

Chapter 1 - Wednesday, January 08, 1969

The Beginning

Margaret McLeod stared out her window. Her ninth-floor apartment offered a glorious, unobstructed view of the New York City skyline. The sun shone so brightly with a sky so crystal blue that for a moment Maggie almost forgot that just last night was the worst storm winter had dealt up yet. The plows had already made their multiple passes so that the City of Newark was alive once again. The sunlight danced on the thin layer of ice left behind giving the Ivy Hill Park Apartments an almost picture postcard look. Margaret's attention turned once more to the parking lot to see if her beloved John had arrived home. He had called her around 10:00 am to say he would be leaving work shortly. A quick glance at the clock revealed it was already going on 1:00 pm. She knew the trip home would include his regular swing by Ryan's Tavern for a quick pint or three with the boys before he made it home. Sure John drank a bit but Margaret never let that bother her. After all he was a happy drunk. He was a good husband and he would make a great daddy.

"Any Day now kids," is what the doctor had said to them on their last visit. "This little one is just about ready to say hello to the world."

Everyone thought for sure Maggie would give birth on Christmas Day. A thought which filled her with dread. But now here it was January and still no baby. Not that she was in any hurry. The very thought of bringing a baby in to these crazy times scared her to death. John had told her time and time again that she would make a fine mom. Of that she really had no doubt. Maggie already loved this little baby more than she could possibly love anything or anyone else. But that didn't change the fact that the 1960s were a crazy time. She was scared. Scared for herself. Scared for her husband. But mostly scared for the life she carried inside her.

Since the news that she was with child she and John had discussed leaving Newark, NJ many times, but where would they go? Much to their fortune the mayhem that was the Newark Riots in the summer of 1967 never made it up to the Vailsburg section of the city so their contribution to "White Flight" would be put on hold for now. Maggie felt the baby kick. She instinctively rubbed her belly.

She was so lost in thought she just barely noticed John's car pull in to his parking spot in the lot down below. She hurried in to the kitchen to put a light under the coffee pot. Lifting the lid off of the Dutch oven she daintily sampled the homemade chili she had been cooking all morning.

"What a perfect day for chili," she thought.

Margaret slid in to the bathroom and starting combing out her hair so to kill some time before John got off of the elevator and opened the apartment door. From the time he parked his car to the time he stepped off the elevator and in through the door of their

ninth floor apartment took between seven to nine minutes. It was the longest wait of her day. Almost three years of marriage and Maggie still got flustered knowing he was on his way up. John McLeod was truly the love of her life.

“Maggie my love! I’m home,” John sang out!

With a half-hearted waive similar to that the Queen of England would give to her subjects as she drove by in her procession, Maggie tried her best to play it off as if she were disinterested. As if she weren’t counting his footsteps from the elevator to the apartment doorway. But John knew better. For as much as she loved him, he loved her tenfold.

He was a senior at Vailsburg High School when he first laid eyes on Margaret Donovan. She was a junior. He remembered like it was yesterday the very first time he looked in to those deep green eyes. At that moment every lie he ever told, every bit of male ego, just seemed to melt away. John was in love. There would never be another. Unfortunately their courtship was short lived. As a graduation present John received a draft notice. He was shipped off to Viet Nam in November of 1965. John served in the United States Marine Corps for all of four months when a bullet caught him in the side of the head. The end result was temporary blindness and a one way ticket home. Back to his beloved Maggie. John remembers that day as the luckiest day of his life. That following April, 1966 Newark Police Officer John McLeod took Margaret Donovan as his wife.

“I’ll be right out love,” she called as she snuck back in to the bathroom. She quick fixed and fluffed herself as best she could. Her Johnny was home. She could forget all her troubles for now.

“How’s my girl,” he asked as he swept her in to his arms. “...and how’s my baby boy?”

“Oh John. You are going to be so disappointed when little Margaret Junior makes her grand entrance,” she mused as she lightly smacked his chest.

“Don’t even try it love. Look at that belly of yours. Just one look and I know it’s a boy! You know how? Baby girls are tiny. So therefore if we were having a girl that belly would be tiny. You my Dear, are a COW!”

Maggie unbuttoned his top button, grabbed his chest hair and gave a sharp yank. “You jerk,” she said between chuckles!

Ow, ow! I’m sorry! You’re not a cow honey. I was only messing. I could really go for a cup of coffee now so if you could please moooove, moooooo!”

John darted past her and towards kitchen. He probably would have made it if it were not for her deadly accuracy with a bedroom slipper. With the grace of an elk and the blinding speed of a cheetah she removed her slipper and winged it across the room. John was a scant two feet from the kitchen door when the flying footwear connected solidly with the back of his head.

"No then," she said. "I may be a cow but you are an ass John McLeod!"

Maggie and John enjoyed each other's company for the next couple of hours over a pot of coffee and some steaming homemade chili. Afterward John showered and readied himself for bed. Maggie laid beside him and watched him drift off to sleep. Before long her mind was drifting off to a place where she loved to be. In the confines of their apartment and the comfort of her husband's arms all was right with the world. Maggie reached down and rubbed her belly.

"Newark is a fine place to start a family. We're going to be just fine little one." With that Maggie too drifted off to sleep.

Wake Up! It's Time!

It was about 5:45 pm when Maggie stirred from her nap. As consciousness stirred Maggie became aware of a dull pain in her stomach. Eleven minutes later she felt the pain again. This time a little more pointed and pronounced. Sitting up she felt an odd gush, and realized the bed sheets were soaked through with a red tinged water.

