

NOWHERE TO LAND
by
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PART I
SHADOWY FIGURES

CHAPTER 1

To the untrained eye, the Charger parked across the street could pass for a real police cruiser. Quentin had spent four years behind the wheel of an Atlanta police Crown Vic, and to him the dark blue sedan was as fake as Lincoln on a Benjamin. The wimpy-ass bull bar on the front was a dead giveaway. If the driver rammed that piece of shit through anything stronger than a screen door, he could end up picking pieces of that Hemi V8 out of his skull.

Quentin crossed to the other side of Sandcherry Drive, lined with middle-class homes and sculpted lawns. The smell of fresh-cut grass hung in the air. “Slow down, Razor,” he said—just a man and his dog out for a casual stroll. He sold it well, which wasn’t hard to do since that was his original plan, but the driver might think otherwise since Quentin was a black man walking through a mostly white subdivision. He sauntered up to the driver’s window all la-dee-da and laid back. “Evening, Officer.”

“Good evening to you too,” the driver said. White male. Late twenties. Short dark brown hair. Medium build. Dark sunglasses kept his eye color a secret. While the blue uniform looked real enough, it fit too flat against his chest. He definitely wasn’t vested up.

Officer, my ass!

“We don’t get much police activity in this neighborhood. Should I be worried?”

“Why would *you* be worried? I’m sure you can handle just about anything...Mr. Kane.”

Quentin stopped cold. “How do you know my name?” The situation could go sideways fast, and he was standing in the middle of the street, ass out. His piece was locked away four doors down, and his yellow lab was a lover, not a biter. Was this someone he had put in the clink, now out and looking for a little tit for tat?

“We know a lot about you. That’s why we’re here. But we don’t have much time.”

Quentin scanned the inside of the car. “We?”

The man checked the street both ways, then glanced back over his shoulder. “It’s clear.”

A head popped up in the back seat, and the rear window slid down. A white woman wearing a gray baseball cap and a man's oversized, tan hooded jacket looked at him with frantic eyes. "Mr. Kane, my brother is in a lot of trouble." She tucked a wayward lock of long brown hair under her cap with fingers that poked out of fingerless, black padded gloves.

Workout gloves? That didn't track with someone dressed like a sneak thief riding around in a fake police cruiser with a poser behind the wheel. Quentin leaned over and peered through the window. Her legs were small for her size, probably the result of muscle atrophy. They could be wheelchair gloves.

"Since you're the one doing the talking, I assume this man here isn't your brother."

"No, he's not."

"What kind of trouble, ma'am?"

"It's hard to explain and will be even harder for you or any other sane person to believe."

Getting dragged across broken glass seemed more appealing than heading back to his achingly lonely house, once filled with love and happiness, which now only existed in picture frames. But something hard to explain and hard to believe sounded like it had too much stink on it to tackle without a big bowl of alphabet soup—APD, FBI, DHS, CIA.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. I'm not a detective anymore. I think you should go to the police."

"The people he's in trouble with aren't your regular criminals. These people are shadows. They only come out of hiding when they're on the move, and they're on the move tomorrow morning. We don't have time for search warrants and police procedures. If we don't stop them now, no one in the world will be able to stop them. Ever. But you can. Single-handedly."

Tires screeched at the north end of the street. A white van barreled toward them.

"They're coming!" the driver yelled. "Get down!"

She shoved a small wooden box through the window. "Take this."

"No. Wait. I don't know what you expect me to do."

"Everything you need and need to know is in here. Take it. *Please!* And hide it."

Quentin took the heavy box. It rattled as he jammed it into the inside pocket of his track jacket.

The driver yelled, "Run, Mr. Kane! Run!"

His engine revved like a horde of screaming demons, the tires squealed, and the car launched southbound down the street. Quentin ran north through a cloud of smoke and the smell of burning rubber. The van screeched to a stop in front of his house.

Shit!

It had barely stopped when three men dressed in all black jumped out and ran straight for him. He scaled the fence into his backyard and sprinted onto his patio. Seconds later, they popped over the fence with the agility of mountain lions. They had him cornered. Three to one. Big mistake.

The one leading the trio walked right onto the patio and stood there like he was the Big Bad Wolf. A brawny, real tough-looking guy. The kind that brushed his teeth with a chainsaw. When he opened his mouth, Quentin heard the rumble of a tornado. "Where is it?"

