed him and into the lobby.

Kill her.

Alex spun around so he could see the doctor. "What did you say?"

"I didn't say anything," Dr. Reyes replied.

Alex stared at him for a moment, trying to gauge whether or not the man told the truth.

"Alex, are you alright?"

His eyes met Dr. Reyes' and he shrugged. Dr. Reyes didn't appear as if he was toying with him. Finally deciding he'd imagined the voice, Alex shrugged. "It's nothing. I'm fine." Then he turned and left the building.

Chapter Eight

Autumn parked her car in front of the zoo entrance and noted the Christmas displays that lined the path further down where people drove their cars and took pictures. She hesitated to turn off her car where it was nice and toasty, but a knock on her window took her attention off that matter. She saw Devon at the passenger window.

She almost didn't roll the window down, but the angel appeared next to her in the seat. "It's safe. Let him in." Then he vanished.

With a slight grimace, she unlocked the car door so Devon could get in.

Devon shut the door and rubbed his hands together. "It's really beginning to feel like the holidays, huh?"

She was sure the look she gave him expressed her desire to be anywhere than here with him.

He seemed to catch on for he got serious and pulled something out of his pocket before he set it on the dashboard. She wondered what it was but decided she didn't care. She had nothing to hide. She wasn't the one who was going around putting implants into people's bodies at Area 51 or bombing places to get people's attention off the aliens.

"Do you have a cell phone on you?" he asked.

"Sure. Who doesn't this day in age?"

"Can I see it?"

The Leader

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Why?” Was he planning to hurt her? Did she know too much and it was his job to do the assassination?

“I’ll explain in a moment.”

She quickly debated whether or not this was a good idea. The angel was insistent she talk to Devon. Didn’t that mean she could trust Devon not to harm her? With a sigh, she took her cell phone out of her purse and handed it to him. “It’s off.”

“That doesn’t matter.” He took something thin and black out of his coat pocket and scanned the phone with it. “Now they can’t hear what we have to say.”

“What is that?” she asked, motioning to the strange device.

“I have a flight to catch at ten. I don’t have time to explain everything.”

She frowned. “Then why did you ask to meet me?”

“Because I have a feeling that what you know is something that can’t wait.” He glanced out the front window before he asked, “Is the black shadow with me right now?” His eyes met hers and he waited for her response.

She scanned the area around him and shook her head. “No.” She turned her attention to outside the car where the angel seemed to be holding something back. In the dark, it was hard to make out the shadowy figure, but it became clear soon enough why Devon didn’t have the demon lurking by him. “The angel has the demon away from you at the moment.”

She waited for him to laugh and tell her she was nuts, but he didn’t. Instead, he asked, “How do I get rid of it?”

“You believe me?”

With a shrug, he answered, “There was something in that hospital when I saw you, and it spoke to me. Well, it tried to speak to me. It said I don’t have to be a pawn. Do you know what it meant?”

“Before I answer your questions, I need you to answer mine.” There was no way she was going to tell him everything she knew and risk him running off. Right now, the angel was her only bargaining chip, and she had to use it. “What’s going on with the aliens? Who are they and what do they really want?”

“Fair enough. The aliens are here to take back the planet. They were here before we were, and they want us removed, with the exception of the humans who’ll do what they want. Those people will be the slave race. The people who agree to do what the aliens want will be allowed to live, and those who resist will be sent to the internment camps.”

“Interment camps?”

“In this country, they’re Fema camps.”

She thought she’d heard the term Fema before but couldn’t place it.

As if he could read her mind, he explained, “Fema handles disasters. They’re a part of the government that aids clean up and aid after hurricanes and earthquakes and other acts of God, or what’s supposed to be acts of God.”

“What does that have to do with interment camps?”

“Let’s say you have a disaster. Your house is flooded out and you have nowhere to go. The people from Fema come along and offer a place for you to stay while you get back on your feet. Will you go?”

She shrugged. “I don’t get what’s so bad about that, but obviously there is if you’re bringing it up.”