"Oh my God," she cried out! "Okay. Don't panic! We are ready for this! John. JOHN! Wake up! It's time!"

"Time for what baby," John asked through a voice thick with groggy confusion?

"Time to have this baby you Jackass! Now wake up!"

"Oh shit! Oh shit!" John sprang out of bed as if it were on fire and he was just now feeling the heat. He grabbed his pants he had laid on the dresser. As he jumped in to his jeans he noticed the blood tinged sheets. "Oh my God honey! You're bleeding to death! I will call and ambulance!"

"John. Calm down. It's just my water. I broke my water. It's normal." John's panic had kicked in a sense of calm within Maggie. Someone needed to stay calm. "Now would you relax and put your pants on before you split your dumb head open and I have to call you an ambulance?"

John looked again at the blood stained sheets and quivered. "This is normal? What in God's name does abnormal look like? I've seen less bloody homicide investigations!"

Fortunately John's panic had the reverse effect on Maggie. She knew someone had to remain sane. "John. It is going to be okay love. I just need to get to the hospital. NOW!"

John snatched Maggie's bag that had been neatly packed and stored in the bedroom closet for the better part of two months. He made a mad dash to the kitchenette and grabbed his

car keys off the counter. Maggie was already in her coat and down the hallway waiting on the elevator. John raced down the hallway to be at Maggie's side.

Less than ten minutes later they were in the car and headed down Manor Drive.

"John will you please calm down? I'd really like to make it to the hospital in one piece. Why don't you pull over and let the car warm up a bit? These windows are so foggy I don't know how you can see out of them?"

"I can see just fine hon. Really. We will be at the hospital in no time."

John put on his best face and his most charming smile but inside he was shaking to his very core. The right turn on to Mount Vernon Ave. came up just a bit quicker than John had expected. He turned hard to compensate for his error. As the Chevy Impala skidded across the black ice Maggie looked up in time to see the 107 bus coming straight at them. She wasn't sure if the bus or John was going to be able to stop in time. As she looked at the bus she could make out the driver and knew in that instant that his face was the last thing she would ever see. Maggie could see his face clearly now. The last thought she would ever have, "Why is that bus driver smiling?"

Chapter 2 - 107675.9.16 Galactic Calendar

Kasteria, KOI System

She had grown up in the capital city of Kalista. The jewel of the KOI System. Alena Arincha was the youngest daughter of Ambassador Gustav Arincha. She and her older sister Gina, or “Gigi as she affectionately called her, attended finest schools, most notable social events and were generally A-List anywhere they went on the entire planet or any of Kasteria’s fifty satellite communities within the KOI System.

Alena remembered the media frenzy that buzzed around Gina for the better part of a sector when she elected to join the Galactic Council and take a post on a planet they had been studying for millennia. The civilization of that planet, and she used that word loosely, called their home world “Earth”. Alena had always thought the name a bit amusing. Yet it was somehow fitting for its inhabitants. The closest translation the Kasterians had in their own tongue for Earth, was “dirt”. That always put a smile on Alena’s face.

Gina would incorporate herself in to the planet’s society and study their progress. She would even make some Council sanctioned alterations along the way in hopes on one day raising the consciousness of the planets inhabitants to the point where they too could join the Galactic Council. That is if they did not destroy themselves first. The “Dirt-lings” as Alena like to call them were still a warlike people. That in of itself was nothing exclusive to their kind. Even the Kasterians had their dark past.

All-in-all it was not considered a dangerous mission. Dirt-lings and Kasterians were almost identical in appearance and genetic makeup so a Kasterian could easily blend in. They have been doing it for over ten thousand years and there has yet to be any loss of life.

Kasteria was a slightly smaller planet ever so slightly farther away from their sun compared to the planet earth. So the only discernable difference in appearance was that the average Dirt-ling was smaller and darker. They also had slightly smaller eyes. Nothing truly unusual as you could find inhabitants of “Dirt” just as tall as the average Kasterian. As for the lighter complexion, Dirt-lings came in a multitude of colors. That seemed to be the body’s protective mechanism against earth’s unstable rotation and revolutions. Temperatures on the planet’s surface varied wildly. Melatonin levels increased or decreased during the evolution of Dirt-lings creating the multitude of diverse skin colors on the planet.

For eons Kasteria rotated and revolved on a controlled scale. Even their native star could be controlled and adjusted as needed. Possibly once upon a time Kasteria itself was home to multi-colored people. If so no record of it existed. Either way what difference would it make if there were. With all of the diverse life forms in the Galaxy how could skin color possibly make any difference?

Her own studies of the planet Dirt, as she had come to refer to it revealed so many things that gave Alena pause. At any given time in Earth's history they had up to two hundred separate and independent governments. The inhabitants of the planet spoke over six thousand different languages with the average person speaking only one or two. The one thing that truly gave her the shivers was when she learned that the people of earth actually killed animals and ate their flesh.

