

CHAPTER 4

I napped for less than an hour before waking with a start from a nightmare that had featured a black panther-like animal leaping for my throat. It was a beautiful, sunny morning outside but all I could think about was mom lying in a hospital bed. I was sitting in the kitchen nursing a coffee when Hanna knocked quietly on the door.

"I couldn't get to sleep," she said as she handed me a bag full of food. "Fast food breakfast for two. You can pour me a coffee to go with it, if you wouldn't mind."

As we ate, Hanna opened her computer and briefed me on the latest news from the website. "Nothing new on the SETI business but it sure has created one heck of a buzz online. If it is legit then we can finally prove what everybody with half a brain already knows: that intelligent life exists on other planets."

"Myself, I'd have to see an alien walking down Main Street before I'll believe it. I mean, radio waves could be created by some kind of natural source that we don't know about yet, the equivalent of that mysterious Morse code signal they were investigating in *On the Beach*."

"Ah, Nevil Shute's novel about the end of human life on the planet," she said. "Excellent read, excellent movie, but no comparison. Obviously science has progressed quite a bit since it was written. What SETI has identified so far is a sound resembling a whistle, as opposed to a hissing noise, which is how radio waves from space normally sound. If I remember correctly, in *On the Beach* they were searching San Diego for the source of a signal they'd detected. It turned out to be a window shade moving in the breeze and accidentally hitting the transmitter key, or something like that. If you ask me, the fact that the signals were random gibberish should have been enough of a clue that they weren't being sent by a human, but I guess since all life on Earth was about to be extinguished they had nothing better to do with what little time they had left anyway."

"So we'll know fairly quickly if the SETI thing is a hoax?"

"It may take a while but I think I can guarantee that scientists working on this latest unidentified signal will easily be able to tell the difference between randomly-generated space gibberish and party invitations from aliens addressed to other sentient beings."

"And then you'll have enough material to keep your blog going for a decade."

"My first major blog topic! Hopefully they're not the movie kind of aliens, in which case they're probably on their way here to devour all of us for dinner, but yeah, either way I get to write about it so it's good for business."

"Let me know if you need a handyman around your virtual office, because it's possible I'll be looking for a different job soon. Even though my specialty is cleaning up elephant dung, I wouldn't mind branching out into other areas."

"Now I'm starting to feel guilty about leaving town for university. Don't forget, we've still got the summer together. Before I go anywhere we'll make sure everything possible is being done for your mom and then we'll get your future sorted out. Makes me feel good to deal with other people's problems for a change. Mine are so boring, like worrying if I'm losing Goth points because I don't conform to their usual liberal point of view."

"I've hung around with you and some of your bizarre Goth friends long enough that I can say beyond any shadow of a doubt that you're no PlastiGoth, even though you're not strictly PC according to their twisted standards."

"As if a reference from a geek like you would do me any good with them!"

"I'm glad you're here with me, Hanna, even if it is temporary. It isn't easy being in this house alone, knowing that she's never coming back."

"Before I forget, have you had a chance to phone people at work to let them know what happened?"

"Yeah, just before you got here I made a couple of calls to my other employers and both of hers. I've managed to get a few days off everywhere except the Hugo project. They'd already heard about her illness at mom's fulltime workplace, but I had to break the news to them at her part-time job. She didn't have a lot of friends, other than your father, so there weren't many people to call. Kind of sad, when you think about it."

"Her whole life revolved around her favorite son," Hanna said. "That reminds me, you're going to start running out of things now that your mother isn't doing the shopping. What are you going to do for money? Are you going to be able to afford to stay here?"

I hadn't really considered my options yet. "Actually, I think this family is now officially destitute, judging by the quantity of bills that have been accumulating around here lately. I'm not sure how much mom's got in the bank, but probably not a lot. She pretty much lived from paycheck to paycheck, you know. I couldn't help much because I've had to save up for tuition."

"Is there a mortgage on the house?"

"I know there's a mortgage but I haven't got a clue how that works, or how much we owe the bank. I guess I'm probably going to have to sell the place and move into an apartment or something."

She smiled. "My father will be able to figure out where you stand if we bring him all your mom's financial records. He does our own taxes. Say, are we still on for the prom? I'll understand if you don't feel like going, of course."

"Like the doctor said, life goes on. I'll do my best not to kill all your fun, because I know how much this means to you."

"Good. For what it's worth I think it's the right thing do. Oh, and before I forget, as I left the house Dad handed me an envelope that he wanted me to give you. I believe it's got some cash in it, and he said to tell you he considers it a loan, repayable after you make your first million."