"Jumping the fence wasn't cowardice, guys. It was an act of mercy. Now get the hell out of my backyard."

The Big Bad Wolf came at him with a punch that could fell an oak tree. Quentin blocked it and caught him with a reverse roundhouse kick dead in the face. He dropped to the concrete patio floor. Lights out.

Hisssss.

Some kind of spray hit Quentin in the face. Liquid fire filled his eyes. He screamed and threw up his hands. When the spraying stopped and he dared to open his eyes, he couldn't see. His eyelids and most of his face were paralyzed. He waited, listening on a microscopic level, hearing only the birds chirping in his Yoshino cherry trees.

"Where is it?" a nasally voice said two steps away on Quentin's right flank.

Got him. In a flash, Quentin vaulted over and slammed the guy's ass to the concrete with a one-arm shoulder throw. The last man didn't make a sound. Smart move. This guy wasn't going to give away his position so easily.

A sharp pain lit up the left side of Quentin's neck. A needle.

"Son of a bitch!" he said as his knees buckled. The next thing he knew, he was flat on his back and hands were rummaging through his pockets. "Get the f-f-fuck ah me." His tongue weighed a ton, half as much as his arms and legs. A hand ripped the box out of his pocket, and the world faded away.

CHAPTER 2

Eden Stone's red Mustang Shelby GT500 shot around a curve. The tall Georgia pines ripped past on both sides of the highway. Stragglers in on CP time the first day? No sir, not when she was sitting on enough horses to pull a train through molten lava. After all the hard work she had done to overcome the "me Tarzan, you Jane" shit she had put up with in her male-dominated profession, no way, not a chance in France.

Shelly wasn't the F/A-18 Eden used to fly, but she wasn't street legal either. The car roared into a deep bend in the two-lane highway as Otis Redding crooned "Sittin' on the Dock of the Bay" on the radio. Eden rounded the curve, and when she crested the small hill, the brake pedal hit the floorboard.

Oh no! Water!

Invisible hands crushed her chest as intensely as the force of pulling seven Gs in the Super Hornet had done when she was in the Navy.

Big lake, little bridge.

Bridge? Dental floss was more like it. Two narrow lanes a half mile long. If she hadn't been about to firewall the gas pedal, she would've had time to stop and turn around. Now she was already on the frigging thing. Some way around Atlanta's I-75 this turned out to be.

An oncoming rusty orange pickup edged over the centerline.

If he didn't get his ass out of her lane...

She hammered the horn, then flashed the headlights. The lake seemed higher than before, an imagination gone wild. The calm water jumped to life with little dancing spouts as the leading edge of the rain stormed in from the west.

If she didn't know better, she'd swear the raindrops were wearing cowboy boots and stomping on the roof as they swept over her. She turned on the wipers and throttled those babies up to max power, but the downpour was already blinding and the wandering pickup disappeared between wipers. Guardrails. Someone with a good imagination or a bad sense of humor had the nerve to call them that. More like strips of corrugated aluminum foil.

There's no room for error. That old voice from her Navy training days was back. That stalker. It sent her stomach into a tizzy, and the two strips of bacon she'd had for breakfast were playing tennis with the egg. The warning awoke something deep inside her that had been dormant for years. Through the windshield, the two-lane bridge became the flight deck of the aircraft carrier USS *Abraham Lincoln*, and the lake turned into the Pacific Ocean. The sound of the pelting rain became the waves crashing against the hull of the ship.

Please, not now. She forced the images out of her mind and attacked the horn.

Moving back into his lane, the man in the pickup gave her one half of the peace sign, then zipped by.

After a barely discernible bump, it was over. No more bridge. No more water. Just glorious land and lofty Georgia pines again. *Christ's sake!* If that was all it took to knock her off her game, she might as well find the nearest skyscraper and take a long walk off its shortest ledge. The prick's crappy driving shouldn't have bedeviled her so. Clearly, her harrowing past wasn't far enough in the past. It might never be.

Minutes ago, she had been bursting to prove she was up for her latest challenge. Maybe she wasn't. She had been masquerading as the perfect little black pilot for so long, she had forgotten it was all a façade. Lesson learned.

She glanced down at her new navy-blue suit and white blouse, and that old familiar feeling of being unworthy of the uniform washed over her, the feeling that she had put a gleaming veneer on top of a rotting tooth.