Kasteria had animals too. But no one in their right mind would ever think of eating one. They were far too valuable to the balance of the ecology to ever take the life of one. Alena also wondered how much more advanced the Dirt-lings might be if they had not spent so much of their time and intellect developing six thousand languages. Sure. Every known intelligence in the Galaxy had its native tongue. The most colorful of which belonging to the Parasani. They were an avian-like species that did not possess vocal cords. Their language was a beautiful mix of clicking and whistling in tones all across the audible spectrum. Their conversations could easily pass for music on Kasteria. If not for Neuro-coms it would probably be impossible for the Parasani to communicate with any other of the Galactic Council species. For eons there had been the Standard Galactic Language. Everyone either spoke or could communicate via Neuro-com using Galactic Standard. Except of course for the Dirt-lings. But six thousand languages with the average person only speaking one or two? That would mean that most places on their own planet the Dirt-ling could go and not understand anyone around them. "No wonder they are so barbaric," Alena thought.

Despite the distance Gina kept constant communication with the Council and her family. Alena remembered the night when Gina had called her specifically. "I am getting married," Gina exclaimed!

Alena and Gina were quite close so there was no pretense of politeness or air of statehood between them. Regardless of the fact that outward disrespect towards Ambassador Gina Arincha or any Embassy Official was unthinkable. Not to mention it could result in steep fines.

Alena exploded. "You are actually going to marry a Dirt-ling? Are you out of your mind? Have they drugged you with something?"

Gina laughed out loud. "Dirt-ling huh? That is a good one Ali. I have to admit. But they call themselves Earthlings. And you ARE coming to the wedding miss!"

"I would not miss it for the world Gigi. I just wish you could be married here. On Kasteria. With all of the Pomp and Circumstance fitting that of my sister the Ambassador."

"Yes that would be nice. But you know that cannot happen. Oh. I almost forgot to tell you. We are going to have a baby!"

“A baby! That means you had sex with a dirt-ling! That is disgusting! I think I am going to be sick,” Alena teased. “So what is dirt-boys name?”

“His name is Stephan. Dr. Stephan Baker. He is a very important man doing very important work. He is kind, gentle and loving. And further, sex with a dirt-ling, oh mercy now you have me saying it! What I meant to say is that sex with Stephan is anything but disgusting,” Gina said teasingly. “You know we and the people of earth are almost exactly the same genetically. Things on earth are just, how should I say, bigger!”

“Okay enough. Really Gigi! I just ate, okay? I also share ninety eight percent of my DNA with a worm. That does not mean I am going to have sex with it!” The two sisters laughed so hard it took them a minute to catch their breath.

So when is this big wedding going to be?”

“Well it isn’t going to be a very big wedding at all. Stephan has no family. His mom and dad passed away several years ago. He has distant family but none he was ever close to. The wedding is going to be just you, mom, dad and a few people from the University where Stephan and I work.”

“You work? Like I mean as in, you have a job? Princess Gina has a job? You didn’t tell dad did you? You know he has an issue with his blood pressure.”

“Very funny Ali. You have become quite the joker since I have left I see. Well we all cannot spent our evenings skipping the satellite communities with our rich friends from school can we?”

“Jealous are we? Let us not forget who it was that taught little sister how to skip the satellites in the first place.”

The girls talked and joked for hours. They reminisced about their childhoods, school, boys and anything else they could think of. The wedding would be in about five sectors. Gina and Stephan were going to wait until after the baby was born. Admittedly Gina was a bit worried about having a baby under the prehistoric system of medicine still practiced on Earth, but she would get through it. After all there had been babies long before there was medicine. During the labor and again after the delivery she would secretly administer some pain maintenance and healing cells to expedite her recovery.

Alena spent the next few months training herself in the language they called “English”. Even the English language itself came in different forms. The inflections, emphasis on syllables and expressions gave hint to where on the planet you were from. Gina’s family cover story was apparently from Lancashire, Great Britain. Learning the language itself was of no great difficulty but the one thing Alena could not get down was the frequent use of contractions. Her mother assured her that it just was not something that the Kasterian brain could process. While they clearly understood the practical application of contractions in the reading and writing of the language it simply could not be spoken.

There was no equivalent of the contraction in Kasterian speech. Nor in that of the Standard Galactic which strangely enough was an awful lot like Earth's English.

The Big Day

Alena and her family arrived on Earth in the month of May, 2006. It was strange for Alena to arrive anywhere with her parents without the media being pushed back by official Embassy Guard. Strange but refreshing at the same time. The trip on the plane from England's Heathrow Airport to America's Newark Liberty International Airport took the better part of six hours. An irony that was not lost on Alena considering the twenty three parsec jump from Kasteria to Dirt Land took less than an earth minute. At first the flight was exhilarating. Alena had never experience the gravitational pull of mass acceleration that she had experienced at takeoff. Her parents had allowed her a window seat so she could see the flight as well as feel it. Only problem was that it was interesting for maybe the first fifteen minutes. After that she began to wonder how the human physiology, supposedly so close to that her own, could possibly put up with this for any length of time. Especially considering that this was their most common form of travel for traversing great distances on the planet. Upon visual inspection of the other passengers on board the craft she quickly learned the answer. Most of the occupants chose to sleep the trip away. Maybe she could learn something from these primitive dirt-lings. She tapped the base of her neck and fell fast asleep.

Her father woke her in time to experience the landing of the craft. That too was quite exciting. She was glad she had not missed it. Upon exiting the craft they were pointed in the direction of the security gates to exit the boarding and deplaning area. Before they could enter the area where Gigi would be waiting for them they had to show paperwork called "passports". He father had explained to her that since there were so many geopolitical boundaries divided in to separate governments the "Passport" was a requirement to show that you had permission to pass from the jurisdiction of one government to the other. Many of these governments were not friendly so travel between the two governments by their residents was not allowed. Alena has a hard time grasping the concept of needing "permission" to go from one place to the other. She wondered why the people would not just make the papers needed for travel like he mom had done for them. It sure seemed easy enough to fool the people who seemed to be in charge of looking that the passports.

