

Return of the Aliens

Novella 1

The
Vanishing

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Ruth Ann Nordin's Books
Springfield, Nebraska

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The Vanishing
Novella 1 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

“You know what they say. ‘Always a bridesmaid; never a bride.’” Autumn Daniels made the joke even though it hurt. For some reason, she assumed she’d be married before Marianne.

Marianne laughed. “You’re not the bridesmaid. You’re the maid of honor.”

“Thanks for the reminder.” She walked over to the closed door of the dressing room in the bridal shop. “How does the dress fit? Do we need to make any alterations?”

“I don’t think so. Come on in and tell me what you think.”

Autumn did as her sister bid and smiled. “You will make a lovely bride next week. Alex is lucky to have you.”

“I know.”

“It’s good to know you didn’t let that law degree get to your head.”

“Ha ha.” Marianne turned to face her. “Your time will come.”

She rolled her eyes. “Why is it that only women who are engaged or already married say that?”

“You know what your problem is?”

“That there are no good men left?”

Marianne reached up and brushed the strawberry blond hair out of Autumn’s eyes. “Your problem is that you never let men see you. *Really* see you.” She took out a barrette from her

hair and slipped it into Autumn's. Motioning to the mirror, she added, "It doesn't take much to attract attention."

"You have a gift for making things look better than they are."

She shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not. The problem could be that you don't know your worth. Men pick up on that, you know."

Autumn decided it was pointless to go through this discussion again. How could her little sister understand? She wasn't even thirty yet. Resisting the urge to settle into her all-too-familiar depression, she gave her sister a quick hug. "I better find out if the saleswoman ever found your veil or not."

Marianne nodded and turned back to the mirror.

When Autumn left the dressing room area, she noticed that the saleswoman was at the counter, staring at her monitor. Hiding her agitation that the employee slacked off at work, Autumn approached her and tapped the veil in her hands. "Is this for my sister?"

The woman jerked. "Oh! You scared me. I thought you were one of them."

She frowned. "One of them?"

She waved for Autumn to join her. "Take a look for yourself. This is a live feed off the news."

Curiosity got the best of Autumn so she obeyed. When her gaze lowered to the computer screen, she slowed her steps. "Is this a movie trailer?"

"No. I...I don't think so."

Once Autumn could read the words on the screen, she verified that the source wasn't a spoof. "Are the other news stations reporting the same thing? Do you have a television?"

"Right over there in the corner."

Autumn hastened to the small area by the window and changed the channel from the cooking show to all the news

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stations she knew about. She had to be dreaming. This kind of thing didn't happen...not in real life. This couldn't be real! And yet, even as she wanted to deny it, the proof was right in front of her.

Aliens. Little grey men. And President Jordan was making the announcement right at the United Nations.

“Autumn?”

She jerked and spun around.

Her sister's fiancé laughed. “You look like you've seen a ghost.”

“Well...” Her gaze drifted back to the television resting on the small table by the wedding catalogues. “You're not too far off.”

President Jordan stood at the podium as he continued to speak. “At this time, we don't know the aliens' intentions, but we assure you that all the governments of this world are coming together to determine the best course of action.”

“This is cute,” Alex Cameron said, shaking his head.

“I don't think it's a joke.”

“Come on. There's no way this is for real.”

She picked up the remote and pressed the channel button several times. “It's on every channel. They even suspended soap operas for this.”

“Oh no. How will we ever survive without knowing who fathered the blond floozy's baby?”

Hiding a grin, she handed him the remote. “Don't believe me? Check your favorite channels.”

“I came here to take your sister to lunch, not get involved in these silly games.” He glanced around the room. “Where did she go?”

“She's in the changing room trying on her wedding dress.”

He stepped toward the dressing rooms, so she grabbed

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his arm to stop him. “You can’t go in there.”

“Why not? We’re practically married anyway.”

She crossed her arms. “You know that it’s bad luck for you to see the bride in her dress before the wedding.”

He groaned but obeyed her. “Tell her I’m starving.”

“There are aliens passing the moon as we speak, and all you can think about is your stomach?”

He leaned forward and whispered, “We’re being taped for one of those hidden camera shows. Really Autumn, I’m surprised you’re falling for it.”

Deciding to ignore him, she went to the saleswoman who was reading a news article on the monitor. She cleared her throat and waited for the young woman to acknowledge her.

“Isn’t this awesome? My aunt said she saw a UFO, but I didn’t believe her. Wow. If she was still alive, she’d flip!” She tapped the screen. “Read this part. There’s alien aircraft on the moon! The aliens have been watching us for a long time.”

Despite the chill crawling up her spine, Autumn smiled and motioned to the veil on the counter. “Is that for my sister?”

“What? Oh, right.” She picked up the veil and gave it to her. “Hey, your sister should get married at that place in New Mexico. You know. Roswell. I mean, in light of this, it’d fit, don’t you think?”

Autumn scanned the room. There were several places where a small video camera could fit. Maybe Alex was right. Maybe this was a joke. Taking a deep breath, she turned on her heels and inched toward the dressing rooms. One glance out the window didn’t do anything to settle her nerves. Several people had pulled over in their cars as cops raced by in their cruisers toward an accident in the middle of an intersection. A man walking past the window with his friend paused and held his iPhone up so his friend could see it. Autumn caught a brief glimpse of President Jordan on the phone. This couldn’t be a

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joke. At least, not a joke in this shop. But who would set up a joke to an entire section of town? It was possible but still... Why would a TV show go to such lengths to do that?

She pushed her rambling thoughts aside and entered the dressing room area. "Marianne, I have the veil." She waited but her sister didn't answer. "Marianne?" She knocked on the closed door. After a tense moment passed, she turned the knob and stared at the crumpled wedding dress on the floor.

"How long does it take for a woman to get ready for lunch?" Alex asked, coming up behind Autumn.

Glancing at him, she forced the sudden panic aside. "Do you still think this alien thing is a joke?"

"What's going on here? Where's Marianne?"

She bent down to pick up the dress. A bra and panties fell to the floor. Marianne's shirt and pants hung on the hook by the door. Her purse rested on the seat. What was going on? Marianne wouldn't run off without her clothes or her purse.

He stormed back to the front of the store.

As he talked to the sales clerk in impatient tones, Autumn knelt down and searched through her sister's purse, hoping to find some clue as to what happened to her. Whatever it was, it wasn't good. Her sister wouldn't leave without telling her. As she pulled out the lipstick, compact mirror, pocketbook and other items from the purse, she spread them on the floor in front of her. All she found were pictures. A tear trickled down her cheek at the photo of her and Marianne when Marianne graduated from college. Then there was a picture of Marianne with Alex. They looked so happy. They were happy. Marianne looked forward to getting married. She hardly talked about anything else. So why would she leave?

It didn't make sense. Autumn sat down and willed her mind to clear. If she could just think clearly, she'd be able to figure out what was going on. She closed her eyes and took a

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few deep breaths, counting backwards from ten and exhaled when she reached one. *Calm down, Autumn. Focus. There's got to be a rational explanation for all of this.*

"She's not here," Alex said.

Autumn opened her eyes.

Alex approached the doorway and turned to the astonished clerk. "Do you see her in there?"

"She could have left out the back," the clerk replied in a shaky voice. "It's happened a couple of times. Some brides get cold feet."

Autumn wiped her wet cheeks with her shirt sleeve. She hadn't realized she'd been crying. Sniffing back the observation, she shook her head. "Marianne and I were close. She would have told me if there was a problem." Settling her hand on the floor, she got ready to stand up when something hard pricked her palm. "Ouch."

"What is it?" Alex asked.

She quickly pulled her hand up and turned to the source of the pain. It was Marianne's cross necklace. Well, there. That solved it. She held it up for them to see. "This was a gift from our parents before they died in the plane crash. She wouldn't have left this behind if she ran off." She blinked back more tears. Gone. Her sister was gone. Just like that. She put the necklace and other items back into her sister's purse and stood up. "I don't know what's going on, but someone must have kidnapped her."

"I'll call the police." The woman ran out of the room.

"Did she have any crazy ex-boyfriends who didn't want her to get married?" Alex wondered as he collected the clothes.