“When you get to these camps, you’ll find people will be separated out. Those who are deemed productive and are compliant with the alien’s wishes will be put into temporary trailers and work until they can return to the outside where they will be tracked to make sure they remain compliant. Those who are too feeble and weak will be quietly disposed of. Those who are resistant or question what’s going on will either be

brainwashed or disposed of. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

She glanced out the window where two angels now stood. One angel was aggressively holding the demon back while her angel nodded at her. Turning back to Devon, she uneasily said, "The angel indicated that you're telling me the truth. So those who oppose the aliens will die?"

"Yes. That's why we're using the sound waves to keep people in a false sense of security. The more people who remain calm, the more will have a better chance of surviving."

"A better chance? What do you mean by that?"

"A certain percentage of the population has to die off. You see, right now the Earth is too populated. There are way too many people for them to control. Since the last century, the governments have been working under the radar to help kill off segments of the population, and they've taken measures to do this so that when the time came for the aliens to arrive, the task would be less daunting."

"They do this through internment camps?"

"They've done it through camps in Germany and China. Russia's used their Gestapo to kill off a lot of their people. But there are other ways they're doing it. The food and drinks are made of high fructose corn syrup which increases diabetes, damages the liver and pancreas, and increases heart problems. They're putting fluoride in the water which leads to more health problems like kidney damage and thyroid problems, and fluoride's been known to lower IQs. The real purpose of vaccines is to sterilize people. Why do you think they target pregnant women and children? The point is, it is all about population control. The larger the population, the harder it is to control. And if they can't control you by dumbing you down, they'll try to introduce something that could sterilize you or give you health problems."

"So what does that have to do with bombing places?"

He sighed. “People will give up their freedom in exchange for security. If people feel that their lives are at risk, they’ll accept surveillances. Congress doesn’t need your permission to listen in on your conversations. Even when your cell phone is turned off, they can hear what you’re saying. Cameras are on just about every streetlight and in all the parking lots to keep track of where you’re going. Everything you do online is kept in a database. The move to paperless money is to track your expenses. Soon everything will have an electronic component to it. Before long, they’ll make everyone wear ID tags in order to buy or sell anything. It’s all under the guise of keeping you safe from terrorists, but the reality is that you’re in a police state and you don’t even know it. They tell you that it’s all in place to keep you safe. What so few realize is that being safe means they’re going to be slaves.”

She didn’t know how to respond. What could she possibly say? She took another look at the angel who didn’t deny what Devon was telling her, and if she saw right, two more angels had appeared to ward off another demon who had come. She groaned. Just what she wanted to see: a spiritual gathering taking place right by her car.

She turned to Devon who had a somber expression on his face. “Do you see what’s going on over there?” She pointed to the assembly.

He squinted and waited for a minute before he answered her. “There’s something different in the air. It’s like a ripple with a flash weaving in and out of it.” He glanced at her. “What am I supposed to see?”

“Two demons and three angels. That demon isn’t going to let you go without a fight.”

He shivered. “This whole notion of angels and demons is...almost ludicrous.”

“Yeah...well...welcome to my world. Ever since those people vanished, I’ve become aware of the spiritual world around us.”

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“So how do I get rid of it? I don’t want that thing hovering over me for the rest of my life.”

She gave her angel an expectant look.

The angel motioned for her to roll down her window.

Surprised, she obeyed.

He walked over to the car, his white wings seeming to grow out of his back as he came closer.

Devon sharply inhaled.

“Do you see all of him?” she asked Devon.

Devon’s gaze flickered to her before he stared at the angel again. “Blond hair, white clothes, and white wings? He almost seems to glow?”

“Yes. That’s how he looks.”

The angel stopped by her door, so she rolled down her window. With the demons nearby, she didn’t want to leave the safety of her car, even if that safety wouldn’t prevent them from getting in if they really wanted to get to her.

Devon leaned toward her, his eyebrows furrowed as he watched the angel.