As they passed through security Alena spotted Gina waiving and jumping up and down just beyond the crowd. The brief reunion in the airport terminal was tearful and joyous. "This is Clarence everyone. Clarence. This is your Grandma and Grandpa. And this is your Aunt Ali."

Alena's mom was holding Clarence and crying uncontrollably. "He is beautiful Gina! He is simply beautiful," Mari Arincha said through deep sobs.

Stephan, now feeling he had given the family their moment entered the circle. Mr. Arincha. It is a genuine pleasure to meet you and your family at last. Would it be possible for you and me to have a private moment sir?"

Ambassador Arincha was briefly stunned at being referred to as "Mister" but quickly regained his composure. He reminded himself that he was an investment banker from Great Britain. He warmly embraced Stephan's hand. "Why of course mate. Of course."

Stephan motioned for the bar not twenty steps from where the family gathered. "Can I buy you a beer sir?"

During his recent studies of the planet and its culture, Ambassador Arincha had read much of this "beer" and was looking forward to the opportunity to try it. "That would be delightful son. But I must insist you call me Gustav."

"Gustav it is!" The two men made their way to a couple of empty stools.

"What do you think that is all about," Alena asked once the boys were out of earshot?

"Tradition," Gina said with a smile. "Apparently it is an earth tradition for the groom to ask for the father of the bride's permission and blessing to marry his daughter. It is a custom that goes back hundreds if not thousands of earth years." Motioning to the baby in her arms she said, "Just a little late to ask dad for permission, no?"

Mari beamed. "Well tradition or no. It will not take more than that to win his way in to your father's heart. Not to mention that all your dad has talked about since you announced your intention to marry is trying this beer."

"Yeah," Gina said with a heartwarming smile. "He is a keeper."

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The wedding was in the Chapel at Princeton University just off of Washington. It was a small affair with no more than fifteen people in attendance with a cranky Clarence filling in as the best man. When Stephan and Gina exchanged vows Alena was not sure who cried harder. Her mom or Clarence.

Alena really admired the flowers. Gina carried a bouquet of white roses. The pews of the chapel were all decorated with blue and white carnations. The fragrant blooms were so much richer than the flowers of Kasteria.

After the wedding the entire party went to The Alchemist and Barrister. Stephan had said Gina's family would like it because it was vegan friendly. Apparently that is what plant eaters were referred to on the planet. Vegan. Alena kind of liked that name. During the meal and celebration Alena was surprised to find that those around her that did eat flesh did not bother her nearly as much as she thought it would. The smell of animal flesh

prepared over fire was actually quite pleasing. If it weren't for the fact that the Kasterian physiology could not digest animal flesh she might have even tried some.

Her dad seemed to really like this beer that earth made. He was on his third and acting really silly. There were fermented beverages on Kasteria but apparently nothing equal to beer. Alena was enjoying how goofy it made him. She and Gina made it a point to tease him incessantly. Alena was truly having a wonderful time on this trip.

Earth held a certain charm that Alena had not expected. It was brighter somehow. Bigger. More colors. On one of her many walks around the Princeton community Alena has also come to notice that earth men were so beautiful. In fact it had been over a week now since she had last referred to them as dirt-lings. Alena was rapidly falling in love with this planet. Gina has bought her a pair of what she called "sunglasses" to help her manage the slightly brighter sun. One of the many boys she stopped to chat with on her walks said to her "Those shades make you look really hot". When she got home she asked Gina if the "Sunglasses had made he look sickly of feverish. "No. Not at all," Gina said. "What would make you ask that?"

"Well this really cute boy told me that they made me look hot. I thanked him for his concern and assured him the current ambient temperature was really quite pleasing."

Gina laughed so hard that the tea she was drinking actually came out of her nose. Alena really did not understand the humor of it but her sister's laugh was nothing short of contagious. She laughed in spite of herself.

All too fast came the day that Alena and her family were scheduled to depart. She was on the floor entertaining her nephew. "I will be back soon little man," Alena said in a sing-song voice that seemed to please Clarence. In fact Alena's mind had been made up for days. Earth and its people were beautiful. She would follow in Gina's footsteps. Earth was worth the effort. She would be back.

"I have a car coming in about twenty minutes Gustav," Stephan had said in a somber tone. "Sir I can't tell you what a pleasure it was spending this time with you and your lovely family."

Fact was that Gustav and Stephan had grown quite close over the past two weeks. To the point where a few of those days Stephan had dragged Gustav to his lab to see his work. Gina had of course protested. "Stephan," She demanded! "My father is not interested in what you and your lab rats do over in that dank cave you call a laboratory!"

"Oh quite the opposite," Gustav exclaimed. "Your husband is an amazing man doing some amazing work!"

The two men shared many private late night conversations over the time they spent on earth. Many conversations and quite a bit of beer. When it came time to walk out the door

Stephan and Gustav embraced warmly. Alena thought at one point she had heard Stephan refer to her father as “Mr. Ambassador.” She quickly dismissed that.