Tough turkey. It was go time. She gunned it toward Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport, where her dream commercial aircraft awaited that she would get to fly for the first time. A smile flirted with the corners of her mouth.

Wow! I'm going to get to fly a Combi.

She couldn't let her past rob her of that opportunity. She couldn't let her secret surface. Today or any day. If she did, the FAA would strip her of her wings, and she wouldn't be allowed to jump two feet off the ground without a boarding pass.

CHAPTER 3

Daniel plowed his 4x4 through the muddy red dirt trail once used by loggers. It dead-ended six miles deep in the woods at a place only he and the other two scientists knew wasn't what it appeared to be or where it was supposed to be. He stepped out of his pickup but kept a hand near the door handle, ready for a quick escape. Ears on high alert.

There were no warning signs. No movement. Good.

The old cabin and everything around it looked like it had been bitch-slapped by Mother Nature. Bears in the thick woods on three sides. Water moccasins in the swampy lake in the back. The early morning air reeked of fungus and dry rot. What a shitpit. The ass end of nowhere. He couldn't stand still ten minutes without kudzu twining up his legs. If the world came to an end, it would be years before this place knew anything about it, but it was one heck of a place to keep secrets.

He opened the door of the cabin. Calling it a shack would give it too much credit. The old wood floors sagged with every step as he walked across the dusty living room crowded with furniture that hadn't been in style since eight-track tapes were high-tech. When he opened the basement door, his heartrate shot up to the stratosphere.

He crept down the stairs nice and quiet, eyes trained on the back of the cage—or rather, on what lay asleep inside it, not that the tranquilizer, still working or not, was any guarantee he would make it back out of the basement with a pulse—or at all.

God, that smell. At least it wasn't *his* flesh that was decomposing. He wrinkled his nose as he walked over to the refrigerated cabinet. He rummaged through the bottles of chemicals and formulas, some familiar to researchers everywhere, some more befitting a witch's brew, and some he wouldn't touch unless he was wearing a hazmat suit. Yet the one bottle that could shut down the gruesome research before it moved into the human test phase was missing.

Ka-thump!

He whirled around toward the cage. From where he stood, he would never make it back to the stairs. He stared through the holes that peppered the edges of the rectangular steel cage. The pencil-sized holes lay so close together he could see through them into the dark interior where gator-green hide lay keeled over on one side. Only heavy raspy breathing emitted from the cage now. The holes were big enough for oxygen to enter, small enough for nothing else to escape—if Professor Ogladorff and Dr. Speck knew what they were talking about anyway. *Ha!*

He glanced down at his watch. Time could be a vicious bastard when it wanted to be. In less than an hour, the other two research scientists would come blast-assing through the door.

A large brown bottle shouldn't be hard to find. His eyes combed the state-of-the-art research lab. If he could get his hands on a fraction of the money spent on this place, Rachel would be out of that wretched wheelchair. Just a few...hell, the right *one* would pay for his sister's treatment. Banks of DNA sequencers, analyzers, and equipment with lambent lights and flickering panels fought for every inch of the tables and walls and filled the basement with low, steady hums and whirls.

There it is. The bottle of probetalamisol sat on the gray table in front of the cage. He squinted through the holes where the breathing green hump didn't block his view. *What the—?* It couldn't be. His sightline was too clear. He shouldn't have been able to see all the way through to the table. Unless...

Holy shit! The front of the cage was missing.

Oggie and Speck's warnings hit him like waves crashing over a ship's bow. *Never enter the lab alone. This is the deadliest animal ever genetically engineered. Your first mistake could be your last.*

Now he stood ten feet from it, and it wasn't locked in a cage.

With only a few steps to go to reach the bottle, his feet turned to stone. “*Non sum qualis eram. Non sum qualis eram. Non sum qualis eram.*” It worked, but instead of escaping up the stairs, he flew past the cage in the opposite direction, the actions of a lunatic with the Grim Reaper on speed dial, but it had all gone so wrong, there was no other way now.

His head slapped the light bulb dangling from the ceiling. The basement had one pitiful working light struggling to do the work of half a dozen. The pendulum swung back and forth, casting an ominous, fleeting light on the shadowy green figure.

Light...dark...light...dark...light...dark.

A faint slithering sound sprang from the cage.

He shot to the back door, grabbed the doorknob, and stopped.