“You want to know how to make the demon go away?” the angel asked Devon.

Devon’s gaze shifted to her, and she caught the surprise in his eyes.

“He could hear us talk,” she explained to Devon. “You should talk to him.”

“What I have to say is for you as well,” the angel said. “The time is quickly approaching when you both will have to make a decision. The war that was once in Heaven has now come to Earth, and Satan is wasting no time in gathering his allies.”

Devon laughed. “Satan? As in the devil?”

“Is there another Satan?” The angel looked Devon straight in the eye, and Devon stopped laughing. “You want the demon to leave you alone? Then choose God. Otherwise, the demon will stay with you.”

Uncertainty crossed Devon's face.

The angel turned his gaze to her. "You won't see Marianne again unless you also make the choice for Him." He reached out and touched the cross that hung on Marianne's necklace. "Your sister's been spared from what's to come, but her faith can't save you."

"Save me from what? The demons?"

"From the great deception," he answered.

Before she could ask for clarification, all the angels and demons disappeared.

"Is he still there?" Devon asked.

She sighed. "No. And yes, he often leaves me wondering what else there is, so don't be surprised he left before we could ask what the great deception is."

"Cliffhangers are my life."

She wanted to ask him what he meant by that, but he glanced at his watch.

"I better go. I have a flight to catch."

"Wait!" She grabbed his arm before he could open the door. "What happened at Area 51 with my friend?"

"What friend?"

"Alex Cameron. You injected him with something. What was it and what else did you do to him?"

He hesitated.

"Don't I already know too much to turn back?" she demanded.

"You can't tell others this."

"Alex is my friend, and he's being tormented by an alien. I owe it to him to help him. I got the angel's answer, but I need to know what you did to him at Area 51."

"I'd have to know exactly who you're talking about."

Grumbling, she picked up her purse and pulled out her wallet. She flipped through the photos until she got to the one of Alex and Marianne. She practically shoved it in his face. "That's

Alex,” she said in disgust. It shouldn’t surprise her that Devon had done this to more than one person. “I saw Alex’s medical charts in the room he was in, and you’re telling me you don’t remember his name?”

“We’re not given the names of the people who come to us.”

“So Alex was just a number to you?” She couldn’t keep the anger out of her voice.

“They have to be just a number. It’s the only way to cope with what’s going on,” he softly admitted.

“Well, I got news for you. Alex isn’t just a number. He was my sister’s fiancé. He was supposed to be my brother-in-law, and he’s my friend. He’s suffering because of what you and your colleagues did to him. The demon masquerading as an alien won’t leave him alone. It even tried to strangle him while he was sleeping.”

Devon winced. “That wasn’t part of the plan.”

“Then what was part of the plan? What did you do to him?”

“His genes are ideal for offspring. We extracted his sperm to make a baby. What the other people did to him, I don’t know. Then I was to tag him with an implant so we can keep track of him.”

“What?” She shook her head as she battled the mixture of rage and shock that coursed through her. “A baby?”

“A super soldier.” He glanced at his watch again. “Look, that baby is humanity’s best hope. My work at Area 51 isn’t as nebulous as you think, but I can’t get into all of that now. I really have to go. If you want, I can explain more to you when I get back in two days. If I don’t make my flight, there will be questions, and those questions can lead them to you. You don’t want that.”

He took his device off the dashboard and slipped it into his pocket. Then he opened the car door. "I'll find you at work." He shut the door and ran to his car.

Too stunned to do anything, she stared at the spot where the angels and demons had been moments ago. Super soldiers? What in the world were super soldiers? And what did that have to do with angels and demons or the great deception?

More questions. It seemed to her that the further ahead she got, the more she didn't understand. She released her breath and grabbed her purse to find a cigarette. If this was the end of the world, she saw no reason to quit smoking. Right now, it was the only thing that kept her hanging on. She lit up her cigarette and finished smoking half of it before she felt calm enough to drive home.

