

The Watchers



"You are not alone."

Ruth Ann Nordin

Return of the Aliens

Novella 2

The
Watchers

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Ruth Ann Nordin's Books
Springfield, Nebraska

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The Watchers

Novella 2 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

Five Months after “The Vanishing”

Screams echoed through the corridor as the elevator door opened. Vanessa Hayden glanced at Devon Patrick. “What’s going on down here?” she whispered.

He didn’t bother looking at her. Instead, he simply said, “The less you know, the better.” and walked forward. He expected his co-worker to follow him and she did. Stopping in front of the security guard who stood before a set of double doors, he held up his badge.

Despite the trepidation on Vanessa’s face, she followed suit.

The guard nodded and opened one of the doors, keeping his gun in his other hand. Devon refused to make eye contact with him. The guards were well trained, and if one wasn’t careful, secrets could come to light. And that’s the last thing Devon wanted.

The hallway was dimly lit, making him all too aware that he was a good mile underground—in the bowels of the Earth. Closed doors ran the length of the corridor, except for one, and that’s the one he was instructed to take her to. He steeled himself against what he was about to do. There was no room for weakness. *They* were watching. His gaze darted to the camera in the corner of the hall. The thing was small, but since he’d been

there before, he knew where to find it. He stopped in front of the open door and motioned to it.

Vanessa peered into the room lit by a blue light and stepped back.

That was when he looked at her.

There was no denying the fear in her eyes or the slight trembling of her body.

“If you don’t do it, they’ll kill you,” he whispered, knowing full well *they* could hear everything he said.

“But I didn’t sign up for this,” she softly replied, her voice wavering.

“There are many things you didn’t sign up for, but it’s your job.”

A man screamed from behind one of the closed doors and she jerked.

Closing the gap between them, he spoke at a volume he knew they wouldn’t hear. “You won’t remember a thing.”

Her eyes grew wide and she shook her head.

“We’re ready, Ms. Hayden.”

He gently took her by the arm and led her to the alien who looked just like a human woman. The only reason he knew her true identity was because she revealed it to him...except he wasn’t supposed to remember that. As long as Vanessa complied, she would live through it.

“You’ll be out before you know it,” the beautiful blond said with a smile. “This is an ordinary procedure.”

As soon as Vanessa made eye contact with the alien, Devon saw her relax. There. Her resistance had been willed aside. Now she would do whatever she was told.

“You may come back for her in two hours, after your procedure,” the alien instructed him.

“Yes.”

He said it because he was expected to. He always said...and did...whatever he was expected to. It was part of the

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game. He waited until Vanessa went into the room and the alien closed the door before he turned around to walk back to the double doors. By the time the guard on the other side opened the door for him, he heard Vanessa scream. Bracing himself, he forced his expression to remain neutral as he passed the guard and returned to the elevator.

He pressed the button that would take him further down. No matter how many times he'd been here, the screams shook him to the core. He could never get used to this. But he knew the consequences if he didn't play along, and he wasn't willing to die for anything or anyone.

The doors to the elevator opened and he stepped out, ready for what awaited him.

Alex Cameron twisted in his sheets. He could feel them hovering over him, inspecting him. Flashes of the incident when he went to Area 51 came in his nightmares—night after night. His mind was slowly putting the pieces of the puzzle together. He didn't remember what happened when he woke up in that cold room in a hospital bed. Everything had been blank. All he remembered was running up a deep hole in the ground and being chased by security guards that tried to shoot him and Autumn.

But three months after that night, he began having the dreams. Only, they weren't dreams. Not really. At first, he thought they were, but a month after they started, he realized they were glimpses of that night. His memory was slowly returning.

Though they never moved their mouths, he heard their thoughts.

"A fine specimen," one of the gray aliens thought to the other three around it.

The one on his right inserted a needle into his arm.

He tried to move but he was frozen in place, as if an invisible hand pressed down on him and kept him still. He struggled to breathe, but the invisible hand clenched his lungs. Acute pain traveled in his vein and up his arm.

Then he woke up.

Gasping, Alex threw his sheets off and stumbled to the bathroom in his apartment. He flipped on the switch and squinted in the bright light. With trembling hands, he grabbed the bottle of pills from his medicine cabinet and quickly opened the lid. The cabinet closed as he turned on the faucet to fill up the paper cup with water. He turned it off and plopped the pill into his mouth.

As soon as he glanced in the mirror on the cabinet door, he wished he hadn't. It was back...watching him. The gray alien stood behind him, silent and not moving. It just watched him like it did every night ever since his fiancé and millions of others disappeared. And ever since the aliens announced to the world that they existed. Peace and prosperity they promised the world. But this one promised him terrors—and fulfilled that promise every night. At least, it did until he saw a psychiatrist and got the pills.

Taking his eyes off his unwelcome companion, he gulped the water down and closed his eyes. He put his face in his hands and willed the frantic pounding in his heart to slow. Is this how it would always be? Would the monstrosity in alien form continue to haunt him? It fed off his fear. It craved it. It thrived off of it. It was a parasite.

But that's where the pills came in. Once the pill began to work its magic, the fear ebbed from him until his mind cleared. His body relaxed and he exhaled. Opening his eyes, he looked at the mirror. The alien was gone. Relieved, he left the bathroom, decided to leave the light on, and went back to bed.

On the nightstand was Marianne's picture. Five months had passed since she vanished, and though he'd searched for her,

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she was nowhere to be found. Neither were any of the other millions of people who also vanished. She was gone. And she wasn't coming back. He caressed the frame with his thumb. They were supposed to marry four and a half months ago. If they had, she'd be with him in bed at night. Then he'd have her right by him instead of that alien who stood by his bed watching him. Watching. Always watching. And occasionally giving him thoughts to increase his fears. But that ability to plant those thoughts departed when he started taking those pills. So now, it just watched. And waited. *What is it waiting for?* He hoped he'd never find out because whatever it was, it couldn't be good.

With a long sigh, he decided it was time to let Marianne go. He couldn't spend the rest of his life holding onto the hope those people would return. Whatever world those aliens sent them to, they were long gone. While the medicine's numbing effect still worked on his body, he threw the picture in the trashcan beside his nightstand and settled back into bed.

Chapter Two

Autumn Daniels stared at the cross necklace in her hand. Whenever she had it with her, she felt close to Marianne, which was why she carried it everywhere she went. In the light, it almost seemed to glow.

“Nice necklace,” Alicia said as she went behind the counter.

Autumn looked over at her co-worker and smiled. “It was my sister’s. She never took it off.” She slipped the necklace into her pocket and cleared her throat. “So, what’s on sale today?”

“Summer clothes. Anything with short sleeves is 30% off.”

“Welcome to September,” she murmured. “I suppose shorts are on that list?”

“Right, but those are 25%.”

“Do we get an employee discount?”

Alicia rolled her eyes. “2%.”

“Are you kidding?” Autumn asked, studying her friend’s face.

“Hampton hates the fact that there’s a sale at all.”

“Aren’t we lucky to be stuck with him for a boss?”

“Oh yeah. We’re the envy of the retail industry.”

Autumn laughed, her mood growing lighter. “Yay for us.”

Hampton left the employee lounge and headed their way.

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“Time to look busy,” Alicia whispered before she darted off for the corner of the store so she could refold the jeans lining the shelves.

Autumn hid her amusement and worked on typing the sales’ prices into the computer.

Unfortunately, he veered in Autumn’s direction.

She inwardly groaned. Work would be much better if she didn’t have to interact with him. She avoided eye contact as long as she could, but as soon as he stood right in front of her and cleared his throat, she knew she had to look at him.

“Tell Alicia that the mall will stay open regardless of what’s happening in the Middle East,” he said in his usual grim manner.

“Aren’t the aliens here to stop us from World War III?”

“This isn’t funny, Miss Daniels.”