If he didn't do it, Oggie and Speck sure wouldn't. He had lost count of how many times he had begged their crazy asses to do it. Twenty. Thirty. It didn't matter. They would rather stick their hands in boiling molasses than listen to him until it was too late. With their crackbrained ideas about research, maybe not even then.

Results trump all, Dr. Speck constantly harped like it was a proverb. *Even the law.*

Without a doubt, that “all” included murder. The other two would never let him live if they found out he was the one who did it.

“*Non sum qualis eram.*” He tore his feet from the spot they were glued to and ripped open a drawer. *Where is it!*

He jerked open another. A third. *No, no, no!* A fourth.

No tranq gun!

The hell with it.

He yanked out a hypodermic needle with a barrel the size of the Coke can sitting on the table in front of him, then grabbed the bottle of probetalamisol. The urine-colored tranquilizer would take effect in five seconds, ten tops.

Shit! Without the tranq gun, he had to get close enough to inject it. So close that in a heartbeat, his flesh could be reduced to half-eaten scraps of offal, clinging to fragments of broken bones. Heaven help his sister then. He filled the syringe with every drop of tranquilizer it could hold. The light dimmed. *Don't do this to me. Not now.* If that lone light went out altogether, his chances of surviving would be slim and none, and slim suddenly hauled ass back up the stairs.

The jerry-rigged electrical system was always somewhere between a hiccup and a fart, which was not a shock considering all the electrical equipment gobbling up power from a system that had been around since Edison.

Why don't you call in a professional electrician, Oggie? Why don't you get the system upgraded, Doc? As if his opinion counted around there. He couldn't wheedle them into calling the fire department if the place was burning to the ground or anyone else with a working pair of eyes.

The light brightened again, then a loud thud came from behind him. What was that! His head whiplashed around so fast that a lightning bolt of pain shot up the back of his neck.

Oh God! No!

Dr. Zebb Speck stood at the bottom of the stairs. Between Oggie and the doc, the more dangerous one had caught him. Dr. Speck was always packing, and he liked to boast about it. *I got enough guns to start World War III by my doggone self.*

The doc wouldn't need to check the traps in the woods. Daniel was going to be the animal's next meal, murdered and tossed into the cage where claws and teeth would sunder his body and all the evidence would be consumed.

Brandishing his usual condescending sneer, Dr. Speck cleaned his eyeglasses with the shirttail of his red-and-black checkered shirt.

Had he seen the syringe? No way. Daniel still had a heartbeat.

He eased the needle behind his back and fired a finger at the cage. "It moved! I heard it!"

The doc put his eyeglasses back on and waved a dismissive hand. "Ah, pish posh," he said in an accent as country as collard greens. "The amount of probetalamisol I just shot into that thing would knock out Godzilla. I swear, if you were any more of a chicken, I'd have to pluck feathers off your ass."

Professor Ogladorff walked in carrying a Skil cordless drill. "I found it. Oh, Daniel, you're early."

Daniel's shoulders slumped. "Looks like we all are," he mumbled under his breath. The only thing he could salvage from this fustercluck was that Dr. Frankenfarmer and Dr. Frankenforeigner seemed oblivious to what he had come there to do, a plan now shot to shit. "Why isn't the front on that thing?"

The doc had the figure of a man who probably buttered his butter with butter. "Well, it would have been if you had gotten your patookus out of bed and been here to help us finish assembling the cage. We had to wrangle that heavy animal from the concrete cage to the portable one, just the two of us. We're about ready for the animal cargo company to come pick it up." He lumbered by with his brown ostrich-skin cowboy boots tapping against the cement floor, then stopped in

front of the open cage with his back to it and a *dégagé* air as if that was safe. “I was so excited that this day had finally come, I didn’t know whether to take off running or stand still. I called Oggie and glory be. He was already halfway to my farm, so we got an early start.”

Daniel cracked open the drawer behind his back and slipped the syringe into it. “Doc, I didn’t see your truck out front when I drove up. Where is it?”

“We took the boat in.”

“Why’d you do that?”

“Why are you so concerned about how we got here?” Speck shuffled over to the front of the cage leaning against the wall. “The milk’ll turn to clabber waiting on you. Don’t just stand there. Grab hold of the other end.”