"No." She thought over everyone her sister had dated. "I don't think so." She swallowed the lump in her throat and ran her fingers through her hair. She felt the barrette her sister had put in her hair less than five minutes ago. Five minutes. It had

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just been five minutes! How did someone disappear in such a short time?

“I wonder if there’s a surveillance tape in this place,” Alex said. “Maybe we can see if someone entered this store and kidnapped her.”

“But she’d still have on her underwear.” At the very least. As it was, wherever Marianne went, she was naked. And that was nothing at all like her sister. Still, she followed him to the front where the clerk hung up the phone.

“I can’t get through,” the young woman said. “The phone is busy.”

Alex grumbled but dug his cell phone from his pocket and pressed the buttons. He frowned. “I’m getting the same thing. Autumn, will you try yours?”

Even though she figured it would be pointless, she obeyed. “Same thing.” She hung up the phone.

“Do you have a surveillance tape?” Alex asked.

“Of course.”

“Can I watch it to see what happened to my fiancée?”

“Let me pull up the system.” She fiddled with some keys on the computer.

He went around the counter so he could watch what she was doing.

“I don’t have anything in the dressing room, but the rest of the store is covered,” she said.

“That’s all we need,” he replied.

It wouldn’t do any good. Autumn already knew that they wouldn’t get any answers from the tape. She reluctantly turned her attention to the window. What had started as a slight disturbance had turned into a full-blown panic. People ran past the store, crying out for others that they couldn’t find. A woman had stopped pulling her stroller and was weeping over an empty seat with a sippy cup and toddler clothes hanging over the

belt strap. A fire truck and ambulance roared by, dodging a few cars that remained in the street.

“We interrupt this program for another special report,” the TV news anchor said.

She rushed over to the television and sat in front of it, turning up the volume.

“Approximately six minutes ago, there have been reports of people disappearing all over the globe. We have footage of this phenomenon coming into the station as I speak.”

The scene on the TV switched to a video where a woman stood in front of a building interviewing a man. One minute she was there asking him a question and the next, she was gone. A chill raced up Autumn’s spine. They replayed the event in slow motion, but there was no indication as to how the reporter disappeared. The next scene was of a group of children playing a ball game. One second they were there and the next, they were gone. All they left behind were their clothes.

Autumn clutched her stomach. She was going to throw up. Did that happen to Marianne as well? She put her face in her hands and took deep breaths so she wouldn’t pass out. Where did all those people go? Where did Marianne go? How did something like this happen? And how was she going to get Marianne back?

Chapter Two

In the blink of an eye, Autumn's entire life changed...and not for the better. What was she supposed to do without her sister? Marianne was the one person who understood and loved her through all the hardships in her life. It was their parents' deaths that brought them close. And now her heart ached with an emptiness that even their parents' passing hadn't caused. She closed her eyes and more tears slid down her cheeks.

The phone rang next to her bed. She turned her head to her nightstand and mechanically lifted the phone to her ear. "H—" She cleared her throat. "Hello?"

"Girl, you aren't going to take another sick day, are you?"

She groaned. "Is it Tuesday already?"

"Yes."

She lifted her head and saw the time on the clock. It was midday. In the confines of her dark room, it was hard to tell day from night anymore.

"Look, I can't keep covering for you," Alicia said in a firm but gentle voice. "You know how Hampton is. With all those people disappearing, sales have dropped and that means I have to bear the brunt of his foul mood all by myself."

Autumn rubbed her eyes and sighed. Her friend was right. She needed to get back to work. She couldn't spend the rest of her life in bed. Easing into a sitting position, she winced and grabbed the bottle of pain killers and plopped two pills into

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her mouth before she washed them down with the bottled water.

“So...are you coming in today or not?” Alicia asked.

“Give me twenty minutes.”

“Twenty minutes?”

“I have to shower.”

“Are you kidding me? It’s noon. You mean to tell me that you’re still in bed?”

“Pretty much.” She glanced at the calendar on the wall. Two weeks. It’d been two weeks since her sister and millions of other people vanished. Every time she went to sleep, she hoped she’d wake up and find out it had all been a nightmare. But each morning she woke up and dialed her sister’s cell phone only to hear that it was out of service. She’d given up on going to Marianne’s apartment, and after talking to Alex, she learned he hadn’t had any luck finding her either. She didn’t get it. What happened to Marianne and the others who went with her? “You’re lucky, Alicia. No one in your family disappeared.”

“I know.”

Autumn caught the sympathy in her voice and appreciated it. “I guess life goes on, right? I’ll see you soon.”

After she hung up, she stood, feeling as if she were seventy instead of thirty-four. Trudging to the bathroom, she flipped the switch on and ignored her appearance. She didn’t need a mirror to know her eyes were puffy and her face was splotchy. She looked like crap and felt worse. She spent five minutes standing still in the shower as the hot water pounded against her back. Everything seemed so mechanical. She was going through the motions, simply existing. Each breath reminded her that she was still alive and had to face another day without her best friend.

She picked up the shampoo and worked it into her hair. The tangles would never get out unless she applied the conditioner, which she did. After she was done bathing, she got

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dressed and slipped on her sister's necklace. It was all she had now. At least until Marianne returned. As foolish as it was to hope that everyone who vanished would suddenly come back, she held onto it.

When she got to the department store, Alicia looked relieved. She asked the male customer to wait before she ran over to Autumn and whispered, "It's been nonstop ever since people vanished. I mean, they all want to return items they bought for their friends and loved ones. I don't know what the price was on the blouse when he purchased it three weeks ago. Do you remember?"

Autumn glanced at the tall, slender man in the dark suit holding an open box. "You'd think with the way he's dressed, he would have gotten his girlfriend or wife a better gift," she whispered. "That blouse was only \$25."

"Thanks." The pretty African American woman hurried back to the register and took the blouse from the man.

As Autumn made her way to the employee lounge, the man glanced her way. A shiver ran up her spine. She blinked and quickly looked away. There was something seriously wrong with him. On the outside, he was as gorgeous as a man could get—tall, dark and handsome. But inside... She didn't even want to think about it. She'd probably never see him again, so it didn't matter. Once she put her purse in her locker, she grabbed a quick drink of coffee before clocking in.

By the time she returned to the register, the man was long gone. She breathed a sigh of relief. "Is there anything new I should know about?"

Alicia stopped flipping through a catalogue and grinned. "There is a hot guy working in the electronics department."

She rolled her eyes. "I meant work related."

"He is work related."

"You need a date."

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“Don’t I know it! It’s not my fault that men don’t know a good thing when they see it.” She shrugged. “Their loss, right?”

“I’d like to think so.”

Alicia sighed. “We do have new jeans. They’re the relaxed fit and they even come in petite. It might be perfect for you.”

“I’ll check them out. It’s been two years since I bought a new pair.”

“Oops. There’s Hampton rounding the corner. I better look busy.” Alicia shut the catalogue and hurried off to a customer.

Mr. Hampton made his way up to her. “Nice of you to come to work, Miss Daniels.”

“I took a vacation.”

“Without telling anyone in advance?”

“My sister disappeared that day.” Why did she even have to explain this? “I didn’t have advanced notice.”

“Life goes on. Some of us are still here and need clothes.”

She bit her tongue so she wouldn’t snap at him. With the economy suffering as it was, she couldn’t afford to lose her job.

“Next time, plan it ahead of time so I can fill in for your slot.”

As he walked away, she stuck her tongue out at him. So what if it was childish? She’d just lost her sister and best friend for goodness’ sakes! Some understanding would go a long way.

Two women came up to the counter and placed two shirts and a skirt in front of her.

Autumn forced a smile and took the items. “Good afternoon. Did you find everything you were looking for today?”

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“Yes, we did,” the blond said. Then she turned to her friend. “It’s about time the truth was told. I saw one when I was a girl. My aunt was even abducted. We weren’t the only ones who had these encounters. Millions of others have too.”

Autumn slowly rang up the clothes as she listened to them. Were they talking about aliens? As in little green men and UFO’s?

The blond’s friend looked apprehensive. “Why would they wait all this time before contacting us?”

“They didn’t,” the blond answered, obviously excited. “They’ve been coming down here since that Area 51 incident. The government’s known about them all along. They’ve been keeping everything classified.”