Chapter Nine

Alex looked at the bottle of pills in his hand. Just the thought of taking more of them made his heart race with dread. He didn't care what the list of side effects said. These pills made him hear voices. He'd skipped taking them that morning to see if the voices would stop and they had. Most of it was garbled, except for the random occurrences where he was told to kill someone. A female. It was always whispering, *Kill her*. He had no idea who "her" was, nor did he want to find out.

He put the bottle back in the medicine cabinet and slowly stepped back from it. He didn't have to take the pills. Everything was in his mind. He was sure of it. The alien didn't always appear when he didn't take them. Maybe he imagined it. Maybe there was no alien hovering by him. Like Dr. Reyes said, he'd had no marks to leave physical evidence to prove an alien tried to strangle him. That alone was enough to know it was all in his mind.

Mind over matter. He could beat this thing. He could. It was all a matter of getting control of his thoughts and fears instead of the thoughts and fears controlling him.

The door to the medicine cabinet closed, and Alex saw his reflection in the mirror. He breathed a sigh of relief. No alien. It was just him. There. That proved it. He hadn't taken a single pill since he woke up, and the voices stopped and the alien hadn't returned. Closing his eyes, he took deep breaths to slow his heart. Tentatively, he opened his eyes. No alien. With a grateful laugh, he turned and saw no alien hanging out in his bedroom either.

Good. Finally, things were beginning to feel normal. He was getting control of his sanity again.

Turning off the bathroom light, he retired to his bed.

“Flight 876 going to Minneapolis/St. Paul is now boarding passengers in rows 10 through 15.”

Devon grabbed his eReader and stood to wait in line. On the TV monitor by the chairs where several people watched in shock, he saw images of Israel attacking Iran and Iran’s retaliation. The aliens would jump in and save the day. Then people would beg for the one world government to come in and save them from annihilation. The aliens would be the heroes and people would gladly submit to them, and by the time they woke up and realized who they submitted to, it would be too late. The position of power and control would be firmly in place. Those who dissented would be removed, and when that happened, Devon would make use out of his cabin.

He glanced at the eReader in his hand. The book he’d been reading would soon be banned. He was surprised it hadn’t been already. That book taught that man had a right to freedom. It spoke of redemption. It spoke of man inheriting the Earth. It had the message the aliens wouldn’t want people promoting. But then, why should he be surprised? The Bible was the most controversial book ever written.

Devon walked up to the woman at the gate and showed her his ticket. She nodded, smiled, and directed him to the doorway that led to his plane.

Autumn picked up the phone on the third ring. “Alicia?”

“Girl, where have you been? I’ve been calling you all night.”

“Yeah, well, I had to meet someone and then get something to eat. Do you know they aren’t taking cash anywhere now? It’s a good thing I got a debit card.”

“Haven’t you been listening to the radio?”

Realizing her friend sounded scared, she dropped her purse and coat to the floor and went over to the TV so she could turn it on. “No. What’s wrong? Did Israel strike Iran?”

“Yes. No one expected it. I mean, they were supposed to have talks tomorrow, you know?”

Autumn’s mouth went dry when she saw the breaking news on the TV screen. It was eerily reminiscent of the day her sister vanished, only this time, there was a war raging in the Middle East. She gripped the phone in her hands. “Iran is going to set off a nuclear bomb?”

“Yeah, and to think they weren’t building those, huh? The Russians are telling Israel to stop attacking Iran, but Israel won’t back off until Iran does. Why aren’t the aliens stopping this? I thought they came to help us reach our potential,” she said as she choked back a sob.

Autumn watched as the camera settled on the white house in Washington DC. The alien craft that settled above it seemed to be glowing. She squinted. Had it done that before?

The reporter spoke into his microphone and glanced at the camera, looking as alarmed as Autumn felt. “The president and vice president have already evacuated for safety. Other leaders of the world are heading for their respective places as well.”

“Why would the leaders be hiding if the aliens were going to stop this?” Alicia cried into the phone.

“I...I don’t know.” Autumn scanned her apartment, wondering if the angel would appear but she was alone. “I don’t know what’s going on. I was told there would be no nukes.”