Daniel rolled down his sleeves against the chill, schlepped over, and grabbed one end of the slab of metal. A dark green leather-covered cushion that was a close match to the color of the animal’s hide padded the center of the side facing him. The two of them lifted the metal slab and sidled over to the cage where Oggie stood ready with the drill. They flipped the cushioned side toward the body of the cage and lined it up.

The animal lay with the rubbery hide of its back separated from Daniel by ten inches of putrid air billowing up from the massive hump inside the cage. “God. That’ll blacken your lungs,” he said. Compared to this stench, the smell of decomposing animal parts was a field of ripe strawberries. The top of the cage came up to his chin, and he hit the six-foot mark. Cushioning also covered the inside of the other three walls and the top of the cage. “What’s with the padding, Doc?”

“If we protect what’s inside the cage, we protect everything that’s outside it.”

“Padding. Hot dang,” Daniel scoffed. Nothing could go wrong during that long flight now. They had a razor-thin piece of leather and an inch or two of fluff to save them.

A faint sound arose from the dark lair, the sound of rough hide slithering across taut leather.

“You hear that?” Daniel asked.

Oggie shook his head. “Not so much as an eyelash quivered. I would know. I’m closer to it.”

“Yeah, but your ears have thirty-three more years of wear and tear on them than mine.”

“You’re frightened of the megateratoid. That’s all.”

“Oggie, frightened is what I was *before* I found out the front wasn’t on the cage.” Every nightmare Daniel ever had lurked in the darkness of that vile thing, every monster that hid in his closet when he was a child, every steel-cold hand that waited under his bed to grab him by the ankles, and every shadow that came to life by the light of a full moon.

“Daniel, will you stop all this nonsense about the mega-T?” Dr. Speck snapped. “You might as well drag a string of barbed wire across my nerves. The sooner we get this done, the sooner we can go have breakfast. I’m hungry enough to eat the ass end out of a low flying duck.”

Daniel listened. There was only husky breathing now.

Oggie jabbed a Phillips-head bit into the cordless drill and raised it over his head as if the sight of it would spur them on.

Daniel hoisted his end up and got a better grip. “Let’s just get this thing attached. The edges are sharp, and it’s starting to bite into my fing—”

Green flesh stabbed up through the gap and lashed at his face. He jerked his head away as the flesh whipped by within an inch and fanned his hair back. Dr. Speck dropped his end. Professor Ogladorff just stood there, frozen, holding the cordless drill over his head like a traumatized Statue of Liberty. Daniel dropped his end and took off across the room while the loud peal of metal crashing against the cement floor echoed behind him.

“Get the probetalamisol!” Oggie said, coming out of his stupor.

The doc hustled over to the long table in front of the cage. His inner thighs rubbing together sounded like he was sawing down a redwood. He filled a hypodermic needle to a third of what Daniel had filled his. Even from across the room, Daniel could see his hand shaking, a sight he had never seen in the two years he had been working there. The doc leaned down and disappeared. Through the holes in the cage, Daniel could see thrashing shadows and slashing green hide while the sounds of loud rustling and violent slapping against the leather interior billowed from the cage. The sounds waned until... Silence. He searched the other side of the cage. There was no sign of the doc and, more important, no sign of *life* from the doc.

Daniel edged back over. What remained of the syringe trembled in the doc’s hand. All six inches of the needle’s steel tip were eaten away except a remnant the length of a pencil tip. The doc laid the needle down on the table but never took his eyes off the cage.

Where was that cocky asshole who turned his back to the cage now? Looked like Daniel wasn’t the only chicken in the room.

He tuned an ear to the cage. *Ah*. Heavenly silence.

Oggie laid the drill on the table. “Zebb, we can’t go through with this. The mega-T has become too difficult to control, too unpredictable, and there are still far too many unknowns.”

Dr. Speck scoffed and shook his head.

“He’s right, Doc,” Daniel said. “He should know. He created it. And all the others,” he added, waving a hand across the room at the glass cabinets that lined the entire wall from floor to ceiling. A creep show. Shelves of glass jars filled with formaldehyde and creatures that gave him

the willies. Recombinant DNA research run amuck. Thank God those abominations didn't exist anywhere else on earth. They wouldn't exist *period* without Professor Wilhelm Klaus Ogladorff—one sick son of a bitch.