Autumn cleared her throat. “The total comes to \$50.35.”

The blond handed her a credit card. “Do you think Area 51 was a hoax?”

Surprised that she was talking to her, Autumn thought over the question. “I don’t know.”

“How can you not know either way?” her friend asked. “You either thought it was real or you didn’t.”

She tore off the receipt and handed it and a pen to the blond. “Well, if you’re asking if Area 51 is where they conduct experiments on little green men, then I say no. The government has technology that is years ahead of what we know about, so it’s logical to assume that Area 51 is where they make and test this technology. Now, if you’re asking if I believe in another intelligent species, the answer is yes. It’d be ridiculous to think that humans are the only ones in the entire universe.”

The blond smiled. “That’s a good point, but this is not the first time aliens have come to visit us. It is the first time the government is allowing them to appear before the entire world. They’ll be broadcasting live at the United Nations at seven

tonight. Isn't that exciting?"

The eerie feeling was coming back to her. Autumn waited until the blond signed the receipt before she tore off a copy and gave her the card back. When Autumn said 'intelligent species', she wasn't thinking of the Area 51 and UFO type of phenomenon. She was thinking of something obscure that would never make it to Earth. Something that would forever remain in the far reaches of space. But having a debate about it was the last thing she wanted to do. So she simply returned the blond's smile and handed her the bag full of clothes.

The blond's friend shook her head. "It's all a hoax. There are no aliens. What we'll see on TV is going to be a holographic image."

"And why would the governments of the world do that?" the blond asked.

"To unite us into a one world government. If enough people panic over this, they'll convince us the only way to be safe is to unite."

The blond laughed. "Oh come on. You need to stop listening to those crazy conspiracy shows."

"Well, we'll see who has the last laugh when big brother takes over, won't we?"

The two women left in the middle of their friendly argument, and Autumn was glad for it. She rubbed her temples. A headache was coming on and if she didn't take another pain pill soon, it was going to get worse. She found Alicia talking with a customer and motioned that she was going to take a break. Alicia waved for her to go.

Grateful, Autumn left the store and entered the heart of the mall. She got a quick bite to eat and it seemed that everyone around her was talking about the aliens making their first appearance in front of the world. After she finished her muffin and soda, she went to make a purchase she vowed to never make

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again. She bought a pack of cigarettes and headed for the nearest bench outside the mall.

Her hands trembled as she unwrapped the carton. She knew it was wrong to smoke, but it was either that or commit herself to the nearest mental hospital. There was only so much stress a person could handle before she broke down. She grabbed her lighter and lit the end of her cigarette. After three years of not smoking, she took her first drag and closed her eyes, savoring the taste. How she missed tobacco. So it wasn't good for her. Did that matter when her entire world was falling apart?

As she exhaled, she began to calm down. *It's all a dream. I'll wake up. It'll be Marianne's wedding day and we'll laugh this whole thing off.* How she wished that was the case. Trying not to break down in front of everyone, she looked around. It amazed her that people could slip right back into their daily routine as if nothing had happened. She took another drag and exhaled the smoke. Well, that wasn't exactly true. Some people did talk about their missing loved ones, but for some reason, this unveiling of the aliens took precedence over the vanishings. In fact, there seemed to be an expectancy that tonight would answer their questions about the disappearances. She hoped so. Even if she didn't fully believe aliens were real, she hoped that something might be resolved tonight.

The watchers are watching you.

Her head jerked up. She saw the man who'd returned the blouse walk by her. Did he say that?

He didn't look in her direction. He just laughed and said something into his cell phone.

No. It couldn't be him. She returned her gaze to her shoes and got ready to take another puff from her cigarette.

Autumn, we know who you are.

Again, she directed her attention to him. It came from him. Didn't it? There was no one else around.

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As he crossed the pedestrian crosswalk, a dark shadow surrounded him and in the midst of that shadow, she saw slanted black eyes staring back at her.

Startled, she dropped her cigarette. “Ouch!” She jumped off the bench and swiped it off her leg. After she stepped on it, she glanced back at the crosswalk.

The man was gone.

She took a deep breath and scanned the full parking lot. Did it happen again? Did more people vanish? Her hands shook so badly that her lighter fell to the ground. What was going on? Were people going to be removed from the Earth until everyone was gone? And the biggest question of all kept picking at her: exactly where did the people go?

A driver backed a car out of a parking spot. As soon as she realized it was him, she nearly cried with relief. Thank goodness. No one else was disappearing. She watched the man as he drove by. There were no shadows this time. There were no voices.

Closing her eyes, she waited for her heartbeat to return to normal before she headed back into the mall. It was just nerves. It had to be. She’d had little sleep in the past two weeks and a great amount of stress. Even if some people could return to their lives as if nothing happened, she couldn’t. Her sister was missing. A lot of sisters, brothers, mothers, fathers, relatives, and friends were missing. She recalled the announcement on the radio for people in the Bismarck area who had lost a loved one to join the support group. Maybe if she joined, she’d start getting some answers.

Chapter Three

Autumn stepped into the school auditorium, unsure of what to expect. The room was practically full. It gave her some comfort to know that other people were also concerned about what had happened. She didn't feel so alone anymore. Others had been affected by losing loved ones in the twinkling of an eye. She checked her watch. Five o'clock. She could only stay a half hour before she had to return to work. Ignoring her growling stomach, she bypassed several people who lingered in the aisle so she could find a seat. She could eat after work. Right now, she needed answers.

"Autumn?"

She stopped and scanned the crowd.

"Over here!"

Her gaze focused on Alex who was standing in the middle of a row that was toward the front of the auditorium. She waved and made her way over to him, saying excuse me as she struggled to avoid bumping into anyone who was already sitting. In this large place, it was nice to see a familiar face, and they both loved her sister so they had something in common.

"I had no idea there'd be so many people," Alex said over the hum of voices surrounding them.

She sat next to him and nodded. "This is good though. I went to work today and it's like no one vanished. It was spooky." She almost told him about the strange man she saw but

decided against it.

“Things are starting to settle down. The first week was the worst. The police had to put down some riots.”

“Really?”

He laughed. “You’re kidding, right?”

“No. I rarely left my apartment.”

He stopped laughing and cleared his throat. “I’m sorry, Autumn. I didn’t mean to be rude.”

“It’s fine. I guess it’s my fault for not turning on the TV or checking the Internet.”

“It has been hard without Marianne.”

Her heart went out to him. He must feel the loss as deeply as she did...just in a different way. “You were supposed to be on your honeymoon by now.”

“So much for that, huh?” He ran his hand through his hair and exhaled. “Listen, Autumn.” He shifted in his seat and leaned closer to her so that no one overheard them. “You know that I thought the whole alien thing was a joke when I first heard about it, but I was wondering...”

“What?” Did he ask himself the same thing she did but was afraid to say it? She decided to venture on it. “You think the aliens took her?”

He rubbed his eyes and shook his head, chuckling. “It’s crazy. But the timing is too much of a coincidence, don’t you think? I mean, one minute the president is making the announcement to the world that these...beings...exist and not even five minutes later millions of people vanish.”

“I’ve thought the same thing.”

He looked relieved. “You have?”

She nodded and took a deep breath. “I don’t know what else it could be.” She glanced around the room, wondering if anyone else was thinking the same thing.

“That’s not the strangest part.”

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She returned her attention to him, noting the anxious tone in his voice.

“Sometimes I think I’m being watched. I even woke up in the middle of the night and thought I saw an alien standing by my bed. I’ve heard of alien encounters but I always thought they were people’s imaginings, you know?”

She gulped. The knots in her stomach tightened. “What did it look like?”

“Like what you’d expect it to. Gray with large slanted eyes. Like the ones you see in movies.”

If he saw the same thing...then she couldn’t have imagined it. It had to be real. And that meant that there was something wrong with that man...and that she heard someone, or something, talk to her. “I had a similar experience.”

“You did? One was by your bed?”

“No. It was hovering near someone. I don’t know who he was either.”

“So maybe they’re already down here.”

She tucked her hair behind her ear. “They may have been here already. It’s just that for some reason they’re going public with it.”

“But why? Why wait until now?”