Gina and Stephan were off for a weekend in a place that Gina had called Cabo San Lucas. Clarence would stay behind with Jemma, their housekeeper and nanny. Alena and her parents would be back on Kasteria before Gina and Stephan reached the airport. There was no need to travel back to England. The driver of the car Stephan had summoned was actually a Kasterian living on the planet earth for the better part of five earth years. Part of his embassy function was to occasionally check up on Gina. He was placed on high alert when he was informed the Ambassador to the Galactic Council himself was arriving. He had kept a close but distant eye on the Arincha family since their arrival.

After he had opened the doors for his passengers to enter and secured the luggage in the trunk he climbed in to the driver's seat and turned to his passengers. “Mr. Ambassador. I hope you enjoyed your stay sir.”

“Thank you Anton. Immensely so in fact. Take us home please?”

In less than an earth minute they were back at the port of entry in the capital city of Kalista. A quick bio-scan and sani-wash, then off to their favorite eatery just outside the port of entry section of the city.

“It is good to be home,” Alena's mom said.

“Yeah I guess,” Alena said glumly. Her thoughts still back on that beautiful planet and those beautiful people.

Chapter 3 – Eddie McLeod

Waiting

Mission Commander Edward McLeod sat in the Observatory chamber staring out at the night side of Kasteria in the KOI-1686.01 system. His vision was magnified some ten thousand fold as the George Orwell was still 0.06 parsecs distant from the planet. Any closer would alarm the outer perimeter. Eddie was not ready for that. Not yet anyway. Soon. But not yet.

The peaceful ambiance and solitude of the observatory chamber lulled him into a sense of calm that he had not experienced since the Day of his Awakening. The day he came aware of “When” as a destination.

Eddie thoughts drifted back to that fateful day. The start of it all. Or one of the many restarts in his life.

The Meeting

It was a Tuesday Evening in August 12, 1997. The bedside alarm went off with its normal shrill. Like every other evening Eddie woke five minutes before the alarm went off. A long established habit from his years as a SOG Officer (Special Operation Group) in less than friendly environments.

Since his Honorable Discharge from the U.S. Army just two-years earlier, a cover for his retiring from the CIA for reasons not disclosed, Eddie had taken to a solitary life with very few friends. Even his now chosen profession as an over the road truck driver left him with very little time to mingle with others. Not that he was anti-social. Quite the opposite. If you were to ask anyone, his neighbors, cashier at the local convenience store, they would all describe him as engaging and quite charming. It was anything deeper than that of which Eddie steered clear. He had no real friends. Only acquaintances. That was by design.

Eddie rolled out on to his deck and took a seat. Nothing was quite like that first cup of coffee in the morning. Or evening in the case of a night worker. He had become quite the coffee snob since his time in Columbia in his work to relax anti-American dissent beyond what it already was. Since his stay there supermarket grind and drip coffee makers just didn't cut it any longer. Eddie preferred using the press method of brewing.

The sky was a cloudless and the stars were coming to life. Eddie looked up at the night sky for a final glance at the stars before returning indoors to ready himself for work. He took a long sip of his coffee and studied the canvas of stars laid out before him. Not that Central Jersey's industrial corridor had much to offer in the way of a star scape. He longed for the night sky back in the days of his youth when he and his family would vacation up at New Found Lake in Bridgewater, NH. Some nights the sky was so clear you could see the Milky Way Galaxy spread out from one end to the other. He and his

Uncle would lay out on the grass and watch the shooting stars and satellites race across the sky for hours. He would stare deep in to the milky white band that was our home galaxy and wonder.

“Say Uncle Rob? Do you suppose there are other planets with other people out there?”

“Well Eddie. I tell you what. There are billions and billions of stars and probably billions more galaxies. So I figure either there is life out there, or there isn't. Either way. The very thought of it is staggering.”

Eddie would lose himself in that thought along with the dancing night sky and wonder. He would wonder if while he was looking up, maybe the mother and father he never met were looking down on him from somewhere out there in the heavens.

Even now, almost thirty years later the sense of loss over the parents he never knew was still strong. As a young boy he would listen to the stories his Aunt and Uncle would tell him of what wonderful people his parents were. How much they loved each other. How deeply they both loved their unborn child. Eddie would often wonder if he would ever know a love that strong.

“Miracle Baby” That was the headline in the newspaper. That is what everyone at the time called little baby boy McLeod and the fatal winter crash that robbed him of his parents. Margaret McLeod was pronounced dead upon her arrival at Martland Medical Center. Her husband John hung on for another three days in a coma before dying from complications of severe head trauma. He never knew that he was right. That he had had a son. When questioned by the reporters camped outside the ER, a hospital spokesman said that Margaret had died on impact when the vehicle in which she was a passenger collided with a bus bound for New York City. Emergency Medical Service found Eddie on the floorboard of the passenger side as they were removing Margaret's body from the twisted wreckage. It was determined that the stress to her body during the crash has forced her in to labor. Upon being checked, checked and triple checked at the Pediatric Emergency Ward it was determined that Eddie was fine. Not a scratch. “Miracle Baby” That's for sure.

Strange at is was, the driver of the bus that hit John and Margaret McLeod's 1967 Chevy Impala was never found. The Newark Police Forensic Investigator on the scene thought for sure that the driver was injured and wandered off in a daze. Police halfheartedly searched for the man that they thought for sure would eventually stroll in to one of the local emergency rooms wondering who he was and why his head hurt. When Detective Anthony Garza got the call from Public Service Foremen Steve Caputo things got real interesting. It turns out that all local bus routes on the evening of January 8, 1969 had been canceled due to the icy road conditions. Further all Public Service drivers were accounted for. Someone had stolen the bus.