“It’s not supposed to be,” she replied. Seriously, Hampton wouldn’t know a joke if his life depended on it. “I’m just saying that was what one of them said on the news last night.”

“Yeah...well...they also claim to be the gods from mythology.”

She blinked in surprise. Did he suspect the truth? It seemed that she was surrounded by people who mindlessly accepted everything the aliens said. Well, except for Alex. But she had only seen him twice since they went to Nevada.

“Anyway, what happens in the Middle East doesn’t affect us here in Bismarck. Okay?”

She gave a slight nod and watched him as he walked off.

As soon as he was out of viewing range, Alicia hurried back over. “What did he want?”

“Just to tell us that we have to keep working if Iran decides to attack Israel.”

Alicia shook her head. “If it does, then the aliens will have to intervene.”

“So they warn us,” Autumn stated. She couldn’t understand why demons would want to save people...if in fact she saw what she thought she saw at Area 51. The event might have happened back in May, but she could still see the alien transform into a monster. And that monster had to be a demon, right? If an angel protected her and Alex, then angels existed. If angels were real, weren’t demons real too? She rubbed her forehead. Great. Another headache was coming on. It seemed to her that she continually got headaches. Picking up her purse, she asked, “Do you mind if I take a break?”

“Go for it, girl. You need one after dealing with Hampton.”

Autumn eagerly left the store and stepped outside. The air was slightly cool, but the leaves hadn’t changed color yet. Fall would come soon. Despite the disappearance of her sister and millions of people, the seasons still came and went. Life went on like usual. And the people around her seemed oblivious to the fact that things weren’t as “normal” as they appeared. Aliens made contact with them. Sure, they weren’t the aliens portrayed in the movies, but they were still aliens. Shouldn’t more people be reacting to this? Millions of people vanished. Shouldn’t there be more than a few groups forming to discuss this? Shouldn’t the media be investigating it?

She took out a cigarette and lit it up. She’d given up on trying to quit. What was the point? They’d all probably be dead soon anyway. *What is going on? Why are people going about their lives like a bunch of robots?* And why wasn’t she affected?

Shaking her head, she sat on the bench by the trashcan and scanned the parking lot. She straightened up when she saw Alex getting out of his car. She stood up and put out her cigarette before she threw it out. As she made her way across the pedestrian crosswalk, he reached her.

“Hey, Autumn,” he greeted with a smile.

“Hi. How are you doing?”

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“Fine.”

She turned so they could walk back toward the mall. “Did you come to do some shopping?”

“No. Actually, I came to talk to you.”

“What about?”

He motioned to the bench, so she sat down. When he joined her, he pulled out a letter from his pocket and handed it to her. “It’s from Marianne. She wrote me while she was finishing up her law degree. Usually, she sent emails, but this time, she chose snail mail. The storm three months ago wiped out my emails, so this is all I had left. She wrote about you and how you were the best sister in the world. I thought you might like to have it.” He took a deep breath and stared at the ground in front of him. “I don’t think she’s coming back.”

“I expect you to move on, Alex,” she softly said as she turned the letter over in her hands. Marianne’s familiar script graced the envelope. It was dated almost a year ago. Not a day went by where Autumn didn’t miss her sister.

“You’re not mad at me?” he asked, looking in her direction.

“Why would I be?”

He shrugged and let out a low sigh. “I thought you might feel like I betrayed her.”

“I don’t feel that way. It’s different for you and me. No matter what, she’ll always be my sister. You were going to be her husband, but as soon as she vanished, that pretty much put an end to that plan. The angel just told me she was safe. He didn’t say she was returning. I don’t know if we’ll ever see those people that disappeared. But I don’t want you to waste time missing her. I’m grateful that you loved her, and she loved you too.”

He nodded.

She realized this was hard for him. The decision hadn’t been an easy one. “It’s okay, Alex. I’d do the same thing if the roles were reversed.”

He relaxed. "Have you seen the angel again?"

"Not since that night we went down to Area 51. How have you been doing? Has the prescription from the psychiatrist helped?"

"Yes. It's helped a lot, actually. I see the alien once in awhile, but when I take the pill, it goes away. I think Dr. Reyes is right. It's all in my head."

Maybe. She wasn't so sure. She knew what she saw when they were leaving that underground facility, and she knew she didn't imagine what terrified Alex. But she feared that telling him that would only increase his anxiety, which was the last thing he needed. So she chose to keep quiet.

"There is something that still bothers me."

She slipped the letter into her pocket and studied him, noting the way he seemed hesitant to continue. "What is it?"

"With everything that's happened, someone should be questioning it. Don't you think people are acting strange?"

"They're acting as if nothing happened."

"Exactly. There should be more of a response. It's like no one cares. When I was growing up, I thought if aliens came to this planet, there would be a worldwide panic. At the very least, there ought to be reporters questioning what's going on. But all I hear is how wonderful things are now that they're here and that they're going to lead us to a new dawn of humanity."

"Everyone's too accepting of it," she agreed. "I don't know why everyone seems to be...oblivious to it."

Alex leaned back on the bench and rubbed the palms of his hands on his jeans. "I wonder if we could find out why."

"You really think that's possible?"

"In the past five months, everything's become possible."

She couldn't argue with him on that point. Her entire world had changed. On the surface, when she watched people going about their daily lives, it was easy to think things were alright. But she suspected it was all a ruse. A ruse for what

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though? To lull people into a false sense of security? Did the demons posing as aliens have something planned but they needed people to be 'asleep' until the time was right to act? Was everyone going to wake up one morning and find out the truth? She shifted uneasily.

Maybe she didn't want to know. She'd already found out more than she wished. Part of her envied those who seemed blissfully unaware of the danger lurking around the corner. However, if something serious was about to happen, if the aliens weren't bringing them into a utopia, then did she have a responsibility to find out? And then what? Tell others? But who would believe the aliens weren't who they were pretending to be?

Alex cleared his throat, directing her attention back to him. "I want to know what happened to me at Area 51. We lost an entire day down there. I have flashes of memories."

She straightened in interest. "You're recalling what they did to you?"

"Nothing concrete. It's all like a puzzle, and I get one piece at a time. All I know is that aliens were there and they were using me like a lab rat."

She shivered. That didn't sound pleasant. But then, she shouldn't be surprised. Nothing in that underground place was pleasant. "Do you remember any people?"

"No. Should I?"

"Well, I did see a man and a woman in your room. They inserted something behind your ear."

"They did?" He reached up and traced the skin behind his ears. "I don't feel anything."

"Let me see." She brushed aside the hair from his ear and squinted, but she didn't see a mark anywhere. "That's odd. It was behind this ear."

"Is it possible you thought you saw it but was asleep?"

She shook her head and eased back into her previous position. “No. The angel was there, and I know I didn’t dream him up.”

“You really think you saw an angel?”

“Yes.”

He simply nodded and glanced at his watch. “I have to get back to work. I just wanted to stop by and give you that letter.”

“Thank you, Alex.” She stood up with him. “And I hope you can get on with your life.”

“Thanks.” He slipped his hands into his pockets. “Is it alright if I keep in touch? You’re the only one I know who realizes there’s more going on than the media’s telling us, and I’m tired of feeling like I’m alone in this.”

“Of course, it’s alright. Let me know if you do figure out what’s going on. I’ll keep my ears and eyes open too.”

He smiled before he turned and headed back to his car.

Autumn glanced at the mall entrance. She knew she should go back to work since she’d used up all of her minutes for the break, but she wanted to see what her sister had written. Pulling the envelope out of her pocket, she took out the letter and unfolded it, careful not to tear it since it was her last ‘contact’ with her sister. As she did, tears came to her eyes, especially when Marianne wrote, *I’ve idolized Autumn ever since we were kids. I’m sure she thought I was a pest. I’d try her clothes on and listen in on her phone calls, but it wasn’t because I wanted to be a snoop. It’s just that I wanted to be like her. She’s always gone out of her way for other people. I admired her for that. There’s no one else I’d rather have as my maid of honor than her. If we have children, I’d like her to be the godmother.*

Autumn finished the letter, rereading parts of it, and then neatly tucked it back into the envelope. She looked up at the clear blue sky. Why her? Marianne had a husband and children to look forward to. Autumn didn’t have anyone to stay for. If anyone

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had to go, Autumn should've been the one. It didn't seem fair. Marianne had so much to live for.