“Maybe that’s what tonight’s broadcast will be about.” She shivered despite the warm temperature in the room. She was glad she was going to be at work when it was due to air. Then she could at least watch it with Alicia. But then she’d have to go home to an empty apartment, and suddenly, that seemed like a very scary prospect.

The people grew silent as the speaker headed up to the podium at the center of the stage, so she leaned back in her seat and tried not to give further thought to her fears.

Two minutes after seven, Alicia got the live video on the Internet. Autumn scanned the area. No customers were in sight, and Hampton was who-knew-where. She picked up her part of the earpiece while Alicia took the other one. If Hampton didn't hear the broadcast, then they just might make this work, though why he refused to let them go to the employee lounge to watch it, she didn't know. Well, maybe she did. He was a control freak.

"You ready for this?" Alicia asked.

"No." But curiosity was getting the best of her.

Even though people had been talking about the grey aliens with the black slanted eyes and even though she saw a blur of it herself, she still expected something different. Different how? That is how they looked in the Area 51 video that was supposedly leaked out over the Internet a few years back. But that was supposed to be made up. This was real. And this alien stood next to President Jordan at the front of the room.

Autumn willed her impending headache away.

President Jordan finished his speech about how this was a new day in the course of human history. Autumn only half listened since it was the same type of spiel she'd expect. After all, the movies involving aliens had some message similar to this, except for the couple she'd seen where the aliens just came to destroy people from the very beginning.

The alien wore a black robe, so people could only see its gray face and long gray fingers. Its black eyes dwarfed its nose and mouth. When it spoke, its voice was clear and low. "We have visited you throughout your history."

Autumn glanced at Alicia. "Shouldn't it need someone to interpret what it's saying?"

"I hear your questions regarding my language," the alien said in a calm tone. "I am speaking in the universal language of all intelligent life forms, but you hear me speaking your

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language.”

“Cute. A mind reader.” Autumn should have known. As if losing her sister, hearing voices, and aliens coming to Earth wasn’t enough!

“We have given you advancements to help you along in your evolution as a species,” the alien continued. “But we promised to return, and now we’re here. You are now ready for the next stage in your evolution. You have come to the knowledge of the deoxyribonucleic acid which you’ve abbreviated to stand for DNA. This genetic code is what we deposited here thousands of years ago. We have helped you along in your early development, as a parent watches and cares for a child. Some names you’ve given us over the course of your existence are Atum, Ra, Gaia, Zeus, and Quetzalcoatl. Those are a few. Most of you now refer to us as aliens. We’ve watched you and assisted you when needed, even when we didn’t make our contributions known to the world. In return, you honored us with sacrifices and worship. We are your creators, or as you call us...your gods. Some of you believe us to be many. Some say we are one.”

Autumn grabbed her purse and dug out her bottle of pain killers.

“Girl, this is awesome,” Alicia cheered. “I always knew we were planted here by aliens!”

Autumn plopped a pill into her mouth and unscrewed the cap of her bottled water. She didn’t know what to think. Matters of aliens...or gods...didn’t even concern her—at least not until recently. She quickly swallowed the water, wishing she could wake up to the sanity that once defined her life.

The alien continued talking in a gentle tone that bordered on the effect of being hypnotizing. “The question on most of your minds is why we have come now, at this point in time? As I said, we have come to complete the final stage of your

evolution. You have only tapped into 3% of your DNA. There is 97% left to explore. This is not junk DNA, as some of you have claimed. This is the most important part of your gene sequence, and now that you are able to manipulate it, you are ready to become like us. You will become gods.”

This isn't real. It's all a dream...or some elaborate hoax.

“Those who have left did so of their own accord. They did not wish for what we offered. They asked to go to another planet to continue in a lesser capacity, so we obliged them.”

Autumn frowned. *How is that possible when they vanished before you made this announcement?*

The alien looked directly at the camera. “Autumn Daniels, we can communicate directly with everyone, and we know your thoughts.”

Alicia grabbed her arm and squealed. “Oh my gosh! It just said my name. He assured me that I’ll be one of the first to become like them!”

“What?” Autumn stared at her friend. Her name? It didn’t say Alicia’s name. It said Autumn.

“We communicate with each person on this planet when we need to,” the alien said. “This is part of what you will accomplish when you are able to fully utilize your brain. Your consciousness will expand.”

Despite her shaking hands, Autumn put the cap back on her water and set it on the counter.

“Don’t be afraid, Autumn. Marianne is safe,” the alien assured her.

Alicia laughed. “It said that my parents are waiting to see me. When I evolve, I’ll be able to cross into the dimension where those who’ve died reside. I always knew there were other dimensions.”

“That is all for now,” the alien said. “When I return, I will bring more of my kind to get the process started on the next

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step in your evolution.” Then it disappeared.

President Jordan smiled. “That’s inter-dimensional travel for you.”

For some reason, Autumn wasn’t reassured about anything. Maybe they took Marianne for their research? Hadn’t aliens been abducting and experimenting on people for decades? Marianne had to be somewhere on this planet. The knot in her stomach tightened.

Alicia jumped out of her chair. “I have to call my cousin. I wonder if she got called by name too. I’ll be back.” She took the cell phone out of her pocket and dialed the number as she left.

Autumn wished she could be as happy about this as Alicia was, but she wasn’t. Something was wrong. Maybe she was the only one who sensed it. Rubbing her temples, she willed the pain killer to start working. When her headache left, she could figure out what to do next.

Chapter Four

It was a week later when Autumn saw *him* again. Except this time, she wasn't at work. This time, she was sitting on a bench outside the Bismarck capitol, staring at the red flowers spelling 'North Dakota' in front of the legislative building. She and Marianne used to walk the perimeter of the lawn and talk. The pain didn't get easier. As she dabbed the tears from her eyes with a kleenex, someone whispered, *We're watching you.*

She recognized the voice. It was the same one she heard her first day back at work. She hadn't heard it since. Turning her gaze to the source of the voice, she saw a black limousine creep under the tunnel at the front entrance. Something about it made her skin crawl.

A quick look around revealed no other cars. She debated whether or not she should investigate. Had it not been for that familiar voice, she would have returned home. Since no one was in sight, she ran to the entrance and slowed as she neared the tunnel. She had entered the capitol building through the doors beneath the steps in the past—before the fateful day when the World Trade Center and Pentagon were attacked on September 11, 2001. That entrance was closed off for good. At least, that's what people were led to believe.

She slowed and peered into the tunnel. The limousine was still there, the engine humming softly. A security guard stood at the open door and two men got out of the car. One was

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the same person who had returned the blouse. Another was a man she didn't recognize. They didn't walk into the building as she expected. Instead, they turned and waited for the third person. Only, it wasn't a person. It was an alien. She shouldn't have been surprised to see one. But she was.

As she watched the alien enter the building, the man from the store glanced in her direction. In the moment his eyes met hers, the alien also turned to look at her. Then a white light flashed in front of her eyes and the man and alien looked away. She blinked. The light hadn't affected her like it should have since it was as bright as the sun. She looked back at the man and alien and realized that they hadn't seen the light. In fact, they acted as if they hadn't even seen her.

But they had to have seen her. They made eye contact with her! So why didn't they call her out? She should have been relieved, so why did the cold feeling of panic wrap itself like a snake around her heart? Turning around to leave, she bumped into an elderly man who was taking keys out of his pocket.

"You don't need keys," she told him. "The doors are unlocked."

He looked at her as if she were crazy. "I'm the janitor. I come here every Sunday, and I've always needed these keys."

"But they just entered the building."

"They?" He peered over her shoulder. "Who is they?"

"The men and alien from the limousine." She glanced back. The tunnel was empty. *Okay. This is getting really spooky.*

When she looked at the man, he patted her on the shoulder and smiled. "It's been a tough month."

She waited until he walked up the steps above the tunnel before she hurried to her car. Despite the spring air, she shivered. She slipped into her car, turned the ignition and blasted the heat. *Something strange is going on. This isn't right. Something doesn't add up.* She glanced at the clear blue sky. Not a

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single spaceship was in sight. She saw some footage of the pyramid-shaped spacecrafts that had emerged over the capitols of every nation in the world, but those had been the only ones to descend to Earth. Then they left after ‘representative’ aliens came to speak with the leaders. The government had dispatched the military to take care of the riots, but other than that, things were calm. And maybe that wasn’t a good thing. Maybe it was too calm. Too normal. What if it was the calm before the storm?