“Really? By who?” Alicia asked with hope in her voice.
“Uh...”

Autumn’s eyes caught sight of Tehran. It was day in Iran, so it was hard to make out the faint glow from the craft, but she was sure she saw it. *They’re not supposed to glow. They never glowed before.* This couldn’t be good. The bad feeling in her gut told her that this couldn’t be good, even if the reporters were wondering if the aliens were going to intervene to stop Israel and Iran from sending out their nukes.

“Maybe they’re going to save us after all,” Alicia said.

Amy swallowed the nervous lump in her throat. *Someone or something better intervene...and fast.*

Alex heard the sirens just as he saw the report on the Internet that Israel and Iran set off their nuclear weapons. The Russians who had vowed to come to Iran’s defense were getting ready to launch theirs as well. And just as he saw another incoming report that the alien craft had obliterated the capital of Iran, a hand wrapped around his throat and squeezed so tightly, it caught off his air supply.

Alex reached up to pry the hand off of him, but the thing hurled him across the wall. Pain vibrated through his body as he landed in a heap on the floor. Struggling to get to his feet, the electricity went out so he could only catch a glimpse of his attacker, but there was no doubt that it was the alien.

The alien was real. And it was back.

Devon gripped the arms of his airline seat as the plane dove forward. People around him screamed as their drinks fell off the trays in front of them and rolled onto the floor. The plane

steadied and Devon gasped, unable to process just what, exactly, was happening.

One of the flight attendants ran down the aisle. She caught up to the other attendant who'd tripped and landed on the aisle floor. She picked her up and cried, "The capitol is gone."

That wasn't supposed to happen. Devon leaned forward and grabbed the woman's arm. "Who attacked DC?"

"The aliens," she hurriedly answered before she and her co-worker hurried down the aisle.

The plane dove forward again, and Devon forgot about his other questions. The lights flickered on and off, and the oxygen masks fell from overhead. Without thinking, he grabbed his mask and slipped it on, making sure to secure his oxygen flow. Then he turned to the woman sobbing hysterically as she tried to get the mask on her terrified child and did the task for her before helping her with her own mask.

What's happening? Why would the aliens attack DC? They were supposed to save the world, not attack it.

But the aliens weren't really aliens. Hadn't he just learned that tonight?

You have to make your choice, Devon. Whose side are you on?

The immediacy of death and the great unknown loomed before him like a dark chasm. The time for putting off the decision was at an end. The nose of the plane rose again and then dipped back down. Devon gritted his teeth and braced himself for the end. *God, save me!*

Autumn waited in the dark. The electricity was out, and the phone had been cut off. She didn't fully understand what was happening, except the aliens were in the process of bombing the capitol of every country in the world. But why? All the leaders were hiding, weren't they?

She put the phone down and walked over to her window. North Dakota was a far cry from Washington DC, and all she saw was absolute blackness. Everyone lost their power. The stars and moon shining in the sky gave the misleading notion that everything was peaceful. She took the cell phone out of her pocket and tried to turn it on, but it was dead. What was going on? And more importantly, why?

Alex darted for his front door, but the alien jumped on him and they landed onto the floor. The alien pressed its hands up to Alex's head and forced Alex to make eye contact with it.

Kill her.

“Who?” Alex yelled.

It stared at him, and Alex had the sensation of his mind splitting in half. He screamed and tried to shove the thing off of him, but its grip remained secure. *Kill her.*

Alex knew he was losing the battle so he went limp, giving up the will to live.

The power came back on, and Autumn jerked. The cell phone in her hand lit up as well. She looked back out the window and saw the rest of Bismarck lighting up, as if waking up from a deep sleep. And then the sky lit up with a bright blue light. Amazed at the brilliance of it, she opened the window so she could poke her head out and get a better view of it.