Jar after jar. From the size of beer cans to beer kegs. All neatly arranged and not a speck of dust on them. It was a twisted man's trophy display, crazy shit *showcased*, no less, in order of creation from top left to bottom right. And each had a pristine white laminated label attached with the name Oggie had given it and the date of creation. Not one label had faded or yellowed. The first one read: SIMBUKTERON, 1981. It looked like someone had zapped a small animal in the microwave until it burst. The label on the second read: SIMBUKTANNY, 1982. It was similar to the first one and was just as disgusting, but this one showed how much Oggie's skills had progressed in a single year. It was a vast improvement with clearly identifiable features. Four paws. A tail. Teeth.

Every jar showed a quantum leap in Oggie's ability to take fragments of DNA from different animals and combine them to form a new primogenial creature that had to be an affront to God.

The last cabinet. Man, that thing. Daniel would jump in the slimy water out back, moccasins and all, if he could see that thing sinking to the bottom of the lake. Except for the last one, the one in the cage, he wouldn't have to look at Oggie's newest creatures then, unspeakable monstrosities from the first to the last. A frog with a snake's elongated, serpentine body; a rainbow trout with a scorpion's curly tail; a rabbit with a duck's white feathers and webbed feet; a bird with a piranha's wedge-shaped teeth; a hairless goat with a kangaroo's two short front legs and a pouch; a striped octopus with a tiger's yellow eye and a shark's black eye; and a gray and green speckled baby crocodile with a rhinoceros's horn, a hog's feet, and an opossum's tail. On and on. Nightmare after nightmare.

Oggie's last creation—as far as Daniel knew—lay inside the cage, far too big to fit inside any of the jars.

Daniel brightened. “Doc, we should euthanize the mega-T. Administer an overdose. It would die peacefully.” If they hadn't come early, the doc would be all weepy at that very moment, moaning about how he had accidentally administered the overdose himself, and Daniel would be so happy he would be laughing out of his ass.

Dr. Speck said, “We *have* to go through with this. Don't forget, I had a hand in this too. If you think I'm willing to throw away all my years of hard work and all the relationships I've built with Granthom Research Group and everyone else who invested in this research, then there's a hollow space in your head with a sign that reads THIS SPACE FOR RENT. My name, my reputation is on the line.”

Ogladorff ran a hand through what was left of his hair. “Zebb, you saw what just happened. Call GRG and tell them it's off. To think it's safe to take the megateratoid out of these woods now, one would have to abandon all common logic.”

The doc threw up his hands. “Come on, Oggie. It'll be out the whole time.”

“It *should* be in a giant jar of formaldehyde the whole time,” Daniel said. “It was supposed to be out a few minutes ago when it came within inches of taking my head off, right?”

“In a state of chemically induced hibernation.” The doc hurled an evil grimace at Daniel. “You big baby. Big difference.”

“The mega-T can hibernate?” Granted, his field was mitochondrial DNA, not recombinant DNA, but maybe it was time for him to check his master’s for an expiration date.

“All mammals have the innate ability to hibernate, Daniel,” Professor Ogladorff said. “Even humans.”

“I thought you stopped drinking, Professor. You didn’t just fall off the wagon; you must have gotten run over by it too.” Humans hibernating. Ridiculous. A tall tale of the Rip Van Winkle sort. But it had come from the mouth of the man who had collaborated on countless science textbooks that universities used all over the world. Oggie was a sixty-five-year-old Albert Einstein with bad intentions.

“It’s true,” the doc said. “In 1999, a woman in Norway was submerged in icy water for more than an hour. No heartbeat. Wasn’t breathing. Her body temperature was down to 57°F. She lived. In 2001, that toddler in Canada...” Deep ruts appeared between the two gray thickets above his eyes. “...ah, ah...”

“Erika Nordby,” Oggie said.

Dr. Speck unfurrowed his brows. “Right. She slipped out of the house in the middle of the night at 11° below zero in just a diaper and T-shirt. Her heart stopped beating for two hours. She lived. And I can’t count the times I’ve seen on the news where someone has stowed away in the wheel wells of an airplane and survived a flight for hours in sub-zero temperatures.”

“What the media proclaimed to be *miracles* was simply hydrogen sulfide,” Oggie said in that easy professor’s voice of his. “It’s found naturally in our bodies, binding to the cells in the absence of oxygen. But with an increase in hydrogen sulfide, the cells’ activity practically stops, and that cuts the body’s need for oxygen down close to zero. Excess hydrogen sulfide temporarily changes humans from warm-blooded mammals to cold-blooded ones, which is *precisely* what happens to mammals that hibernate naturally.”