Autumn spent the next three days trying to get the image of the limousine and its occupants out of her mind. What were they doing at the capitol building...and on a Sunday...and entering a portion of the building that had been closed off to everybody since the 9/11 terrorist attack? She struggled to make sense of it. All the pieces were there—right in front of her. The vanishing. The aliens. Men taking aliens to secret meetings on Sunday afternoons.

If the aliens really did come to open up dialogue, then what was with the secrecy? But then, was that really a surprise? Should she expect aliens to be honest when the governments hid their agendas? *Their agendas.* The thought made her shiver. What if they weren’t there to help?

Autumn glanced up from putting the sales prices into the computer. Alicia was helping a customer. Though the aliens hadn’t made an appearance before the entire world since the televised appearance with President Jordan at the United Nations, people seemed more at peace about the vanishing. Obviously, there were some who weren’t, but the general population accepted it.

Yesterday, the aliens kept the sunlight going for a full

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twenty-four hours to give them an example of their control over the solar system. She glanced down the aisle and saw the sun had finally shifted to its normal 3pm position. Time had resumed back to normal. They promised other signs in the days to come to prove that they were the gods of old, the gods of myths and legends. Gods who were really aliens.

She returned to the cash register and entered in the next sales price. It was too much to take in. She didn't want to think about it. What she wanted was for her sister to come back.

Alicia walked up to the counter. "Pink is your color," she told the customer before looking at Autumn. "Don't you think pink and black look sharp together?"

Forcing a smile, Autumn nodded. "I always thought red and black together was too bold. Pink is more subtle."

"Plus, it's on sale, right Autumn?"

"25% off."

The customer took out her debit card. "In that case, I must have it. I have a job interview, and I want to look my best."

"Good luck." Alicia swiped the tag under the scanner. "In this economy, I feel fortunate just to work in retail."

"Oh, the alien told me I'd get the job."

"Really? When?" Autumn asked.

"When he gave that speech at the UN. Well, I guess it could be a 'she'. It didn't seem to be a specific gender. Did you think it was a man or a woman?"

"Probably neither," Autumn replied.

"Then how does it reproduce?"

Autumn shrugged. What did she care?

Alicia giggled as she put the pantsuit into the store bag. "Obviously, if it put us here and watched our evolution, it figured out its own ways for that. Maybe they clone each other or live forever. You know, I heard that people can prolong their lives

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by hundreds of years if they can keep their bodies in good health. Maybe they figured out the secret. Maybe that's part of what they'll teach us."

The woman swiped her card and punched in her pin number. "I certainly am ready for a change. When I was in college, I consulted a psychic and she told me that in my future, I would unlock my third eye." She tapped the middle of her forehead. "I don't know exactly what she meant, but I feel that a sense of destiny is upon me."

Alicia picked up the receipt and glanced down at it. "Well, Ms. Hayden, I hope the alien was right and you get the job."

Ms. Hayden thanked her, took the bag and receipt, and left.

Alicia turned to Autumn and squealed. "Good things are coming our way! I just know it."

Autumn's fingers itched to hold a cigarette. It'd been a bad idea to go back to smoking, and now that she had, she didn't know how to quit again. Marianne had given her the support she needed for the task. And now that Marianne was gone... Choking back a sob, Autumn picked up her purse. "Do you mind if I take a break?"

"Not at all. I'm in such a good mood that even Hampton can't get me down today. Go out and enjoy the fresh air."

As she walked out of the side entrance, she wondered, once again, why everyone seemed normal. Instead of running around and panicking, people were...content. She watched two women pass by. They talked of what to wear for their upcoming dates.

Autumn shook her head and put a cigarette between her lips. Her hands trembled as she lifted the lighter to the end of her cigarette and lit it. *Am I the only one who fears that something bad*

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is going on? She had never felt more alone in her entire life. Inhaling the smoke, she willed the simple action to calm her nerves. Once she was done, she threw the cigarette butt out, sat on the bench, and placed her face in her hands.

“Are you going crazy too?”

Startled, she looked up. “Oh, hi Alex. Did you come to shop?” That was a stupid question. What else would he be doing there?

“No. I don’t feel like shopping. Mind if I sit?” He motioned to the spot next to her.

She shook her head and scooted over. After he sat, she asked, “How are you holding up?”

“I’m not.” He leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees. “I feel like I woke up in a nightmare and can’t get out of it.”

“I know the feeling. Marianne always said that I let stress get the best of me.” Even as she laughed, tears came to her eyes.

He sighed. “I miss her too.”

“Are we the only ones who know that something bad happened to her? To all of them?”

“It sure seems like it.”

She wiped her eyes with her sleeve. “What’s wrong with everyone? Why aren’t they searching for them?”

“You don’t believe they were taken to another planet?”

“No. Do you?”

“No. I don’t believe the aliens are good guys. I don’t know what they did with Marianne and the others, but I intend to find out.”

She lowered her voice so no one passing by would overhear. “How are you going to do that?”

“I’m going to Area 51.”

She stared at him for a moment.

“Look, I don’t know if anything is there or not, but last night when I was trying to sleep, I kept hearing ‘Area 51’ and when I woke up, one of the aliens was standing over my bed.” He gave a slight shiver.

“Alex, I don’t think these things are making personal visits to people.”

“Well, there’s one that keeps visiting me.”

“It scares you.”

“Why shouldn’t it?” he snapped. He rubbed his eyes. “I’m sorry. I haven’t had a good night’s sleep ever since the vanishing. The thing is always there, watching me. Last night was the first time it actually told me something. Maybe if I go, it’ll leave me alone.”

“Alex, that’s awful.” This made her brief encounter with the strange beings seem tame. She considered her next words. “Do you really think Marianne and the others are there? Somewhere underground maybe?”

“I don’t know. But I have to find out or else I’ll never be at peace again.”

She stared at her hands as she quickly weighed the pros and cons of her rash decision. Finally, she realized that she would do anything to get Marianne back, safe and sound. “Can I go with you?”

Straightening his back, he shot her a cautious look. “Are you sure?”

“She’s my sister. If I don’t take this chance to rescue her, I’ll never be able to live with myself. When do you plan to leave?”

“Tonight.”

“But shouldn’t you get a good night’s sleep first?”

“I won’t sleep. Not with that thing hovering over me and staring at me with its creepy black eyes.”

She saw his point. If she was going through that, she

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wouldn't want to sleep either...at least not alone. "I'll tell you what. We'll take turns driving. That way, you can get some sleep on the way to Nevada."

His body relaxed and he smiled. "Thanks, Autumn." He stood. "I should pack. Is seven okay?"

"Sure. I can get off early." And if Hampton had a fit, let him. This was her first real chance to find her sister, and there was no way she was going to blow it.

Chapter Five

The drive through the night should have worn Autumn out, but it didn't. Something, deep down, told her that a piece of the puzzle was about to fall into place. She was doing more than sitting around and wondering what to do next. She needed this. Needed to act. To do something. Anything. Her sister was out there...or up there. She glanced at the clear sky. The stars twinkled. The spaceships were only over the major cities of the world, and North Dakota apparently was too small for aliens to bother with. Well, except for that strange occurrence at the capitol. Nothing about that was reported on the news, and it should have been.

She sighed and shook her head. Changing the radio station, she glanced at Alex who slept in the passenger seat. She wondered what the alien standing over his bed at night wanted with him. The irony wasn't lost on her. If anyone had told her aliens visited them while they were trying to sleep a month ago, she would have called them crazy. As much as she wanted to get back to a sense of normalcy, she feared that nothing would ever be normal again.

The radio played out a soothing tune. Good. She needed something mindless to listen to. Up ahead the vacant road, she saw a figure in white standing in front of her. Startled, she pressed her foot to the brake, careful not to slam it. As she slowed, she blinked several times. She was seeing things.

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There was no way she could be seeing what she thought she was seeing. But as the car came to a stop, the headlights bounced off the man's body.

This can't be happening. First aliens and now angels?