The accident was at that point being investigated as a hit and run and possibly vehicular homicide. Unfortunately in the aftermath of the historic Newark riots the city was in

rapid decline and the police were over-taxed. After three months the case went cold. The tragic death of Maggie and John would be reduced to a dusty box in a basement on Market Street.

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Eddie slid open the door and stepped back inside. His home was sparsely furnished but plenty comfortable for his needs. Since leasing his own truck he found that he was not home often enough to consider any further interior creature-comforts. It was in fact, perfect just the way it was. The price was right. Taxes weren't too bad. And of course there was that beautiful waterfront view.

Location was perfect as well. Central Jersey may have well been the center of the Universe. Perth Amboy was at the hub of just about every major highway that went north, south, east and west through the state. Eddie had managed to arrange parking for his Tractor in the neighboring town of Sayreville, NJ about seven miles from his house. He had an arrangement with an Equipment Rental business on Main Street that happened to have a decent parcel of land. So for one hundred and fifty bucks a month Eddie's truck was parked behind eight feet of chain link. One less thing he had to worry about.

At 9:40 pm and it was still 82 degrees with 70% relative humidity. Tonight was going to be a sticky one. Typical of New Jersey summers.

He stared out his sliding door over the Raritan River and the Perth Amboy waterfront. His townhome has a beautiful view of the waterfront park. This time of the evening was always the most peaceful as the neighborhood was just settling in. The waterfront was almost empty. By morning the neighborhood would be a bustle of traffic. The waterfront would be packed with NY City commuters waiting on the Ferry Crossing to Wall Street. By that time Eddie would be long gone.

By 10:05 pm Eddie was showered, dressed and waiting for his ride. At exactly 10:15 pm the black sedan pulled up to find a waiting Retired Captain Edward J McLeod standing curbside.

A fit young man in his mid-twenties hopped out of the front passenger seat with the obvious stiffness of military training. The young man opened the rear passenger door while simultaneously snapping to attention. "Good Evening Capt. McLeod"

"Please don't call me Captain," snapped Eddie. "I'm a civilian now."

"As you say, uh, sir!"

With a less sardonic tone Eddie Responded, "Please. Call me Eddie, or Ed."

"Um... Yes sir.....Ed.....sir."

Eddie slid in to the back seat and the sedan eased its way from the curb and headed out towards Route 9.

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It was earlier, around 2:00 pm when the call came that led up to this evening's meeting.

"Good Evening. My name is William Mason. I am with the Federal Reserve. Am I speaking with Captain Ed McLeod?"

"This is he. However nowadays I just go by Eddie. How can I help you?"

The gravelly voice on the other end of the line said, "Well Eddie. We understand that your years in the uh, military has left you with a Security Clearance. Is that correct?"

"Yes sir. That is correct."

"We have a job offer for you. My function at the Fed is the disposal of old currency. Do you know how the Fed disposes of old currency Eddie?" He didn't wait for a reply. "We burn it. We burn it to a crisp! That's what we do. Now the only problem with that is we have to get it from Point A, the Treasury, to Point B, the Incinerator. That is where you come in son. I understand you own your own truck now?" Again he didn't wait for a response. "We'd like to talk to you about hauling some money for us. Can we meet tonight say, 22:30 hours?"

Eddie paused a moment before answering. "A 10:30 pm meeting? That is a bit odd. When is it you are looking to hire someone for the haul?"

William Mason cackled in a laugh of someone who had been smoking most of his life. "Hire someone? We aren't interviewing her son. We want you. The job is yours. Question is do you want it?"

"It sounds interesting Mr. Mason. When do you need me?"

"Like I said. Tonight at 22:30 hours"

"Oh. I'm sorry sir. I'm going to have to take a pass. I've just returned with a load. My rig is sitting parked next town over loaded with paper products I have to deliver to Staten Island by 11:00 pm."

Again the crackly chuckle. "Ed! No! You can't pass up this opportunity! Fifteen hours at the very most. It will be a one thousand dollar payday. You leave at 23:00 tonight. We will get someone to cover your ass on your toilet paper delivery son. Get it? Toilet paper? Cover your ass?"

Another cackle.

“We will send a car for you at 22:15. We are in the area today only.” With that the line went dead.

For the next ten seconds Eddie entertained the idea of calling Mr. Mason back and telling him to eat shit, but to be honest his curiosity, and the money, far outweighed his angst over William Mason's disregard. He would take the job.

....

Less than 15 minutes has passed since he took to the back seat of the sedan. They rolled into the driveway of a huge prefab warehouse on the Northwest side of the Raritan Industrial Complex in Edison, NJ. This time of night there was not much in the way of traffic in the complex. Almost instantly he noticed the warehouse has seen better days.

As the car pulled in to the open bay door Eddie noticed two armed soldiers standing inside on either side of the bay door. The sedan driver rolled down his window and nodded at the one to his left as they pulled in. The heavy steel bay door closed silently behind them. They were driving slowly towards the back corner of the warehouse where a heavy-set man, mid-fifties, in dress greens stood in front of a stand-alone office trailer. A circle of blue smoke wreathed his head and a stub of a cigarette pressed between his lips.