The watchers are watching you.

Her head snapped up. A familiar car drove through the parking lot. It was him. The man she'd seen three times. Once at this mall, once at the Bismarck state capitol building, and then at Area 51 when he injected Alex with something. As the man drove, a dark shadow flickered in the passenger seat. She blinked, but the image was gone.

Him. He knows something. Somehow, he's a part of this whole thing.

That was when she made her decision. She'd have to keep an eye out for him in the future. Maybe then, she could start getting some answers.

Chapter Three

Autumn sat on the bench in front of the Bismarck capitol building. Was this a good idea? She glanced at her watch. It was her third Sunday here, and snow scattered the ground. She'd wasted two weekends already. Did she want to waste another one? Just what did she expect to see anyway? What were the chances that the strange man with that alien would return in that limousine?

She'd spent a good half hour here. Last time they came at two. It didn't look like that was going to happen again. If she had any other idea on what she might do, she'd abandon this silly notion. But this was her only lead. Alex was hard at work trying to figure out what was going on. The least she could do was follow her gut instinct, and her gut was telling her to start here.

With a heavy sigh, she opted for one more lap around the lawn. If the man and alien didn't show up during that time, she'd give up this crazy plan. She made it halfway around the perimeter of the lawn when she heard the familiar words, *The watchers are watching you.*

She looked up and saw the limousine drive into the tunnel beneath the capitol steps. Excited, she ran forward, hoping she wouldn't get there too late. If they went in before she could see where they were going, then she'd lose them. By the time she reached the tunnel, she was out of breath. Careful to keep hidden from view, she peered around the tunnel's entrance and saw the limousine pull out of the tunnel.

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The door to the entrance that had been closed off since 9/11 swung shut. Waiting until the car was out of sight, she hastened to the doors in time to see the two men and the alien enter an elevator. Squinting, she realized that the down arrow above the elevator door was lit up. Good. So now she knew they were going down. Once the elevator doors closed, she reached for the door handle and pulled the door open. Then she stopped.

Was this a good idea?

Her mind flashed back to the night almost six months ago when she and Alex went to Area 51. The angel had warned her not to go, but she had anyway. Maybe this was a bad idea. Maybe she should leave well enough alone and turn back.

“Go.”

She jerked and glanced behind her.

The angel stood in front of her, but he wore regular clothes, as if he were an ordinary man.

Blinking in surprise, she asked, “Where are your wings?”

A slight smile crossed his face. “We do not always have wings. Sometimes we appear as humans.” He motioned for her to go into the building.

“But...? Is this like that time with Alex?”

“No. You need to be here. I was due to tell you five minutes ago, but the power over Bismarck delayed me.”

“Power over Bismarck? You mean, an alien?” Or rather, a demon?

“There are forces at work that you know nothing about but will soon learn. You are needed here.”

She knew better than to argue with him. Reaching for the door, she asked, “Are you coming with me?”

“I’ll join you shortly. There are things I need to tend to out here.”

She glanced around them but didn’t see anything. Even so, she didn’t doubt him. Something was there, and even though

she didn't know what or where it was, she could feel its presence. Eager to get away from it, she entered the building.

Silence. Eerie silence. Shivering, she pressed forward and made her way down the empty hallway. Her shoes echoed softly off the linoleum floor. Once she stood in front of the elevators, she took a moment to gather her courage before she pressed the down button. Then she crossed her arms and waited. She had no idea what she was doing or what she'd find.

I'm losing it. I'm completely losing it.

That was the only reason why she'd do something this stupid. But the angel wouldn't lead her into something that would hurt her. Would he?

The ding from the elevator brought her attention to the doors that parted for her. Before she could change her mind, she stepped into the elevator. She got ready to press a button, but the one to take her down lit up and the doors closed. Gasping, she jerked and backed into the wall.

Okay. That was spooky.

She waited for an agonizing thirty seconds while the elevator descended. As soon as the doors opened, she ran out of it, glad that nothing else supernatural happened. She looked behind her, but nothing had followed her out. At least, she didn't think something followed her out.

The doors shut and she became aware of the dim corridor. All the lights were off except for a few in the ceiling. To her left, she heard the sound of people talking. She took a deep breath. Okay. So now she knew where to go. Despite her slight trembling, she moved her feet.

I can do this. I can. The angel said it would be alright.

Her steps came to a halt and her eyebrows furrowed. Wait. Did the angel say it would be alright? She mentally ran over their conversation and realized all he told her was to go.

Oh great. He never said I'd be okay!

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She turned to go back to the elevator, but a dark shape hovering in the corner of a nearby doorway stopped her.

The watchers are watching you.

With a small squeak, she bolted down the hallway toward the people. She reached the only room with its lights turned on and instinctively came to a stop right outside the door. Still shaken up, she crouched down so that she could hide behind the table along the back of the room. A quick look behind her assured her that the...*thing*...hadn't followed her.

She found a group of chairs located at the end of the table and hid between them. Peering through the chairs, she saw a group of three men and the alien in the front of the room. She recognized the one named Devon—the one who'd injected Alex with something. She also recognized the governor of North Dakota. That left the other man and the alien.

“So things are going according to plan?” the governor asked as he wiped sweat from his forehead with a neatly folded cloth.

“Don't be weak,” the alien said. “Only the fit will survive.”

Survive? Autumn gulped. Survive what?

“Nothing must compromise the plan,” the alien continued.

Devon leaned forward, placing his elbows on the table they were all sitting at. “You and your family will be fine as long as you cooperate.”

“The sound wave frequencies are only a short-term plan,” the unnamed man spoke. “It won't control the masses for much longer.”

“Which is why we need to get their attention onto other matters,” the alien said. “The sooner, the better. You humans are slow in getting things done.”

“I had a couple of phone calls and letters this past week. People are asking questions,” the governor said. “I don’t believe they’ll be fooled much longer.”

“Get their minds off of why we’re here,” the alien replied. “Threaten their security.”

The governor winced. “North Dakota is a relatively peaceful state and—”

“So do what you can to limit the number of casualties,” the unnamed man barked. “This isn’t why we put you in this office, governor! You served in the Gulf War. You’re supposed to be trained to deal with stress.”

“I was protecting life over there.”

The man laughed. “Protecting life? I got news for you, Governor West. That war and the one over there right now have absolutely nothing to do with protection.”

At least not human protection, the alien thought.

Autumn blinked. Was she the only one who heard that? She examined the somber looks on the three men’s faces as they continued to talk about *the plan*. The alien wasn’t looking at her, but she had a clear view of its profile. She recalled the alien she saw at Area 51. When the angel touched her, she caught a glimpse of its true identity. She wondered if the same thing would happen if she focused on this one. Taking a slow, deep breath, she concentrated on its face, and after a few seconds, its features darkened and eyes turned red.

Then its head began to turn in her direction.

She quickly ducked so that the entire chair blocked her from its view.

“Governor,” Devon said in a firm enough tone that made the others quiet. “This is not about the world as we knew it. It’s about surviving in the new age. If things get out of control, we have a safe place for you and your family to go to, but you have to play by the rules if you want to make it. My boss will see to it.”

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Autumn dared to peek back through the space in the chair and saw that the alien had its attention directed back at the men. She breathed a soft sigh of relief. That was close.

Devon nodded in satisfaction. “Good. We’re all agreed. We’ll vamp up the frequency in all the electronic devices enough so that people will go back to sleep. It’s a temporary fix but it’ll work.”