The man in white with his wings almost hidden behind him motioned for her to leave the car so she could talk to him.

She gripped the wheel as she debated whether to obey him, wake Alex up, or just drive around him. The figure standing before her was imposing, to say the least. His expression was grim, making him seem more intimidating than he might actually be. The only assuring thing about him was the concern in his eyes. But even as her heart slowed, she couldn't fully relax. After all, he wasn't a cute little baby with wings fluttering around with a bow and arrow. Licking her lips, she decided to talk to the angel. She softly opened the door and shut it, careful not to wake Alex. Her steps were hesitant. This thing was different from the dark shadow she'd seen emanating from that man in the mall.

"You must turn back," the angel said.

She didn't know why but she thought he'd sound more...angelic. He sounded like an ordinary man. He even looked like an ordinary man, except for the long white robe and wings.

"Don't go to Area 51."

"Why?"

"There are some things you cannot change, and this will not bring your sister back. Your answer does not lie in the direction you are going."

Hope fluttered in her chest. "Do you know where my sister is?"

"Yes. She is safe. You have no need to worry for her. Worry for him." He motioned to Alex.

She glanced over her shoulder and saw Alex stir in his

seat. “Why?”

“He must not go to Nevada.”

She stuffed her hands into the pockets of her jacket and debated the logic of pressing an angel for more information. After all, did angels engage in a question and answer session with humans? Finally, she decided to press her luck. “Why?”

“They want him there.”

“They? You mean the aliens?”

“That is what they call themselves.”

That is what they call themselves? Did that mean they weren’t really aliens? If they weren’t really aliens, then... “Who are they?”

Suddenly, he disappeared.

Surprised, she stepped back.

“Autumn?”

She turned to Alex who was opening the car door.

“What are you doing in the middle of the road?”

“Uh...” She moved her hand through the space where the angel had been standing. All she felt was a warmth that quickly dissipated in the cool air around them. So he had been there. She hadn’t imagined it.

Alex approached her. “Are you okay?”

“I don’t know.” She sighed and rubbed her eyes. “I don’t know anything anymore.”

“Hey, don’t worry about that one.” He rubbed her back. “Everything’s out of balance.”

She brushed her hair away from her face and looked at him. “Do we really have to go to Area 51?”

He put his arm down and frowned. “What’s going on? I thought you agreed that this was our only lead.”

“I know. But...” She crossed her arms, feeling vulnerable. “I saw an angel here, and he said that we should turn back.” There. She said it.

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“An angel?”

“Well, I think it was an angel. It looked a lot like one. You know, the wings and all. Anyway, he said that we should go back.”

“But I was told to go.”

“I realize that.”

He turned and took a few steps away from her before he returned to her. “I’m going. I have to go.”

“You can’t! The angel said that you mustn’t, even though they want you there.”

“You mean the aliens?”

“I’m not sure. The way he said, it sounded like they’re not what we think they are. And he said that Marianne isn’t there.”

“Where is she?”

“I asked him but he wouldn’t say.” She was starting to get frustrated. Couldn’t the angel stick around and answer Alex’s questions? This way was getting to be complicated.

“I’ve been going through a living nightmare, Autumn. I have to find Marianne and bring her back. I don’t want to spend my life without her. I love her.”

She knew that. It was obvious in the way he used to look at Marianne, and she respected him for that.

“When I do manage to sleep, I get images of Marianne. She’s comatose with all the others who disappeared, and I keep seeing the number 51. Doesn’t it make sense that whatever is happening, Area 51 is the key?”

Alex had a point—a good one. She couldn’t deny that.

“I’ll drive you home, but I have to keep going. I have to find out whether or not she is there. It could be that nothing is there. But I owe it to her to get her out if I can.”

“The angel said you could get hurt.”

Alex shrugged. “So what? She’s worth the risk. I

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don't want to go through the rest of my life without her.”

But the angel said Marianne—wherever she was—was safe. Did she believe the angel? Did she believe the alien that told her Marianne was safe? Both things told her the same thing, but they stood on opposite ends of the spectrum. Didn't they? What if they weren't? What if they were in this mess together?

She needed a cigarette. Hurrying back to the car, she dug the cigarette out of her purse. Her hands shook as she lit it. She hated this. For a moment when she spoke with the angel, she felt safe. She inhaled, struggling to grasp what was going on. Who could she trust? Maybe she couldn't trust anyone. What if they were all screwed?

“What are you doing?” he asked, coming up to her.

“Trying not to run down the road screaming and pulling my hair out.”

“I thought you quit.”

She took another drag. “I started back up.”

He looked as if he wanted to say something but sighed. “I can't blame you.” After a moment of looking up at the sky, he said, “I'll drive you back to Bismarck.”

“No. I'll keep going with you.”

“Are you sure?”

She nodded. “I don't know who...or what...to trust any more, except for Alicia and you.” She finished smoking her cigarette and threw it on the road where she stomped on it. “Do you want to drive or sleep?”

“I'm wide awake. I'll drive.”

She went to the passenger side and slipped into the car.

He got in next to her and shut the door. “I guess we'll find out soon enough if she's there or not.”

She buckled her seatbelt and settled into the seat. “Yeah. I guess so.”

Chapter Six

A full day passed before Alex parked the car close to Area 51.

Autumn examined the flat landscape. Nothing was around for miles. “Why did you park here?”

“I have an image in my mind. The alien I told you about, the one that stood by my bed, sent it to me—telepathically. It said that I would know where to go when I got here.” He took a deep breath and motioned to the still night in front of them. “This is it.”

That didn’t make sense at all, but that was just one more thing that didn’t make sense so she wasn’t surprised. Instead, she shrugged and got out of the car. “Well, let’s find out what’s going on.”

He turned off the car and lights.

She waited for him to approach her before she spoke. “Where do we go?”

“This way.” He motioned south, so they proceeded along the desert terrain in silence.

She shivered and zipped her jacket. Though there wasn’t a breeze, she felt as if something cool passed by them. Glancing behind them, she noted that nothing out of the ordinary was in sight. Still, it spooked her to no end. Were they being watched? And if so, by what? She didn’t detect any cameras. Perhaps a satellite had picked up their location? No. Whatever it was—if *it* was a person or alien or whatever—it was

close. Suddenly, she got the nagging suspicion that they should have obeyed the angel. Well, it was too late to turn back now. They were here, and for better or worse, they had to find out if Marianne was here or not.

He stopped.

Surprised, she halted her steps and watched him.

“It’s somewhere along here.” He pointed to the ground.

Turning her attention to the sand, she squinted in the moonlight until she noticed a faint line in the ground. She knelt down and brushed the sand out of the way.

“It continues through here,” Alex said, tracing the area with his hands. “It forms a square.”

What would something like this be doing out here...so far from anything?

“It’s a door.” He wiped the sand until he exposed a latch.

“I think we’re supposed to go down here.”

Autumn rubbed her forehead in disbelief as he pried the door open. Who would put a door leading into the ground out here? And more importantly, *why* would they do it?

He pulled out his keychain and turned on the flashlight he had on it. “Take a look.”

She reluctantly obeyed. Down the hole was a series of rungs. Great. It wasn’t exactly something she wanted to do—plunge into a dark abyss where who knew what laid at the end of the path. But she’d come this far, and she wasn’t about to turn back now, especially not when she was about to find out if her sister was somewhere down there. “Did the alien show you this too?” she whispered, even though there was no one around them. Well, there was no one that she could see. And that thought made her shiver. What if someone or something was watching them?

“The alien sent me a series of images, and this is one of them,” Alex answered. “I’ll go down first and you follow.

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Okay?”

She nodded.

The descent into the darkness might have spooked her, but it wasn't as scary as she imagined. At least no creepy, slimy creatures slithered up to kill her. If she'd been watching a movie or dreaming, that's exactly the kind of horrible thing that would have happened. No. She wasn't watching a movie, nor was she asleep. She reached the bottom without incident. The passage was quiet enough that she could hear their breathing in the small concrete horizontal tunnel that led to more darkness. Of course. It had to be dark. She stayed close to Alex as they slowly made their way down the path. Even if Alex beamed his flashlight ahead, it was hard to make out where they were going.

“What other images did the alien show you?” Even though she whispered the question, her voice echoed.