"I don't know what to say, except thanks." I removed the bills from the envelope without counting them and jammed the money into my shirt

pocket. "He's been a good friend to mom over the years, even if he doesn't exactly approve of me dating his only daughter. I suppose he's happy about your choice of universities, since it means we'll no longer be going out together?"

"He doesn't hate your guts, if that's what you mean, but let's just say he didn't object very loudly. Don't forget, he's a big-time liberal activist so I suspect he's kind of hoping that exposure to a liberal university atmosphere will cure me of my conservative tendencies. The fact that you probably won't be able to follow me there is a bonus as far as he's concerned."

"While he's in such a generous mood, you might ask him if he's aware of any jobs where I can work my way up to CEO without having to waste my time flipping burgers even though I have no qualifications or experience and I don't like interfacing with people very much. My needs are modest, but a six-figure salary should cover them."

She laughed out loud. "Typical student. Don't forget that you're one of the few people in the country who can honestly claim they're part of a research project studying how elephants communicate. That's got to count for something."

"The difference between you and me is that you have the self-confidence and the raw talent necessary to actually pull it off. Let's face it, I shovel elephant dung out of Hugo's cage at the research center and run errands for the people who actually do the real work. Most of them happen to sport the title "Doctor" in front of their names. Pretty hard to make me look like somebody important when I haven't even got a degree, let alone my high school diploma, don't you think?"

"The truth is, from what you've told me, if you hadn't established a rapport with Hugo this project wouldn't have gone ahead. Then all those scientists and all their fancy equipment would have had to look for some other animal subject to focus on. They need you, and they as much as said so when the paper did that big story about their research last month. I saw it on the Internet and linked to it on my old blog"

"Too bad they didn't bother to mention my name at the time. Hey, maybe I can get a reference from my good friend Hugo if they actually figure out how he communicates," I said, laughing. "Think he can spell 'scatologist' or should I just enclose a sample of what an elephant's byproducts look like so potential employers will understand exactly what it is I do for a living?"

She shot me a brief smile, and then turned serious again. "I probably know you as well as anyone does, and if your intention was to become an academic, well, I just can't see that happening. You're too much of an independent thinker and you'd never be able to conform to all their silly rules and play all their stupid games. On the other hand, don't ever sell yourself short. No matter what happens with this project you've always got plenty of options outside of university."

"I sometimes think I'd be happy just working with elephants for the rest of my life but I know that isn't going to happen. Besides, I'm not sure how much longer they're going to keep Hugo around for their experiments. He's on loan, sort of, but the zoo may not have room for him anymore and I'm afraid nobody else will want him because of his history. I don't know

what will happen to him then. I guess maybe he and I will both be looking for a place to live. Wonder if he snores?"

"Somehow I can't see the two of you sharing an apartment. You're too messy, for a start. Even if the university does terminate you, you've still got your other part-time jobs to fall back on so at least you can earn enough to feed yourself while you deal with your mom's illness. When you're ready, we'll take dad out to dinner and talk to him about it. Some of his former students decided music was never going to earn them a decent living so they ended up going into business for themselves. They're always looking for workers with a good attitude, and of course dad will give you a great recommendation because I'll tell him to."

There was so much to think about. Some of it was almost too painful for me to contemplate at the moment but I knew I couldn't allow myself to slip into self-pity mode.

"Maybe we should start looking for mom's financial stuff now, if you've got time. When do you have to leave to decorate the auditorium?"

"I told the committee I'd show up if they needed an extra body, but so far I haven't received any e-mails asking me for help. I told them what's going on with your mom. If they really need me they know how to get hold of me. It's not for a couple of hours anyway, so meanwhile let's start going through your mom's papers. Find us a cardboard box and we'll just load it with everything that looks like it has anything to do with money."

My mother didn't believe in organizing her finances, or anything else in her life for that matter, so we ended up with a box full of bankbooks, bills and credit card receipts after going through the desk in the living room. I was tempted to toss the stack of bills that had accumulated over the last few months into the garbage can but dropped them into the box instead after Hanna pointedly remarked that they couldn't be ignored forever. When the phone rang, I walked into the kitchen to take the call. The conversation was over in less than a minute.

"Andy, you look like you just saw a ghost. Was that about your mother?"

"No," I said as I continued examining papers and tossing them either into the box or the garbage can. "I've just been informed that I have an appointment at noon with the principal to discuss Keith's accusation. Maybe this is going to be a problem after all."

She looked at me as if she wanted to talk about it, but I made it clear that I didn't by avoiding her gaze and continuing what I was doing. I thought we were finished with the document search after I'd finally cleaned out the desk, but Hanna reminded me that we hadn't checked the attic yet.

"I hadn't thought of that, but it's a good idea. I've never been up there before, you know. The door is always locked and I've never been allowed inside."