It could be true. More likely than not it was, with Oggie’s academic acuity. Despite that, after the debacle that just happened, neither one of them could sell him a dollar for a dime. Daniel fished his truck keys out of his pocket. “I’m sorry. I can’t go through with this. If all the things you two warned me about are true, no one should come within a hundred miles of that thing again.” *Until I have a chance to kill it.*

“I guess what everyone is saying about you is true,” the doc said.

“No. I am not what I once was. Not anymore.”

“You’re a has-been who never was.” The doc’s words were shards of glass that cut to the bone. “Besides, what about your sister, Daniel?”

“Zebb!” Oggie said. “That’s low.”

Daniel shook his head at Dr. Speck, insensitive son of a bitch. Above him, the bare boards of the unfinished basement resembled giant bones. Fitting. He was trapped in the belly of a mammoth beast in a way. He exhaled a long sigh. “We’d better seal up the cage.”

“Good, you milquetoast,” the doc taunted in a way that always made Daniel’s blood surge through his body in search of a relief valve. “And check for any sign of injury first. You could have cut it when you dropped your end.”

Daniel shillyshallied toward the cage. Why rush? If they missed the flight...yay! Whoo-hoo!

The doc’s scornful eyes followed Daniel across the room. “This may take a minute, Oggie. I only have two eyes, two ears, two hands, and too little help.”

Daniel picked up the flashlight from the table and shined it through the front of the cage where one color dominated. Green animal. Green padding. Green everywhere the light landed—mostly dark green with a hint of pale green—but there was nothing out of the ordinary. He circled the rectangle and turned off the flashlight when he reached the front again. “No sign of injury.”

Oggie rubbed a forearm across the drops of sweat glistening on his forehead. “Good heavens. We must be more careful. Carelessness with the mega-T would be a horrific method by which to commit suicide.”

Daniel trudged back to the table. Another rustling sound shot from the cage behind him.

A loud *pop!*

Instant darkness. *Tink, tink, tink.* The sound of fine glass bouncing off the cement floor filled the blackness. The light bulb!

He spun back around toward the cage. Should he stand still or haul ass for the stairs? He would trip and fall half a dozen times in the dark. He kept stone still, ears searching the basement but finding no sounds coming from the cage. Not a peep from where the doc had been standing. Nothing from where the professor had—

He was still holding the flashlight.

His thumb slid onto the switch and froze. If he turned it on, the mega-T might see him before he saw it, and claws would slice him in two quicker than a chainsaw could a toothpick. Coercing his disobedient thumb, he pushed the switch forward and cringed.

“Whew!” Daniel said. It was just Dr. Speck, standing there wild-eyed and mouth agape. He swung the flashlight over to the cage where the mega-T’s side rose and fell with each breath.

“Quick!” Dr. Speck barked. “Before it wakes up again. It’s going in and out of consciousness.”

Daniel laid the flashlight on the table and aimed the beam at the cage. This time he lifted the slab of metal by himself. His left foot slid out from under him, and the front of the cage slid down his hand to his fingertips. As he hoisted it up again and reclaimed his grip, he stumbled on something. *Gotta be kidding me. What black cat’s path did I cross?* He stepped over it and lined up the holes in the front of the cage with the holes in the cage itself.

Dr. Speck stabbed a screw into the top left corner and screwed it home with the drill. Ten or twelve screws later, he stepped back from the cage. “Done.”

Daniel grabbed the flashlight and pointed it at the floor. “Doc, look!” The slip mark that his foot had made cut through a puddle of blood, and something black lay at the edge of the red circle. He swung the beam over. “Nooooo!”

The light rested on the professor’s right leg, which was completely severed from the knee down. It was still wearing its shoe, its sock, its pant leg, and probably Daniel’s shoeprint now. But the oddest of all was the filament from the light bulb sticking out of the calf. He swept the flashlight left. Right. “Professor!”

Oggie lay in an expanding mere of blood with three parallel gouges running diagonally from his left shoulder down to his right pelvic bone.

The doc ran over and stooped down. “Oggie!”

Oggie gurgled and coughed up a spray of blood as entrails seeped out through the gouges. “Zebb, do what Daniel suggested. You must...” He gurgled again. “...kill it. Here. Now. If you proceed...later, it could be just as lethal dead as it is alive. Maybe even more so.”