“We’ll need a suitable distraction too,” the unnamed man added. “We can’t afford to take our chances.” He looked pointedly at the governor. “You know what you need to do, so I expect you to do it.”

People will go back to sleep? A suitable distraction? Just what did all that mean? Autumn was really beginning to wish she hadn’t ventured down here. This thing went deeper than she thought...or wanted to think. She rubbed her forehead. Her fingers itched for a cigarette, but there was no way she could light one up—not here...and not now. So she subconsciously grabbed for something, and that something happened to be her sister’s cross necklace that hung around her neck.

“I have to get back to DC,” the unnamed man said as he stood up. “I do give reports on what the governors in each state do or don’t do to cooperate with the New World Order.”

Governor West closed his eyes for a moment but nodded his understanding before he stood up.

The others followed suit, and soon, they left the room.

When she was alone, she exhaled and released her hold on the necklace. She was safe. Now all she had to do was wait for a few minutes until they left and get out of there. Then she could talk to Alex.

She counted to two minutes before she slipped out of her hiding place. Just when she stood up, someone turned the lights off. She gasped and spun around.

Devon frowned, his hand still on the light switch, and narrowed his eyes at her. “What are you doing here?”

She waited for her “guardian” angel to appear and hide her like he did before, but he didn’t. Oh great! What was she supposed to do? The angel told her to come here, she did, and now he abandoned her? It wasn’t like she was being careless this time.

Devon put his hand down from the light switch and stepped into the dark room lit only by the lights in the corridor. “I asked you a question.”

She immediately stepped back, looking for something to arm herself with. She gripped the chair. It wasn’t light. She hid her aggravation. Where was her angelic helper? Clearing her throat, she said the first thing that came to her mind. “What are you doing here?”

He glanced over his shoulder before he took out a small rectangular device from his pocket. After adjusting something, he placed it on the table by the door. Then he headed in her direction.

Startled, she picked up the heavy chair and got ready to throw it at him. “Stop!”

He was in the middle of the room, just a few feet from her. “You think this is some kind of game? You follow people into buildings and listen in on their conversations?”

She swallowed the lump in her throat. “You’re one to talk. Telling the governor to harm some people so you can put the ignorant masses back to sleep.”

“You’d do well to find other things to do with your time.”

He took another step forward, and she flung the chair at him. It missed him. She grunted. She didn’t even get close! Why did she have to be such a lousy aim?

She noted the concern on his face. “Look, I don’t want you to get into trouble, alright? You shouldn’t be here. My suggestion is that you leave and forget what you saw and heard.”

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She shook her head. How could he expect her to do that? Whatever he and those with him had in mind wasn't right. It wasn't decent. She knew it.

"Either you forget it or they'll kill you," he said, his voice solemn. "Do you want to live?"

"Of course, I want to live."

"Then you know what you need to do." He motioned for her to go to the door. "I'll let you off with a warning this time."

She debated whether it was wise to stay there and insist he tell her exactly what the men had been talking about, but a movement in the hallway caught her attention. The angel waved her forward. She rolled her eyes. Oh sure. Now, when she'd been caught and scolded, the angel decided to show up.

With a heavy sigh, she strode out of the room. She went over to the angel and wanted to ask why he took so long to get to her, but Devon closed the door behind him and faced her.

"You'll have to go out another way," he said.

She glanced from the angel and back to Devon. Didn't Devon even see the angel? Devon took her arm and led her in the opposite direction from which she came. Nope. He didn't see the angel. Her gaze drifted to his hand, and she saw he was holding that strange device.

"What is that?" she asked, keeping her voice low.

"Let's just say it ensures no one knows this conversation took place."

His steps were hurried so she decided not to press the issue. Instead, she walked with him to a staircase and climbed a flight before he led her out into a vacant corridor. The entire time, the angel followed, and none of them spoke. Something in Devon's movements were anxious, so she decided the sooner she got out of there, the better.

They reached a door and he opened it. The bright sunlight made her squint as she stepped outside, the angel close

behind. She turned, expecting Devon to leave too, but he shut the door and the lock clicked into place.

“What just happened?” she asked the angel.

“Exactly what needed to,” he answered.

“What? That I would hear the governor’s going to stage something?”

“No.” The angel smiled. “It wasn’t you that needed to be reached this time.”

Then he vanished.

She groaned and threw her hands up in the air. Of course, he spoke in weird, cryptic words. Why wouldn’t he? He was supernatural, after all. Not once did he give her clarity on anything. Why would he start now? Deciding she’d had enough, she darted across the lawn spanning the side of the capitol building and headed for her car.

Chapter Four

Alex sat across from Autumn and studied her expression. “That’s it?” he asked.

She shrugged. Though the plate of lasagna looked appealing, she had little appetite. She finally gave up on trying to enjoy her half-eaten meal and put her fork down. Leaning forward on the table in the family restaurant, she said, “I don’t understand what’s going on.”

He took a drink of soda and set it back down. “So you think they’re emitting sound waves to keep us oblivious to what’s really going on?”

“I’m not sure.”

She glanced out the window next to their booth. It was the next day during lunch, and they agreed to meet so she could tell him what happened the previous day. She’d been shaken up when she called and he’d offered to come over to see her, but she decided to wait until today. She had needed time to process what happened at the capitol, and even after twenty-four hours, she still couldn’t fully comprehend it. She didn’t even dare tell him about the angel or demon. He’d think the rest of her story was unbelievable. She needed something concrete, something solid to tell him.

“The governor was there?” Alex asked.

She nodded and wiped her mouth with the napkin. “He looked scared. He knows something we don’t.”

“Obviously. But is that a surprise? I mean, he is a politician. There’s a lot they never tell us.”

“True.” She couldn’t argue that point, especially when she was pretty much ordered to “forget” what she heard, but how could she forget? “Whatever they’re planning, it’s not going to be pleasant. I guess all we can do is hope that it’s not serious.”

He tapped his fingers next to his empty plate and asked, “Do you think they’re doing this in other places?”

“What? Planning some kind of diversion to keep our attention off of what they’re doing?”

“That and sending out the sound waves. Maybe that’s why everyone seems to be accepting that the aliens are good guys. They’re being subliminally manipulated.”

“Most likely. It can’t just be here.”

“I wonder how deep it goes. Do you think it has anything to do with the talk of a one world government?”

Or maybe it went even deeper than that.

Their server walked up to them. “Can I get you anything else?” she asked.

Autumn shook her head. “No thanks. Well, I guess a to-go box.” She motioned to her food.

The woman nodded and looked at Alex.

“I’m fine.” He glanced at his watch. “I should get back to work.”

“Okay.” The server handed them their checks. “I’ll take your cards when you’re ready and get that to-go box.”

Once she left, they set aside their payments, and he let out a low sigh. “You got more than I did. I can’t come up with any answers.”

“I don’t think I got answers. I just got more questions.”

The server returned to collect their money and handed Autumn a to-go box. She glanced at Autumn’s money and smiled. “I’m sorry, ma’am, but we no longer accept cash.”

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“But I always pay with cash when I come here,” Autumn replied, surprised.

“Well, starting last Monday, the new policy is that we will only accept debit or credit cards.”

Autumn reluctantly took back the cash and stared at the bills in her hand. “But this is all I have.”

“I got it,” Alex told her. “Just add her check to mine.”

The server nodded and took their checks and his card.

“I can’t believe it,” Autumn muttered. “Cash should be good anywhere.” She set the money in front of him and thanked him.

He shook his head and gave it back to her. “Don’t worry about it. Friends help each other out.” As she dished the remaining lasagna into the styrofoam box, he continued, “You might want to think about converting from paying cash for everything to using a card.”

She sighed. He was right. It was time she got with it and got a debit card. She couldn’t deny that it’d be more convenient, especially in situations like this. “I guess that’ll be put on my To Do List for this week.”