On the TV, shots from all over the world revealed that everywhere on the planet, it was as dark as night. The sun had been eclipsed and the only light in the sky was the same blue light she saw now. Perhaps more astonishing was the obliteration of the alien spacecrafts that had been hovering over all the major

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cities of the world since May. The nukes that had been launched were also destroyed.

She peered back out the window. From the blue light emerged a silver metallic disc. A quick glance at the TV showed her that all around the world, everyone was seeing the same thing. And following the one disc were more discs.

Devon didn't notice the leveling of the plane and ascension right away. His eyes were squeezed tight, and his hands still gripped the armrests. A bright light lit up the interior of the plane, and for a moment, he thought this was it: he was dead and had passed onto the next life. But others around him gasped and the child next to him asked his mother what was flying next to them.

Opening his eyes, he turned his attention to the window next to the mother and leaned forward. Silver discs flew out of the light.

"What does it mean?" a woman behind him asked her companion.

"I don't know. Maybe when we land, we'll find out," her companion replied.

That's all they could do, Devon thought. Wait and see what this meant because nothing the aliens planned...nothing the world governments planned...was anything like this.

Autumn picked up her phone when it rang again. "Alicia, are seeing what I'm seeing?" she asked her friend, still uncertain as to what this new development meant.

"Yes. More aliens. But these are different. Do we trust them?"

Autumn thought of the angels. Was it possible these aliens were really angels? “I don’t know. I don’t know anything anymore.”

The pressure in Alex’s mind departed. He gasped with relief. The pain was gone. Mercifully gone. He opened his eyes and saw the dead alien lying on the floor four feet from him. Startled, he turned his head and saw a tall blond woman standing before him. She wore a long blue dress that covered her from head to toe, and her hair hung in soft waves around her shoulders.

“What just happened?” he asked.

“They have been destroyed. They will not afflict mankind anymore. We came in time.” She held her hand out to him.

Still unsure but not sensing any malice from this alien, he took her hand and stood up. For the first time since May, he felt a renewed calm flow through his body. After the hell he’d been through, this was the most wonderful feeling in the world.

“Who are you?” he dared to ask.

“The Sumarians called us the Anunnaki. We are the Ancients who created you. We built the pyramids as a sign we would one day return.”

“But the other aliens claimed the same.”

“It is in their nature to lie, to assume the role of the creator when they are the created. There are many intelligent life forms out there, but not all should be trusted.”

She touched his head and a light sparked from her fingers and traveled through the synapses of his mind. At first, it was soothing and healing, erasing the damage the pills and alien had done over the past months. But then, something in his mind seemed to open, and he understood every minute detail of how the human body worked. In that instant, he became aware of

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every cell in his body, and he became aware of the malignant tumor growing in his mind.

“I’m dying,” he whispered.

“No. Not now. Being the creators, we have the power over life and death.”

Her hands caressed the back of his head, and she hummed a soft and beautiful tune that reminded him of bells. Then he felt it. The healing power reaching out from her and seeping into him. The tumor shrunk until it was gone. The healing reached out to everything in his body, healing old scars from childhood, the cavities in his teeth, and the carpal tunnel in his wrist. His body felt vibrant and new, and he’d never felt more alive than he did at that moment.

“You have been restored,” she announced.

He blinked, unable to believe what had just happened to him.

“You are safe now,” she said. “We come in peace.”

The leader emerged from his ship in front of the United Nations, aware that the world watched and waited for him to speak. He stood six feet three inches tall, lean, and handsome. He wore a blue robe that shimmered in the lights that shone down on him from the building. His steps were slow but purposeful. Should there be the perfect image of mortal man, he filled the necessary requirements, and by the smile on his face, the discerning person could detect his pride.

He stood still for a minute, examining a wall that contained words that embodied the supposed purpose of the United Nations. He turned to the nearest camera and quoted, “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation. Neither shall they learn war any more.” He made a shooing

motion to the flags and one by one they fell off the poles. “Today this is fulfilled before your very eyes.” He paused for a moment and glanced at the wall before he turned his attention back to those who watched him. “I have returned.”

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