The doc caressed Oggie’s head. “You’re right. I should have listened to you. This is all my fault. I’ll do it and then I’ll call GRG and tell them we’re not going to make the flight.”

Oggie’s eyes closed, and his head thudded against the floor.

The doc stood back up. “Come on. We have to install the crate on top of the cage before Animal Land Aircargo gets here.”

He walked out of the beam of light, leaving Oggie lying on the cold floor like his riven partner was nothing more than a broken jar of pickles on the kitchen floor.

“But you just promised Oggie that—”

“Now, Daniel!”

Heavy, raspy breathing filled the cold silence.

“Doc, what did Oggie mean?”

“Get your lazydinkus over here and help me put the crate on. The truck just pulled up.”

“How the hell could the mega-T be more lethal dead than it is alive?”

CHAPTER 4

What the hell did I drink? Quentin was still a little woozy, and he couldn't remember anything between the time he strapped on Razor's collar to take him for a walk yesterday and waking up on the patio early this morning. His head felt like there were a hundred tiny men trapped inside his skull, all trying to hammer their way out—busy little bastards. Going on a bender like the one he had yesterday was new territory for him. Sure, he had tossed back more than his share of the teeter-totter water since he lost his wife and baby girl, a hell of a lot more than his share, but he had never blacked out drunk in his life. *Whatever it was, they should stop making that shit.*

He pried through the hurry-scurry of Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport and arrived at Gate E31. As he weaved around a woman and a little girl standing at the entrance, a redhead caught his attention. The man was stealthy. Quentin had to give him that. Smooth. A real pro. Part of an air marshal's job was to spot odd shit like that. He walked over to the redhead's row with a black leather carry-on bag digging into his shoulder and a cup of perk in each hand. He flopped down directly across from the thatch of curly hair poking above a copy of *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. If the man's hair was any redder, it would catch fire.

A *paper* newspaper? Well, la-dee-da. It had been some time since Quentin had read a newspaper, printed or otherwise, so who was he to judge?

“You look like you didn't get much sleep last night,” Red said without so much as a peek over or around the paper.

How does he know what I look like? Quentin stared at the back of the still paper. “I guess I got about a wink and a half.” That was his new normal since life did a hit and run and left him for dead, although no one could ever accuse him of not doing his part. He was unhappily married to the job and having an affair with the bottle.

“Those two cups of coffee certainly won't help you sleep. Don't count on them to fix that hangover either.”

Without a doubt, the aroma gave away the coffee, but how did he know Quentin had two cups instead of one? Screw that. How did the redhead know he had a hangover? He damn sure did, one for the record books, but it couldn't have been that obvious. Covertly studying the passengers waiting to board Flight 1219 to Cape Town was one thing, but now Red was doing

the same thing to him. The difference was that in Quentin's case, not one time did the man move from behind the newspaper.

Quentin examined the back of *AJC's* Monday edition. There wasn't a single peephole. He tossed the first cup of forty weight down his gullet without tasting it and started on the second one.

A bright flash.

It was just the lights reflecting off the corner of a silver briefcase, one of those strong metal jobs. The pudgy man carrying it walked by in a brown tweed blazer and brown ostrich-skin cowboy boots. For a man who had to be on the past tense side of sixty, he had a head full of hair, silver hair, thick and bristly. He must have a wolf somewhere in his family tree.

"Do I have to do everything?" the man with the briefcase asked. "I only have two eyes, two ears, two hands, and too little help."

The younger man walking with him had the face of a pallbearer; his ice-blue eyes, distant and solemn, his face, stern. His hand zipped and unzipped the front of his jacket nonstop. When he looked up at the windows, his somber face twisted into a scowl.

"What are you gawking at?" The hairy one looked up, and his mouth dropped open.

The newspaper simultaneously flipped to the next page and moved down enough for two green eyes to get a gander above it at the man clutching the silver briefcase. They paid a blink's worth of attention to it and less than half as much to the man holding it.

Hungover or not, old Quentin Kane saw every minute movement as easily as if the newspaper and the eyes reading it, or pretending to read it, had moved in slow motion.

Still, Red never so much as glanced in his direction. "Do the sleeping pills give you the shakes too, my friend?"

Quentin looked down. His hands were shaking ever so slightly. How the hell did he know that?