“Why have you held off all this time on getting one anyway?”

“Because when I was in college, I ran into some serious credit card debt. It took years to dig myself out of it too.”

“Well, a debit card isn’t like a credit card.”

“Maybe not, but the temptation to overspend if I don’t have physical money is better.”

“So do what I do. Have a savings account to hold most of your money and transfer over whatever you need for the day. If you go over, the cashier will be very happy to remove an item from your cart.”

She wryly grinned at him. “I see you’ve had experience with that one.”

“Once. And once is all it took.”

She closed the box and looked at him, noting that when he smiled, he was handsome. It wasn't the drop dead gorgeous handsome but a boy next door appeal. She could see why her sister was attracted to him.

The server returned with his card and a receipt. "Thank you and I hope you both have a good day." After she handed him the items, she left.

He turned his eyes to Autumn who blushed and focused on collecting her purse and box. "At least you get to go home and take a nap," he said as he stood up.

She followed suit. "Yep. No Hampton to give me grief today."

"How is the new hire working out?"

"She's right out of high school, perky and blond, and since she must have a social life, Hampton's making me work weekends now because I'm too old to have a life."

He laughed. "You're not old."

"Compared to an eighteen year old, I am."

They left the restaurant and he glanced up. Curious, she also looked at the clear sky.

"Have you seen the way the alien craft looks as it hovers over a big city? I hear those things span a good three miles."

"I've seen the pictures. I don't get it though. Why would they hover there?"

He shrugged. "The gods have returned to watch over the affairs of men?"

"Or so they say."

"Whatever they are, they're not friendly."

She shot him a good look. "Is that alien still watching you at night?"

"I've tried going through a night without the pills, but I woke up and couldn't move. It felt like I was back at Area 51."

Her jaw dropped. "Alex, why didn't you tell me sooner?"

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“Nothing else happened. It took me five minutes before I could move, and you bet the first thing I did when I could was swallow one of those pills.”

“That’s awful.” Hearing this made her experience with Devon seem minor. She couldn’t imagine having one of those things hovering over her like that. And as she scanned Alex, she didn’t detect anything sinister around him. “I wish we hadn’t gone to Area 51. I should have insisted on it.”

Alex smiled and patted her on the back. “That thing was by my bed before that incident, remember? This isn’t your problem. It’s mine.”

“It seems like there should be something you can do to stop it.”

“That’s what the psychiatrist is for. I have an appointment with him this week. The prescription he has me on helps.”

“Does it?” Could it be that simple? A pill and all the problems went away? At least until it was time to take the next one?

“I just take it one day at a time. I’ll see you around.”

She said good-bye and watched as he went to his car. She focused on him, trying to detect a demon lurking around him, as she’d seen around Devon on a couple occasions. True, she didn’t see the thing hovering around Devon at the capitol, but there was something seriously wrong with him. But Alex was a good guy. He didn’t go around telling governors they might want to harm people to get the masses to cooperate.

The masses. That was how Devon and people of his ilk saw normal, everyday people like her and Alex. Like her and Alicia. They were just numbers. Easily expendable. Like sheep for the slaughter. She shivered. The masses not cooperating? Send a diversion? Send out sound waves to lull them into a false sense of security. And if they start waking up to what was going

on, find a way to get them back in line. She wondered what the governor was going to do.

She watched as Alex drove past her. He waved and she waved in return. There was nothing unusual about him. No dark shadow. No creepy feeling. He turned out of the parking lot and onto the main road. She shook her head. What was she missing? What was it she didn't understand?

Chapter Five

Alex tried to move in his sleep but couldn't. His eyes flew open and the alien was sitting on his chest, its cold bony fingers wrapped around his throat. He struggled to breathe, but the fingers dug into his skin, cutting off his airway. He unwittingly recalled the three aliens at Area 51 who hovered over him. They held something over his nose and mouth so he couldn't breathe.

Unlike then, he wasn't strapped to a metal table. No. He was home in his warm bed, and this alien was trying to kill him! Fear gripped him and held him securely in place, and as much as he wanted to fight back, to defend himself, he couldn't. All he could do was stare into the alien's eyes.

It wanted him dead, and yet, it wanted him alive so it could continue to torment him.

All Alex could do was stare at it, feeling more helpless than he'd ever felt in his entire life. And then...mercifully...everything went black and the pressure around his throat was gone.

The next morning, Alex sat in the waiting room and checked his watch. He hated to go into work late, but he needed to see Dr. Reyes. After what happened last night with the alien... He shivered. It never attacked him before. It had watched him. Yes,

it freaked him out. But it never touched him, and it certainly never made a move to kill him.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He just wanted the alien to leave him alone. He wanted to be able to get a good night's sleep again without having to take pills.

The office door opened and the psychiatrist waved Alex in. "Good morning, Alex."

Alex nodded and went into the nice spacious room. He headed for the beige chair and sat across from Dr. Reyes. Wiping his hands on his pants, he wondered if Dr. Reyes would confine him to the mental ward of the hospital after he heard what he had to say.

"I heard you had a rough night," the older man said as he set a notebook and a pen on his lap.

"Yes." Alex shifted in his seat. The man was going to think he was loony. No one else had been through this. Maybe some questioned the aliens' motives, but no one had their own personal alien trying to kill them. Taking a deep breath, he said, "I saw the alien again."

The doctor frowned. "Have you been taking those pills?"

"Yes. Well, I admit I didn't one night, but I wanted to see if I could get through the night without help. You know?"

"It's very important you take those pills."

"I know. I'm sorry." Alex felt like a child. He shouldn't have to apologize. He was an adult, and if he wanted to see if he could manage one night without the pill, that should be his right.

"Well, don't worry about it. What's done is done." The doctor smiled and scribbled something down in his notebook.

Alex hated it when he did that. It made him feel like he was being written up for bad conduct. *Relax, Alex. Dr. Reyes is here to help you. He's not giving you a bad grade.*

"Why don't you tell me what happened last night?"

The man with graying hair gave him a kind look that made Alex feel easier. "I did take the pill last night before I went to

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bed. About two hours after I went to sleep, I felt a need to panic. When I woke up, I couldn't move. The alien...it was sitting on me and trying to strangle me."

The man frowned. "I see no marks on your neck."

He absentmindedly touched his neck. It wasn't even sore. "I can't explain it. I felt it. It was real. I know I was awake." *Here goes. He's going to say I'm crazy and have me locked up.*

"So what happened while the alien was doing this?"

"Nothing. I couldn't stop him. I tried to move but was frozen in place. Then I blacked out. When I woke up, it was gone and it was daylight."

The man nodded, said "um hmm" and wrote something else down. Glancing up at Alex, he said, "What you experienced is called sleep paralysis, and it's not all that uncommon."

He blinked in surprise. "Really?"

"If you gathered together six strangers into a room, at least one has been through it, though not as extreme as what you experienced. Sometimes people just wake up and feel terror that goes away as soon as it comes. Some people see an old hag or a hooded figure in the room with them. Then there are those who swear they see things like goblins. There have been studies done on it."

Alex immediately felt better. So he wasn't the only one. He dared to ask, "What about aliens? Has anyone seen aliens?"

"Sure. Haven't you ever heard of alien abductions?"

"Yes. I didn't think it was real until all of this happened."

"I come across a lot of things in my practice. Few things surprise me anymore." The man glanced at the clock on his desk. "I'm afraid I have to take care of my next patient. Do you mind if we continue this on Thursday when you have your appointment?"

"That's fine."

"And since this thing appeared to you with malevolent intent, I'm going to give you a different prescription. It's a

stronger dose, but you reported no ill effects with the other one, so this one should be fine. If you do notice any complications, let me know and I'll adjust the dosage." He reached over to the small table beside him and wrote on a small yellow pad. "I think you had your encounter last night because you missed that pill. It can set your whole body off balance when things like that happen."