First I had to dig my mother's house keys out of her purse, which felt wrong because I would never have dreamt of touching it before today. Her privacy was always very important to her and I'd always respected that. I unlocked the attic door and we made our way cautiously up the creaking wooden stairs. I expected to find a dusty room full of junk and I wasn't

disappointed. It reminded me of the kind of storage rooms you might expect to find in the basement of a museum. There were piles of old stuff, abandoned light fixtures and furniture, as well as boxes and crates stacked high with long-forgotten bits and pieces from life in the forties and fifties.

We looked through the boxes first, but most of the contents dated back to well before I was born. There were old wooden crates full of dishes, cutlery, blankets and linen, as well as several boxes full of old papers and mementos.

"It looks like mom saved everything she inherited from her parents and stored all of it up here in the attic. I can't believe she kept all this junk."

Hanna absently leafed through some photo albums, then passed one to me and pointed to a page where two prints were missing. "That's strange. These are obviously your family albums, and yet there's not one picture of your mother in any of them. I wonder if she removed them for some reason."

"I don't have a clue. I've never seen them before."

"There aren't even any baby pictures of her left," she said. "It's like somebody wanted to eliminate any traces of her in your family history, like those Soviet leadership photos that were doctored to erase all traces of the existence of any bigwigs who fell from favor. You can tell which ones are missing from her albums because there's a caption that mentions your mom beside each blank space."

"Maybe she didn't like the way she looked back then?" I said.

"I guess it's possible she had some self-esteem issues when she was younger, but why her baby pictures too? Is there a reason she wouldn't want anyone to see what she looked like as a child?"

"My mother? Admittedly she's a little strange, in a nice kind of way, but self-esteem problems? I don't think so."

"Yeah, she doesn't seem the type, does she? Just out of curiosity, why weren't you allowed up here in the attic?"

"I don't know. The garage out back was always off-limits to me as well, until she finally relented and let me lock my bike in there after the first one was stolen from the yard. There's an old aluminum-bodied house trailer locked up inside that hasn't been used since before I was born and she wouldn't let me go near it until recently. I burgled my way into the place once when I was just a kid but I couldn't get inside the trailer. It was locked up and you couldn't see through the windows. I remember that day well, because she found out what I'd done and grounded me for a month. I'd never seen her that angry."

"A trailer, eh? Well, that's something else you can sell to raise some cash, I guess."

As we paused at the top of the stairs, I pulled the chain on the overhead light bulb to turn it off. I stopped and pointed toward the far end of the attic.

"There's some kind of light showing through a crack in that wall. Did we forget to turn something off up here?"

"I don't think so. Must be sunlight coming through a hole in the siding. It's an old house, you know, and it probably hasn't been maintained properly over the years, what with her being a single mother and all."

"True enough. I'll come up here someday when I have more time and take a closer look at it."

I stepped aside so she could take a look. "Andy, I can't see any light from that direction, so it can't be the sun. Turn the lights on again so we can figure out what's going on. It'll only take a minute."

"You always did love a good mystery," I said as we waded through the jumble of boxes again and made our way toward that end of the attic.

"Take a look at the dust on the floor here. Neither of us traveled in this direction today, and yet you can see a trail of footprints that leads right up to that end of the attic and stops. Why would your mom walk through this area when there's nothing here to look at?"

I put one eye up to the crack in the wall and had a look. It took a few seconds for my eyesight to adjust to the different conditions, but the light was just bright enough that I could make out nearby objects illuminated by its greenish glow.

"There's another room behind this wall. Sweet!"

"You're right, I really do love these kinds of mysteries!" she said. "Imagine, a secret room, and it's hidden in your house! Get us a flashlight, will you, so we can figure out how to get inside."

I did as I was told, and after a bit of exploring we found a portion of the wall at waist height that gave way when I pressed on it. It was an access flap about six inches in diameter that blended perfectly into the wall. The flap was hinged on the top so that it swung inwards, and there was just room enough for me to put my hand through. I cautiously reached inside and undid an old-fashioned gate latch that allowed the door to swing open. There was a light bulb hanging from the ceiling and I pulled the chain to light up the space. The green light was still illuminating the room, but I chose to ignore it in hopes that it would disappear, in the same way that I was often able to turn off the synesthesia when it became tiresome.

It was like walking into a time capsule. The room, approximately six feet deep and the same shape as the rest of the attic, appeared to have been a hobbyist's workshop at one time. On one side there was an antique oak desk covered with notebooks, gadgets and various tools. On the other side of the room there was a workbench covered with more of the same.