The front seat passenger bolted out of the car, saluted the other and opened the door for Eddie to make his way out.

“McLeod. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is General William Mason, U.S. Army.”

The Job

“Son of a Bitch!” Eddie was outraged. It was apparent upon entering the facility that it was a make-shift military operation. But why here? In Edison, NJ? And why did they lie to him just to get him here?

“I know you must be angry and confused son. Come inside and I will brief you as to why you are here. Why we so desperately need you.” With that the General snapped around and trotted up the five steps to the office trailer like a non-smoker 20 years younger and half his body mass.

“Let me start from the beginning Captain. Cigarette?” The General, now seated at took out a fresh one and took a heavy drag as he lit it. He tossed the pack across the desk in Eddie's direction.

Eddie gritted his teeth. He left that nasty habit behind years ago.

"Please sir. With all due respect. I am no longer a soldier nor a Captain. If you would, my name is Eddie."

General Mason sensed the irritation in his voice. "I can do that Eddie. Since you are so insistent that you are no longer a military man, then I in turn must insist you call me Bill. Fair?"

"Fair enough Bill," he said with far less tension in his voice.

"So Bill. What is this all about? Why did you lure me down here under false pretense?"

"Not entirely false. I readily admit I didn't tell you who I really was but I did give you my name. Nor did I lie about the fact that we have a job for you. We need someone to drive from here to Virginia. That was the truth."

The General's voice took on a soothing yet authoritative tone. Almost parental.

"Listen son. I know about the work you have done for your Government. I know you can be trusted. I need someone I can trust. You understand?"

"I take it this has nothing to do with hauling old money, does it?"

"Well Eddie what you are going to be hauling for us is not old money, true. But it is old. You see just outside of this warehouse about half a click south was an old WWI Military Munitions Depot. A few years ago a construction crew unearthed some live shells. Fortunately they had the presence of mind to stop what they were doing and call the police."

"Yeah. I remember reading about that." Eddie said.

"So these things were so old and so volatile that rather than remove them the Army Corps of Engineers thought it best to just detonate them right where they lay. Problem is we still don't know how many there are and how many will turn up. This may well be a project that we are tethered to for the next decade."

Bill Mason massaged his temples at a futile attempt to rub away some of the stress the project obviously placed on him. "That's where you come in Eddie. That truck out there contains some of the items we recovered on one of our many munitions digs. We need to get it down to McLean."

Eddie cocked his head back in a confused motion. "I thought you said that these bombs were so old you couldn't move them? Now you are asking me to haul a trailer full of fragile, ancient bombs over two hundred miles? Down one of the most heavily traveled highways in these United States?"

“No son. Of course not! You see what we found... Well let's just say it wasn't WWI munitions. The boys at Langley are very interested in what we found. We need to get it down there without drawing a bunch of undue attention. A military vehicle would do just the opposite. The shipment is safe and stable. I promise you that. You are not now nor will you be at any personal danger from the contents on board that truck. We know you Eddie. The folks at the company trust you. We need you. Will you help us?”

“Of course General. Of course I will.”

That moment Eddie sensed someone else entering the office trailer. Eddie stood and turned to greet the new arrival. The gentlemen shot his hand out to grab Eddie's with a hardy shake.

“Mr. McLeod. It is a pleasure to meet you sir. My name is Dr. Garrett Bowers. I work with General Mason on this project.”

Eddie instinctively took inventory of the new arrival. Dr. Bowers was a tall man, roughly six feet. He smelled like money. His suit was a black fabric that looked like it was pure silk. Obviously tailored. On his wrist he wore a gold Tag Heuer that probably cost more than a year's worth of payments on his truck.

As the two men shook hands Eddie was struck with a strange feeling. Was it the way Bowers was staring him down. Almost looking through him? Then it dawned on Eddie. “I know this guy,” he thought.

“The pleasure is mine Doctor Bowers. Medical doctor?”

“Please. Call me Garrett. No need for formality. And no. I am a physicist. Oh, and may I call you Eddie?”

“Sure Garrett.” Eddie studied the man. “Have we met before doctor?”

“I have that kind of face Eddie.” Dr. Bowers flashed Eddie a smile that must have made some orthodontist somewhere a small fortune. He swung around the business side of the small desk and took a seat in the beat up Office Depot chair almost in one swift movement. It was only then that Eddie noticed that Bill Mason was no longer in the room.

“I'm slipping” Eddie thought. Back in the day a lapse of attention like that may well have cost him dearly. Possibly even his life.

“Well then Eddie. Let us get down to business shall we? Please listen carefully. This delivery is top priority. We will be leaving in ten minutes. I know you have taken government commissions in the past, but unlike those we will have no escort. When we leave we will drive directly to McLean, VA. No stops other than to pay tolls. If you have to piss, you will piss in a bottle. If you have to take a shit, you will hold it. All of your

identification will be left here. When you return you will find your personal effects sitting on your kitchen table. If for some reason we get pulled over we have arranged for temporary identification that we will use. This way this trip can never be traced back to us no matter what. In the cab of the truck will be an envelope and a box. The envelope will have our identification, travel expenses and vehicle documents. The box has some fruit, a thermos of coffee, water and a few odd snacks that should more than do for the five to six hour trip. When we get to the designated drop point we will leave the vehicle. Call my contact and go our separate ways. You will be provided with enough funds to make your own way back. After the drop we will never see each other again. Am I understood?"