Noting the warning, Alex agreed to take the new pills every night before bed. If that was what he had to do to make sure another attack didn't happen, then he'd do it. There was no way he wanted to go through that again.

The doctor tore the slip of paper and held it out to him.

Alex stood up and took it. "Thank you, Doctor."

"You're welcome." The man stood and walked him to the door. "Now, if you have another episode, let me know."

"I will."

He opened the door and smiled. "Have a good day."

Relieved, Alex returned his smile and left. So he wasn't crazy. Now he didn't have to go around town feeling like a freak.

Chapter Six

Autumn finished putting clothes on the mannequin in the store and yawned. Glancing at her watch, she realized she had another five hours to go before she could go home. Alicia wouldn't be in for another hour and the Saturday crowd hadn't picked up yet, so she had nothing to do at the moment.

She tapped her foot on the floor and debated whether she should take this opportunity to loaf around or look for any clothes that needed to be returned to their correct locations. Finally, she opted to search for misplaced clothes. She rolled her eyes. Here it was, a beautiful Saturday and she was stuck at work with her most exciting prospect being what she'd watch on TV when she got home. Again, she wondered why she hadn't been one of the people to vanish. Just what, exactly, did she have to stick around for? It should have been her instead of Marianne.

A familiar giggle caught her attention. She looked over her shoulder and sighed. Katie Winslow, the new employee, decided to come in on her day off with her boyfriend. Katie was holding his hand and blabbing on about someone they knew. Typical gossip. Autumn thought of dodging behind a rack of pantsuits but Katie saw her.

"Oh hey! Autumn!" Katie turned to her lanky boyfriend. "That's Autumn. I work with her."

He nodded, not taking his eyes off the perky blond who gave him a flirtatious smile.

Autumn inwardly groaned but gave a polite smile and wave before she turned back to the rack in front of her, trying to

look busy so Katie and her boyfriend would get bored and leave. However, such was not to be the case.

“Autumn! I have some terrific news to share with you. Come on over!”

Autumn stayed in place, watching as the glowing girl waved her forward. When she realized Katie was practically dragging the guy her way, she sighed and went to meet them. “What is it?”

“I’m engaged!” Katie thrust her hand in front of Autumn’s face and squealed. She wiggled her ring finger, making the small diamond sparkle in the light. “Kevin just proposed last night. Isn’t that awesome?”

Engaged? Autumn tried not to show her disbelief. Katie was only eighteen for goodness’ sakes.

“We’re here looking for lingerie,” Katie said and snuggled against Kevin who kissed her cheek.

Katie giggled and cooed at him. In response, he nuzzled her neck and she wrapped her arms around him, squealing in delight.

Autumn swallowed. If she wasn’t careful, she was going to throw up. Watching two horny teenagers hanging onto each other was more than enough to make her gag. Just as she turned to get away from them, a loud boom resonated through the mall.

Without thinking, she dropped to the floor, only half aware of the screams of panic coming from the two shoppers in the store. She glanced over her shoulder and was reassured when she saw that Katie and her boyfriend were fine. She waited to make sure nothing else was going to happen before she struggled to her feet.

Mr. Hampton came running out of his office, his face pale. Motioning to the door, he yelled, “Everyone, out!”

Not that Autumn needed to be told to evacuate, but if Hampton was scared, then this was more serious than she thought. If Hampton was one thing, it was able to handle even

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the toughest of situations in stride. While he assisted one of the shaking customers, Autumn ran to help another one out the nearest exit. Kevin held onto Katie, so at least she was taken care of.

Once they were outside, a group of fire trucks and policemen were hurrying to the center of the mall. People were rushing out of the building as smoke billowed into the sky. Some people were crying and holding onto each other. Others were searching for loved ones. Still, others looked on in apparent shock.

Autumn shivered. It reminded her of the day her sister vanished.

“Funny how the cops and firemen got here as soon as they did,” Hampton muttered under his breath.

Surprised, she looked at her boss. “Why do you say that?”

He glanced at her as if he couldn’t believe he had to explain it. “That was a bomb, and it just went off. How could they be that quick?”

His meaning settled into her rattled nerves. Her eyes grew wide. “Are you saying this was staged?”

He rolled his eyes. “It wouldn’t be the first time something like this happened, would it?”

Before she could answer, he went over to one of the shrieking women in the crowd. He patted her on the shoulder and did his best to comfort her.

Autumn could hardly think over the sirens blaring, the crying people, or the police using bullhorns to instruct people to evacuate the mall. She tried to come to grips with what Hampton said as she walked through huddled groups of people. The smoke continued pouring out of the main entrance, making her cough as she neared the scene of the devastation.

She passed a cop who spoke into his walkie talkie. “Yeah. Probably a terrorist attack.” And that was all she caught of that conversation since he hurried past her to wave an ambulance over

to assist a blood-soaked man who was lying on the ground. The man blinked, and Autumn felt a small comfort in knowing he was alive.

She studied the amount of medical personnel that got out of their ambulances and frowned. The explosion only happened a few minutes ago, hadn't it? She checked her watch. Maybe it had been five. There was no way all these policemen, firefighters and medical personnel should be here yet. She hated to agree with Hampton, but something was wrong.

As she scanned the chaos ensuing around her, her gaze happened to fall upon *him*. Devon. He was there at the scene, talking into a cell phone and motioning to a cop. She narrowed her eyes at him. Ignoring the people around her, she strode in his direction. Not once did she let her focus off of him. There were way too many people lingering about.

Shock gave way to anger as she got closer to him. How dare he be a part of this? Her brows furrowed and her stomach tightened. For all she knew, he was responsible for this. Maybe he set off the bomb. No. He didn't look like the type. Most likely, he gave the orders and someone else did the dirty work.

By the time she reached him, he was still on the phone. His back was to her as he walked back to the mall. She thought he was going to go under the police tape that two men were putting up to secure off the entrance, but he didn't. Instead, he veered around it and made his way to the other side of the explosion. Where was he going? She picked up the pace so that she could make out something he was telling the other person on the phone, but there was too much noise around them for her to make out anything.

To her surprise, he went around the corner of the building, which left them alone for the moment. She glanced behind her, wondering if it was best to keep following him. Perhaps she should go back to Hampton. Now, that was

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something she never thought she'd willingly consider. Going back to her irritable boss so she could feel safe!

"It's taken care of," Devon said into his cell phone. "Don't send anymore."

Anymore? She turned her attention back to him.

He hung up on his current call and started to dial another number when he noticed her. He jerked and quickly shut the phone. "What are you doing here?"

She couldn't tell if he was alarmed or angry but finally decided he was probably both. Crossing her arms to hide her slight trembling, she said, "You're behind this explosion, aren't you? There is no terrorist attack. You set this up."

He stared at her for a moment, his face unreadable.

The only thing that held her in place was her anger over the needless destruction and suffering that he caused. "You've done this before, haven't you?" Stupid. What was she thinking by confronting him like this? He obviously had important connections, and here she was invoking his wrath. But something in her had snapped, making her unable to stop. "Well? What else have been false terror attacks?"

He calmly placed the phone into the breast pocket of his suit jacket. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't play dumb." Her pulse raced with adrenaline. Stupid. She was stupid! This man was dangerous. She just knew it. That was the only reason why a demon lurked around him. And yet, losing her sister and having her entire world tossed upside down was taking its toll on her nerves. She couldn't stop. Even if he pulled out a gun right now and threatened to kill her, she couldn't stop. "Do you know where those people disappeared to? Was that another ploy to get the people to unite for this coming one world government?"

He took a step toward her, and she instinctively backed up. He grabbed her arm and shot her a warning look. "I advise you to tread carefully. You think you know what you're dealing

with but you don't. This goes much deeper than you can imagine."

"You bastards took my sister from me. I have nothing to lose." And she didn't. She had nothing to live for. Nothing to give up. No reason to exist.