The rest of the walls had floor-to-ceiling shelves that were crammed full of odd-looking electrical devices that appeared to be several decades old. There were several radios, an old record turntable, some fans and a variety of test equipment, all of it clean and relatively dust-free. As we began to explore the room we opened a filing cabinet built into the desk that contained dozens of technical manuals and documents. One of the drawers held dozens of file folders full of yellowed newspaper clippings and handwritten notes. Each was labeled neatly, and they covered a wide variety of topics ranging from electronics to history to current events from the sixties and seventies.

"This has obviously got to be my grandfather's hideaway. I recognize his handwriting on the notes he's left all over the place."

"What a cool little cubbyhole. I bet he spent hours and hours up here, playing with his toys and getting away from reality. What did your grandfather do for a living, by the way?"

"He was an electrical engineer for the power company. It's interesting that he chose to spend his spare time doing the same thing he was paid to do at his job, which must mean he enjoyed his profession, I guess. Come to think of it, mom mentioned once that we were still getting royalties from time to time for something he invented. It wasn't much but she said it came in handy. Maybe this is where he thought up all his ideas."

"Too bad he didn't invent something really important, like the first computer, so you wouldn't have to worry about money ever again. Still, how many people have actually patented an invention, let alone made any money from it? He must have been quite a guy."

"I wish I'd had a chance to get to know him. Mom and I are the only remaining members of our family, so it's not like there's anyone I can find to tell me more about my ancestors. Maybe I'll go through my grandfather's files when I have a chance, just in case there's information there about our family history."

"This must have been a very special place to your mom. Looks like she came up here regularly to clean."

"Yeah, it's almost like a shrine or something that she's preserved in order to remember my grandfather. I wonder why she never showed me this room."

"Maybe she sought refuge here whenever she needed a quiet place to think, somewhere her pesky son couldn't bother her," Hanna said with a smile.

She picked up a piece of paper that had been sitting on top of a pile of other documents on the desk. "Hey, I recognize this. It's a hard copy of a picture I found on the NASA website."

"It looks like a ball made out of colored ice. What is it?"

"Europa. You know, Jupiter's moon. This is an image they obtained from one of their spacecraft that did a flyby a while ago. Galileo I think it was."

"How the heck did this picture end up in our attic?"

"I was talking to your mom about Europa one day after I heard it being discussed at an online NASA press conference. What I found fascinating is that they discovered Europa has ice covering its surface, although there's still a lot we don't know about how it got there and what's underneath it. Your mom seemed quite interested when I mentioned it to her, so I made a color printout of the page that afternoon and dropped it in your mailbox. I'm surprised she kept it, actually."

"She really enjoyed talking to you, Hanna. She always said debating you stopped her brain from deteriorating."

"Your mom was a very smart woman and a good listener, and she had an insatiable interest in almost every subject I ever discussed with her. Had she been born a couple of decades later, I swear she'd have been a science nerd, just like me. I'm really going to miss her."

The green light was originating from somewhere underneath a pile of equipment stacked on one of the shelves. I jumped as a strangely familiar sound suddenly began emanating from the same general area. It was similar to my earworm, only I wasn't hearing it inside my mind now. As the music

grew louder it was accompanied by a stream of green luminescence that began to flow gracefully from the bench toward the floor and then curled around the room randomly until it had settled like a fog at our feet.

I was transfixed by the spectacle, but Hanna seemed disinterested as she stood waiting for me.

"Can't you hear that?" I asked.

"What?" she said, with a look of puzzlement on her face.

"Then I guess there's no point in asking you if you're seeing what I'm seeing right now?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she replied, and then stared at me with a concerned look on her face. "Andy, what are you talking about?"

I struggled to make some sense of what I was experiencing. The green light was unlike anything I'd ever seen before. It was definitely associated to the music, which was eerily similar to my earworm, almost as if it had been created by the same musician. It was the same melody, really, but very different in a way that I couldn't quite analyze. Whatever it was, Hanna obviously couldn't see it or hear it.

"Must be a weird side effect of the synesthesia kicking in, I guess. I'm seeing something glowing in the dark inside this room. It's probably nothing." I tried to keep my voice sounding casual, but it still sounded pretty shaky to me.

Was this a hallucination? I wondered what, if anything, this had to do with the matter my mother wanted to discuss with me before the brain tumor triggered her coma. I felt angry with her for waiting to share her news with me until it was too late, although that flash of anger was immediately replaced by overwhelming feelings of sorrow and regret. It struck me then that I was really going to miss having her around as a sounding board whenever I ran into problems I couldn't handle on my own. Problems like the one confronting me now in this hidden room. It took every ounce of courage I possessed, which admittedly didn't amount to much, to stop myself from turning tail and fleeing the house.

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