Eddie needed a minute to absorb all of this information that his apparent co-pilot just spit out in about fifteen seconds. "So am I to take it that you will be coming along Garrett?"

"That about sums it up Eddie. I don't get car sick. I have GPS so you won't hear me say, Are We There Yet. I promise I will be a good little passenger."

"GPS? You have GPS?"

"Global Positioning System, yes. It's pretty cool actually. There are satellites all over the globe that can accurately tell us exactly where we are standing with a margin of error less than a meter. The military was the first to use in the late fifties but about fifteen years ago they were put to use in civilian aviation. One of the projects my people are working on is rolling out this technology to the masses. So you may know what GPS is now. This is what it is going to look like in fifteen years." Garrett held up the sleek device for Eddie's inspection.

"I do know what GPS is. But I have to admit I have never seen one like that."

Dr. Bowers found it difficult to hide his "I know something you don't" smile. It was a look Eddie's Uncle used to call "a shit-eatin' grin".

"I'll tell you what Eddie. Let's go see how this thing works first hand. Let's get out of here."

"I'm with you" Eddie said

With that the two men strode out of the office trailer in the direction of the truck in the far corner. Confused and excited over the events of the past hour pumped Eddie with adrenalin. It was about then he noticed the truck was running and the warehouse was empty. The black Ford Crown Victoria that delivered him along with his escorts and General Mason were long gone.

"Okay Eddie. You have been briefed. It is going to take me a moment to hook up the GPS unit and calibrate it for our trip. You take a moment to familiarize yourself with the

documents in the envelope on your seat. All pre-trip inspections have been done so there is no need to waste any more time. Please give me your wallet.”

Eddie handed over his wallet to his new partner and headed around to the driver's side of the cab. He grabbed the hand bar and with a yank he pulled himself in to the cab of the truck. As a habit Eddie did a quick survey of the truck's interior. “Fire Extinguisher secure and charged. No debris loose in the cab of the vehicle...” Working his visual inspection from bottom up Eddie noticed to his immense pleasure that the tractor had an automatic transmission. That was going to make the trip much easier to bear.

Eddie looked over to see Garrett fumbling with the sleek GPS unit. Plugging it in to the 12-volt receptacle it made a chiming sound. The small screen on the front of the box glowed to life while Dr. Bowers seemed to be stabbing at it with his fingers trying to configure it somehow.

Eddie decided to take the time to look over the contents of the manila envelope while his passenger played with his toy. Bending back the tin clasps, Eddie dumped the contents of the envelope in to his lap. The vehicle documentation seemed in order. Eight hundred in cash. All twenties. He looked at the driver's license and a recent picture of himself smiled back. The name on both the driver's license and the D.O.T. card read “Walter Medina”. Eddie looked at the picture of himself with his Reddish-blond hair and green eyes and said “Walter Medina? Sure. I can pull off Walter Medina. Looks like you're Andrew Clarke”

He placed everything back in to the envelope with the exception of his new license. That he shoved in to his front pocket. He pulled upward on the lever of the center console to place the envelope inside and examine the box of goodies provided. It was that moment he noticed the 9mm pistol in the console.

“Really? Just in case I guess?”

Garrett who was now done setting the GPS coordinates looked harshly at Eddie. The friendly face from just moments ago had turned to stone. “McLeod. You have exactly two minutes to get the fuck out of my building and on the road!”

Maybe it was the dramatic change of tone but Eddie, who didn't scare easily, realized the hairs on the back of his neck were at attention.

“Continue to Industrial Parkway....” A sing-song voice emanated from somewhere inside of Dr. Bowers' GPS thing.

“Whoa!” Eddie popped the air brake and shifted the truck in to drive.

In minutes they were entering I-95 Southbound. Eddie reached out of his window, took the ticket from the toll attendant and proceeded on to the highway. The graphic on the

lower left corner of the GPS showed they would arrive at their destination in just over five hours.

“So Eddie. I understand you did a lot of wet work with the company. What made you leave?”

Eddie didn't like talking about it anymore than he had to. “It was just time. That's all.”

The question brought images to the front of Eddie's head that he didn't like to think about. Back in mid-1994 Eddie had made the decision to return to civilian life. The debriefing that ensued was worse than any training he had endured in his history of serving his country. It almost broke him.

From time to time he would find himself in some big city making a pick up or delivery. One thing all big cities had in common was its homeless population. Eddie would stare at the homeless men wandering the streets and wonder painfully how many of them had once been fellow field agents who just cracked during the so called “Debriefing”.

Just the thought of it gave him a headache. It came on quick. He could tell by the pounding at the base of his skull that it was going to be one hell of a headache. He remembered seeing a bottle of ibuprofen in the center console when he was rummaging through it. He reached for the lever of the console and opened it up. He had forgotten about the gun he had seen there earlier and jumped a bit when he saw it again. Now his head felt like it was splitting open.

“Dr. Bowers! Something's wrong!”

Now his head was spinning and the pain started to affect his vision. Eddie swore he could hear a faint buzzing sound. The sound seemed to emanate from everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Without regard to the fact that they were moving sixty miles per hour down the NJ Turnpike, Eddie let go of the wheel and grabbed his temples. Everything started to turn white.....

In a voice that sounded faintly like that of Dr. Garrett Bowers, yet somehow coming from inside his skull, “Relax Eddie. Just a few more seconds. It's only like this without a chip.”