"No. We didn't. We don't know what caused that."

She shook her head as her eyes filled with tears. She'd wanted him to admit it. But he didn't. "You're lying," she insisted, even though it was ridiculous. She wanted him to be lying. She wanted to be able to get to her sister and bring her home.

He shook his head. "That wasn't part of the plan, but it doesn't matter because it's done. Look, do you want to live or not?"

She hesitated to answer. After how close she came to dying just now... If that bomb had been further down the mall... Was she prepared for death?

He sighed. "If you want to survive, you have to play by their rules."

Shooting him a sharp look, she asked, "Whose rules?"

Before she knew what was happening, he pressed her up against the side of the mall and kissed her. Stunned, she didn't push him away. How could she? She didn't have time to think.

He wasn't demanding in the kiss, though he was insistent that the kiss happen. His hands settled on her hips, and that was when she thought to push him away. His mouth left hers and traveled the length of her jaw and down her neck. Her heart raced, even as she figured that she should be able to push him away once she caught her breath.

He brought his lips to her ear. "We're being watched. There are cameras everywhere. Listening devices. You're being monitored. You have to be careful."

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Her eyes flew open and a chill raced up her spine. A warning. She turned her head and saw that a security guard was watching.

Devon let go of her, stepped away, and coughed. Giving the older man a sheepish grin, he said, "Sorry. Didn't see you there."

The guard gave a stiff nod. "Save it for the bedroom."

She looked at Devon. He was lying. He knew the guard was there the whole time. It'd all been a show. She didn't know whether to be relieved or upset. So he hadn't been trying to take liberties with her...but then, what man ever had? She sighed and rubbed her head. Her mind was a jumbled mess. So much was happening at once, and too many thoughts went in circles through her head. What did it matter? What did any of it matter anymore?

The guard motioned for them to join him. "Right now, I need everyone where I can get your names. Got to separate the living from the dead."

Dead? She glared at Devon who ignored her. Instead, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed a number. He glanced at her and said, "Go on ahead, sweetie. I'll catch up to you."

She stared at him for a moment and asked the guard, "Some people died in that explosion?"

"So far we have two confirmed bodies," he replied. "Come on. I can't be over here forever."

Resisting the urge to slap the phone out of Devon's hands, she stormed passed him and followed the guard, aware that Devon walked not far behind.

As she made her way into the crowd of the parking lot, her eyes caught sight of a light post. A camera sat at the top of it. She blinked. Then her gaze shifted to another post. It didn't have a camera, but the one further down did. She shivered and crossed her arms, as if doing so would ward off the growing sense of dread sinking into her.

It was quickly dawning on her that the world she thought she lived in wasn't anything like she believed it to be. Aliens, Area 51, cameras, listening devices, being monitored, lied to believe terrorist attacks were real when they were being staged to sway public opinion, demons, angels, heaven, hell... Her head hurt. Just what was real and what was an illusion?

Chapter Seven

The phone rang. Devon rolled over in his bed and tapped the snooze button on his alarm clock. Another shrill ring echoed through the dark room. Realizing it was the phone, he picked it up. “Hello?”

“Devon Patrick?”

His eyes flew open and he sat up in bed. “Yes.”

“Code?”

He didn’t want to give it. He knew where this was headed, and he hated it.

“Patrick?”

Taking a deep breath, he gripped the bed sheets and said, “834-712.”

“You are due to report to Dulce at 1500 today.” Then the man hung up.

A cold shiver snaked its way up Devon’s spine as he hung up the phone. Dulce, New Mexico—a place he wished he’d never have to go to again. And yet, General McHenry gave the order. That meant he had to do it, whether he wanted to or not.

He sat still for a moment, staring at the mirror across the room. How did he end up in this nightmare? Sighing, he rubbed his eyes. He could do this. He’d done it before. It hadn’t killed him. At least not yet. Forcing his mind off of what was to come, he got out of bed and went to the bathroom where he turned on the water for the shower and the faucet.

He closed the door and searched the room but didn't find any bugs. So they hadn't been back. That was good. It meant they didn't suspect anything. Maybe he was getting better at this. He threw off his night clothes, wrapped a towel around his waist and left the room so he could retrieve his cell phone. Dialing a number he wanted them to know about, he also grabbed a new bottle of shampoo from the linen closet at the end of the hallway.

"This better be good, Patrick," his boss muttered into the phone.

"General McHenry called. I'm due to report at Dulce at 3pm today."

"Oh. In that case, I'll let you live for waking me up."

It was a half-hearted joke, and Devon didn't bother laughing as if he was amused. There was nothing funny about any of this, but what could he do? He needed to obey orders.

He entered the bathroom and shut the door. The running water masked some of what his boss said, but his boss would be giving him the usual spiel about how he was doing what was best for the country. Devon set the shampoo on the counter by the sink and waited until his boss was done before he thanked him and hung up.

Then he retrieved his second cell phone which was strapped to the underside of his sink and dialed his doctor's number.

Dr. Raymond picked up on the third ring. "Devon, did they call you in again?"

Wiping his sweaty palms on his towel, he said, "Yes. At 3pm."

"I'll come by your house Thursday night at ten and we'll take care of it."

"Thank you." He hung up the phone. There. Dr. Raymond would remove the implant, and Devon would know what the government planned to do to him this time.

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Right at 3pm, two men in military uniforms led Devon to the second level of the Dulce underground base. He stripped and was weighed before he slipped into an off-white jump suit and picked up his identification card. He didn't speak as the men walked him to a shuttle. The tunnel was dim with only phosphorous units which cast a yellow hue over the cavern.

He wasn't supposed to remember being here, so he refrained from getting on the shuttle until instructed. He sat next to the man operating the vehicle.

"Card?"

He presented the card which the man scanned. Then Devon pressed his hand to the scanner to verify he had the right to carry the card.

Satisfied, the man nodded and shifted the shuttle into drive. "You're due for level four."

Devon closed his eyes in relief. Not that level four would be pleasant, but it beat level six, which was termed "Nightmare Hall" for good reason.

No one spoke during the ride through the second level. When the shuttle stopped at the elevator, Devon got out. As if on cue, the doors opened and the alien masquerading as the blond woman in a blue jump suit waved him in. He hesitated, briefly recalling the way Vanessa responded to her. Vanessa had every right to shy away from the blond. He knew what her being here meant, and he knew the blond took a twisted delight in playing cat and mouse with him.

"Come on in, silly. I don't bite." She giggled and reached out to take him by the hand.

His skin crawled at the contact. Before she could deduct that he remembered her, he removed his hand from hers, entered the elevator and stood at the other end of the small space.

"You don't remember me, do you?"

He shook his head. "Am I supposed to?"

Giggling again, she shrugged. "I guess not." She winked at him before she pressed the number four.

The elevator doors hissed and the elevator gave a low hum as it went down.

He closed his eyes for a moment and focused on his breathing. She could pick up on fear, and the last thing he wanted to do was give her anymore power over him than she would have once they strapped him to the table.

When he opened his eyes, he caught her staring at him. For a moment her eyes flickered, and he blinked. He'd never seen her in her true form, but he knew she wasn't an alien grey. Reptoid, perhaps? He'd heard Reptoid aliens lived at level 5 and who-knew-what lived at level 7 on down.

After all he'd seen and heard, he wouldn't be surprised if they really did exist. He might be privy to more information than the average person, but he wasn't that high up the chain. So many things were going on behind the scenes. That woman he caught sneaking into the Bismarck capitol had no idea what she was tapping into, and if she was smart, she'd finally back off because if she didn't, it was just a matter of time before they came after her.

The doors hissed open and a white corridor came into view. The blond got out of the elevator and looked expectantly at him. What choice did he have?

He joined her. The blue door up ahead loomed before him and the sense of dread in his gut twisted tighter. Images of his past visits flashed through his mind. Some things he wished he didn't remember. Well, there was no going back now. He knew too much. He'd done too much.