“A door down here. The combination to get in. And then a room full of people who looked like they were sleeping.”

“Did you see Marianne?”

“No. But the alien told me that I would find her there.”

She bit her lower lip. Could it be this simple? Would they find her sister at the end of this long corridor? All she could do was press forward and find out. She continued walking beside Alex, hoping for the best but fearing that the angel was right—that they shouldn't be here.

They reached a steel door and he directed his flashlight to the number pad. He pressed a series of numbers that resulted in the sound of something being unlocked. That something, naturally, was the door. He turned the knob and it opened. Peeking through it, he said, “It looks good.”

She followed him through it. It led to another dark tunnel, except this time, there was a light ahead. That meant they were getting closer to getting their questions answered. Or at least that was her hope. Something in the air stirred.

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Surprised because the tunnel was airtight, she glanced over her shoulder.

“What’s wrong?” Alex whispered.

In one instant, she was standing, aware of the pervasive feeling of cold air that swept through the corridor and circled them, and in the next instant, she was engulfed in a sudden warmth that made her collapse, rendering her unconscious.

The first thing she became aware of as she regained consciousness was her breathing. Her lungs ached as if something had stepped on them. After a few moments of lying still, the feeling receded. Then she became aware of the cool floor. It was concrete, just as the floor had been when she and Alex started down the dark corridor. Was she still in that strange tunnel?

Opening her eyes took effort, for her head hurt and the dim light up ahead made her wince. She closed her eyes for a moment, willing the headache aside. She groaned. Her entire body felt as if someone had taken it and bashed it against a wall. It hurt all over. She remained still, wondering what happened to her. One minute, she was standing up with Alex, and the next, a mixture of cold and warm air surrounded her. After that, everything went dark.

Something peculiar happened; something that made her journey into the land of nightmares all that more intense. Silence hovered over her, and for some reason, that made it even more bizarre. When she could lift her head, she did. A quick glance around revealed that she was alone. Where was Alex?

A feeling of dread welled up in her stomach. The angel had been right. They shouldn’t have come here. For some reason, she knew they took Alex and left her there. What did

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they want with him? They had to be aliens. It was an alien that told him to come here. Maybe they meant to lure him into a trap? That was the only plausible explanation she could come up with, especially in light of the angel's warning.

Finally, she managed to roll onto her back. She should be afraid here—alone in the dark, shouldn't she? But she wasn't. What she needed to fear was further ahead...where the light was. The question was simple: did she dare continue?

She had to. She couldn't leave Alex here. Whatever the aliens wanted, she couldn't let them succeed. Besides, if Marianne was here, she had to find her. No. Marianne wasn't here. Suddenly, she just knew that wherever Marianne was, she was far away. So now she needed to focus on getting Alex and finding a way out.

Grunting, she rolled onto her side and pulled herself up. The aches were fading in slow intervals, so with each step she took, she felt better. She pressed forward with timid steps, not sure of what she'd find...or what she'd do when she found it. The light grew brighter and bigger. She wondered how much time had elapsed since she collapsed. Pulling out her watch, she noticed that the hands were spinning. She sighed. So much for that.

An image came into focus, and she realized she was approaching a large rectangular window. Actually, there were a series of them lining the corridor. Along each side of the wall was a row of windows and doors. When she reached the first window, she peered into the room.

She frowned. There was a small blue light in the corner, but the rows of bassinets had to be for babies. How many were in there? She estimated about fifty. The place looked like a nursery. An arm shot up from one of the bassinets. Startled, she jerked back. Hugging herself, she continued to the next window. Another nursery? What on earth were all these

nurseries doing here?

After about six nurseries on both sides, she looked into rooms where children were playing. The children didn't seem to notice her. She estimated that there were twenty of them per room, and unlike other children, these all played alone. One actually levitated a pen and wrote something on the paper. Another child picked up a bowling ball with little effort. Another one jumped up to the ceiling and came back down, landing on his feet. Odd children. Or maybe they were super-children.

She passed those rooms. For some reason, they gave her an unsettling feeling in the pit of her stomach. They couldn't be normal. But what were they doing here? She was near Area 51. Shouldn't she see aliens?

Where are you, Alex? She noted a slight drop in temperature, so she quickened her pace. Something was with her, in the hallway. She glanced over her shoulder but didn't see anything. Just because she couldn't see it, it didn't mean there wasn't something there. If she wasn't so spooked, she would have laughed it off. But something *was* wrong. Seriously wrong. And no matter how hard she tried to rationalize it, she couldn't dislodge the feeling that she was being watched...and closely so. Oh man, she really could use a cigarette right about now!

As she hurried down the corridor, she looked through the windows of more rooms and noticed that adults were lying—unconscious—on what seemed like hospital beds. Men and women were hooked up to monitors. Each room had only one person in it, and as she stepped up to one of the windows, she realized that this particular room had two extra people in it. She recognized the man and woman who stood above Alex's sleeping form.

Alex!

The Vanishing

She inched out of their viewing range so they wouldn't notice her. The man with dark hair stood above Alex with a needle. She squinted. He was injecting something behind Alex's left ear. But what? From where she stood, it was impossible to tell. There was no doubt that the man was the same one who had returned the blouse and the one she'd seen entering the capitol. The woman who wrote something into her clipboard was Ms. Hayden. So this was her new job.

Autumn wondered how she was going to get Alex out of there. The man and Ms. Hayden looked in her direction, so she quickly stepped back. She took a deep breath and tried to figure out what to do. Should she just stay there? Should she try to hide?

She saw the doorknob to Alex's room turn.

Oh great! This is just what I need! She rushed to the nearest door and realized it was locked. Things were quickly going from bad to worse!

The door opened and the man and woman left the room.

Autumn had nothing to hide behind. She was exposed in plain sight. Feeling like a moron, she pressed her back against the wall and tried to blend into the background. As if that was possible. The wall was light blue and she wore dark clothing.

"I'm still kind of nervous," Ms. Hayden told the man. "I've never done anything this important before."

The man closed the door and locked it. He glanced over his shoulder and Autumn held her breath, which was stupid. Really, just because he couldn't hear her, it didn't mean he wouldn't see her.

Suddenly the angel appeared in front of her, his wings extended enough to hide her.

She would have yelped out in shock had it not been for the warmth that surrounded her, calming her down in less than a second. Since he was facing them, she could only see his

back—and the majestic wings that sheltered her.

“Devon?” Ms. Hayden asked.

Autumn couldn’t see them, and even if she wanted to, the angel wouldn’t let her.

The man—Devon—didn’t reply for a moment. Finally, he said, “I thought I saw someone.”

“Where?”

“Over there.”

“Hmm... I don’t see anything.”

“Must’ve been my imagination.”

She giggled. “Well, this place is eerie.”

He chuckled. “You get used to it.”

Their footsteps echoed off the floor. “Do you? You’re the one seeing things, not me. And you’ve been doing this for a good ten years now.”

Once Autumn heard them enter another room, the angel turned to face her. “I warned you,” the angel whispered.

Her face grew warm with embarrassment. What could she say? He had warned her, and she came here anyway. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry for yourself. Be sorry for your friend.”

What is that supposed to mean?

Before she could ask it, he motioned to Alex’s room. “You need to get him out of here before any more damage occurs.”

More damage? She debated on whether or not to ask but finally decided she didn’t want to know. At least not right now. Not when her nerves had returned to high alert. Since she disobeyed the angel before—and look where that got her and Alex!—she realized she couldn’t afford to disobey him now. She rushed over to Alex’s room and tested the doorknob. “It’s locked,” she whispered.

He waved his hand over the knob which clicked.

The Vanishing

He didn't need to tell her to try again. She opened the door and shivered. The temperature had to be in the low 60s.

"Be quick."

Startled, she jumped. Right. There was no time to stand around and wonder what was going on here. For most of her life, she'd heard fairytales of Area 51 and the unusual stuff going on there, but this was no fairytale, and the more she learned, the less she wanted to know.

She took a deep breath to calm her shaky hands and detached the wires from Alex's body. She shouldn't have been surprised when the monitors continued displaying activity as if he was still hooked up. That must have been the angel's doing. *If I get out of here alive, the first thing I'm going to do is smoke a cigarette.* She no longer cared if it was good for her or not. She needed something to settle her down.