"We're going to have a lot of fun," the blond whispered suggestively.

Without another word, she led him to the door and opened it. Slowly exhaling, he stepped forward.

Chapter Eight

Devon woke up at 11:30pm. His heart beat was unusually fast and his back hurt. Where was he? Anxious, he glanced around and quickly realized he was in his bed, safe at home. Breathing fast, he tried to sit up, but a sharp stab of pain in his lower back stopped him so he collapsed on the bed.

Dr. Raymond ran over to him. “It was a real doozy this time, Devon.”

In that instant, he remembered that he had gone to Dulce. He swallowed despite his raw throat. He’d been screaming. That was the only reason his throat hurt as much as it did. He choked back on a cry. What had they done to him this time?

“They put this in you. I got it before it became a part of your spinal column.”

Devon blinked away the tears and focused on the jelly-like implant with two dangling limbs.

“Whatever this one was, it was alive.”

“A-alive?” He struggled to breathe through the fear coming at him full force. That thing had been inside of him, wrapping itself into him like a parasite? It was half an inch long. None of the other implants were that big either.

The doctor turned to the dresser in the bedroom and placed the implant in the box with the other five implants he’d removed on other occasions. Turning his sympathetic gaze in Devon’s direction, he asked, “Are you sure you want to know what happened at Dulce?”

Devon dreaded that question. Finding out meant he had to relive the whole nightmare all over again. Each time they were done with him, they dropped him off at home and he didn't remember a thing. It wasn't until that fateful day Dr. Raymond gave him an MRI and found the first implant that Devon realized he was nothing more than a lab rat. Gripping the sheets beneath him, he steeled his resolve. He had to be strong. He had to know what they did and what they wanted. He had to. Failure was not an option. Failure meant someone would come up to his door with a gun and a bullet.

He tried to speak but his voice wouldn't come, so he nodded.

With a heavy sigh, the doctor lifted the needle. "I'm sorry, Devon." He sat beside him on the bed and held onto Devon's stiff arm.

The needle went in with little effort, and the cool liquid found its way into his vein. Soon. Soon he'd recall the horror he'd just been through. *Be strong. You can do this!*

Dr. Raymond pulled out the needle and strapped a band-aid over the puncture wound. "I'll be here in case you go into another convulsion."

Devon managed a slight nod.

The doctor helped him up.

Though he was weak, he made it to the bathroom. It was the same routine. He knew what to expect. He knelt by the toilet and waited. The sensation of a chill passing over him was the indication he needed. He leaned over the toilet and closed his eyes.

He could do this. He had to remember. This was much too important. His life depended on him knowing the keyword and the name of his alternate personality. So far, he'd accumulated five separate personalities. This was his sixth. And as long as he played along with his superiors, he was safe.

I have to do this.

The Watchers

The chill seeped into his bones, making him shake. The tremors started off small—easy enough to tolerate. But he knew what was coming. He took deep breaths, counting to ten before he slowly exhaled. This simple exercise, he'd learned, warded off the nausea until the end.

An image flashed in his mind. He tried to focus on it, but it quickly blurred back into the recesses of his repressed memories. Not yet. It'd be a little longer. He gripped the sides of the cool porcelain toilet. Within a half hour, it would be over. The wait wouldn't be long. Another minute or two and it'd start.

His teeth began to chatter even as he willed off the increasing cold. A slight amount of bile rose up in his throat. He took a deep breath. *1, 2, 3, 4...* Behind him, the doctor wrapped a warm blanket over his shoulders, and his nausea receded. He exhaled. The reprieve was temporary, but he was glad for it.

He waited there in the silent room for a minute when the first clear image opened in his mind. The tall blond woman stood over him. She smiled, but it wasn't friendly. It was the smile a predator gave its prey before it struck.

"It's always nice to see you, Devon," she whispered into his ear. Her hand traveled up his leg until it reached his inner thigh.

He struggled to get away, but he was frozen to the table. Not again. He didn't want to go through this again!

The scene faded, and Devon's eyes flew open. He was staring into the empty toilet bowl and shaking all over, despite the blanket or the fact that the doctor turned the heating lamp on. So cold. Nothing could conquer the icy sensation pumping through his veins.

A sharp pain under his fingernails made him grit his teeth. He closed his eyes again, and this time, he was strapped to a chair. Two men sat on either side of him. They took turns digging razors under his nails. He screamed and tried to wiggle his way out of the chair but couldn't.

Once again, his focus returned to the toilet in front of him as the feeling of nausea increased. That meant the flashes of memory would be coming faster. He clung to the rim of the toilet, his body on the edge of convulsing. The doctor came near with a syringe, but he shook his head and let the repressed memories surface.

He hung by his wrists in a room that made him shiver. His stomach growled and his dry tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. How long he'd been there was anybody's guess, but his arms were numb and he'd long since lost the battle to hold off on urinating. He groaned. He wanted to pass out but couldn't, not with the IV they'd hooked him up to in order to keep him conscious.

Rodents scampered across the floor and tickled his bare feet. He struggled to touch the floor, to steady himself so he wouldn't swing whenever they ran into him. But his toes merely brushed the surface of the rough wood. A snake hissed and slithered around his ankle. They had snakes here? This time when he shivered, it was from fear. He hated those things more than any of the rodents in the room.

Then another memory flashed in his mind, and he was strapped to a board and shoved under water. By instinct he held his breath. Exhaustion fought with his need to struggle. He was weak. So weak he could hardly move, and his wrists and fingernails were sore. He was still hungry but had long since given up on the idea of food. How he wanted to go to sleep, to ease the duress his body had been under for the past couple days. His lungs began to burn, and just when he was about to inhale the water, they brought him out. He gasped the warm air. Before he had time to see who was handling him, they thrust him back into the water and the process repeated itself.

Bile rose up in his throat and his eyes flew open. He was back in his house, staring at the clear water of the toilet. Even as he trembled, he held onto the rim, his fingers still tender and his

The Watchers

wrists rubbed raw from the rope. It all had come back to him, and he remembered that moment his personality split in half—when he reached the point where he couldn't take it anymore.

Luke. The blond woman named him Luke. That was his new identity. And the code phrase was *level 6 reinforcement*.

What did that mean? What was he supposed to do when he heard that?

He gritted his teeth and cried out as the acute pain traveled the length of his back where they had implanted him with that thing—that living creature the doctor had removed from him. His body jerked forward.

“That's it,” the doctor said, getting ready to stick him with the needle.

“No! I need to remember!” Devon screamed as vomit rose up in his throat. Almost there. One more piece to the puzzle and this whole ordeal would be over.

The doctor slowly stepped back.

Level 6 reinforcement. For what?

The blond woman returned in another memory. She held a needle in front of him and smiled, her eyes turning black and a trace of her horns projecting from her forehead. “The leader's mark. You will inject this DNA into those who resist the mark.”

The final memory in place, Devon released the vomit into the toilet. As soon as he emptied his stomach, he sat back.

The doctor inserted the needle into Devon's arm. His stomach soon settled and the chills left in quick succession. The doctor helped him up. Thankful to have the experience behind him, Devon leaned on the other man as he lumbered to his bed. As soon as he collapsed on the mattress, his eyelids grew heavy.

“I want to take that thing they put in you and see exactly what it is,” the doctor told him.

Devon nodded, too tired to fully comprehend what the man said.

The doctor pulled the sheet and blanket up to his neck.

Devon was barely aware of the doctor leaving his house. A peaceful numbing sensation swept over him, and after the pain he went through, he just wanted to enjoy this moment. His breathing grew slower. He felt sleep coming swiftly. His last thought, before he finally dozed off was what the blond meant by the leader, but he knew he'd find that one out soon enough.

The Watchers

the calm is always followed by a storm...

Novella #3



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