Alex's eyes opened, and she shrieked. Quickly pressing her hands to her mouth, she stood still. Had Devon and Ms. Hayden heard her?

"Where am I?" Alex asked, lifting the sheet. "And what am I doing in a hospital gown?"

"Shhh..." She quickly searched the room for his clothes and found them neatly folded in the small closet. She stopped as she picked them up from the shelf. Pulling out one of the folders stacked on a higher shelf, she opened it and nearly gasped. Copies of his medical records? What was going on here?

"You don't have time for this," the angel warned.

She glanced at Alex. He stood up and walked over to her.

"Do you see him?" she whispered as she handed him his clothes.

"See who?" he asked.

She glanced at the angel who motioned for them to hurry. No. Alex couldn't see or hear the angel either. For some

reason, she was the only one. But why? “Forget it. Put these on. I’ll turn my back.”

She approached the window and looked out of it. The hallway was empty. That was good. She looked at the angel. He didn’t seem concerned at the moment, so that had to be good too. She hoped. How she hoped. Right now she just wanted them to get out of there alive.

“I’m ready,” Alex said, coming up behind her.

The angel pointed out the door and down the hall back to where she’d come from.

“Let’s go this way,” she softly said as she bolted from the room.

Alex obeyed without question, his footsteps light behind hers.

She took a moment to look over her shoulder when she heard Ms. Hayden laugh. The angel stood in the center of the hallway, his wings extended so she couldn’t see Ms. Hayden...and Ms. Hayden couldn’t see her or Alex. Autumn didn’t know how the angel managed it, but she figured that angels had abilities of protection that humans didn’t. Angels! She couldn’t believe it. A month ago, she didn’t even believe in such things. But so much had changed in the course of a month. Her entire world had been thrown upside down, and she couldn’t tell what was real or imaginary any more. For all she knew, this was all a strange dream. One she couldn’t wake up from no matter how hard she tried.

By the time she and Alex reached the door at the end of the corridor, she reached for it but something cold reached up and grabbed her hand. Startled, she looked up and saw something fading in and out of the light.

Alex’s face paled. He screamed and backed up against the wall. “Get it away from me! Get it away!”

The...thing...blew past her and approached him.

The Vanishing

“No! Get away from me!” He held his hands out as if to stop something.

Autumn stood there, watching in a mixture of horror and shock as Alex sunk to the floor, trembling and whimpering. She reached out to grab the dissipating shadow but her arms went through the air. All she felt was a trace of cold air swirling in front of him. *What is going on?* She blinked several times, trying to find the thing, to figure out what it was.

The angel appeared next to her and touched her shoulder.

In that instant, she could clearly see it. It was an alien and it hovered over Alex. “He belongs to ussss,” it hissed. But it didn’t talk to her. It talked to the angel.

“No,” the angel said.

“Yessss.”

“The time for decision has not yet come. You cannot claim him as long as he hasn’t made his choice.”

The alien scowled, and as it did, its face changed. Its eyes grew smaller and turned red while horns protruded from his forehead.

As soon as she saw the transformation, it vanished.

The angel released his hold on her and touched Alex’s shoulder, and Alex quickly calmed. “His fate hangs in the balance. It is prudent that you never bring him here again.” The angel looked at her. “Do you understand now why I told you not to come?”

She gulped. “Y-” She cleared her throat. “Yes.” She didn’t just see what she thought she did, did she?

“You need not fear for Marianne or the others. They are safe, as I told you. It’s the ones who are left that are going to face the great delusion.”

“What do you mean?” She swallowed the lump in her throat. “What delusion?”

Ruth Ann Nordin

“Are the aliens here to help as they claim? You just saw it for yourself.” He motioned to Alex who was blankly staring ahead—who wasn’t even aware of what was going on around him. “Those who vanished are safe with God. Worry not for them. Worry for yourself. Your fate also hangs in the balance.”

Before she could ask him what he meant, he turned his attention down the hallway.

“Go quickly.” Then he disappeared.

Alex groaned.

She knelt by him. “Come on. We need to go.” She grabbed his arm and helped him to his feet.

“What happened?” He rubbed his forehead. “I have a headache.”

Questions could wait. Already, she could hear a group of people running from another hallway. She turned the doorknob, and the door opened. “Come on.”

Alex stumbled forward and crossed the threshold.

She joined him, reached for his hand, and led him down the dark corridor. It seemed to her that a light guided their way from a long distance. The closer they got to the light, the more it eluded them.

The door behind them echoed as it opened. “Down there!” Ms. Hayden called out. “Don’t let them get away!”

Those words must have broken Alex out of his trance, for his pace grew stronger.

“Hold it! You are not authorized to be here!” a man yelled.

Then we’ll be happy to leave, Autumn thought. She was out of breath by the time they reached the door.

Alex pulled it open and motioned for her to go first.

A gunshot fired, nearly missing them.

Who was she to argue? Ladies first seemed good to her!

The Vanishing

She darted through the door before another shot rang through the corridor.

Alex followed her and slammed the door shut.

Satisfied that he wasn't hurt, she climbed the rungs that led to the exit. Her chest hurt from the exertion of breathing, but she pressed on. Faster. She had to go faster!

Alex was at her heels, which helped motivate her along.

Someone pounded on the door. "It's locked! I can't get out!"

Did she dare look? Was the angel there, working another miracle on their behalf? No. She couldn't break her attention. She had to keep going.

By the time she reached the exit, she was gasping for air. She dug her fingers into the ground and used her remaining strength to pull herself out. Alex emerged right after her. Collapsing, she watched as he hobbled to the steel door and closed it. Then he gathered the surrounding sand to cover it back up.

Relieved, she looked up at the stars that seemed to be spinning. Realizing she was dizzy, she closed her eyes and waited for the whirling sensation to pass. When she opened her eyes, she studied the stars and noticed that some were still moving. She brought her hands up to her head and groaned. No. Those weren't stars. They were alien spaceships. No. That wasn't right either. Yes, they were UFOs. Many of them, and they were coming to Earth. Only, they weren't aliens. They were of a darker, more sinister nature. They were demons.

Demons. Angels. Really, did she believe in such fairytales? Could she afford not to? How else could she explain what just happened?

"Autumn," Alex said, crawling over to her, also worn out. "Autumn, we lost a day."

"What?" She finally turned to face him.

Ruth Ann Nordin

“My watch. It says that it’s May 12th.”

“May 12th? But it’s May 11th.”

“It was May 11th.”

A day? They had been in there for a full day? But it didn’t feel like that much time elapsed.

Looking contrite, he got up and helped her to her feet. “I’m sorry. You were right. We shouldn’t have come here.”

She scanned their surroundings. Nothing seemed different. It all looked like they hadn’t even gone down there. Even his car was on the side of the road, untouched and waiting for them.

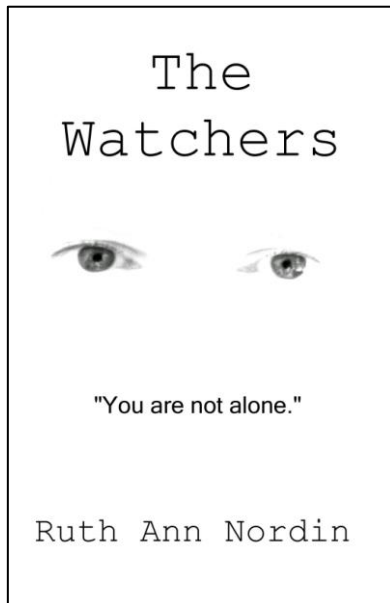
“Let’s go back to Bismarck.” He reached for her arm.

She leaned against him. Her strength had departed her, and she didn’t even want to contemplate the loss of time or what it might mean. She just wanted to go home and wake up to find that this had all been a dream. One terrible, frightening, nightmarish dream. She wanted to feel normal. But she feared that she’d never know the meaning of normal ever again. The nightmare, it seemed, had just begun.

The Vanishing

the nightmare continues...

Novella 2
Coming June 2010



Things aren't always what they seem. While this novella continues Autumn's story, it also gives insight into Devon's—and the demons he faces.