

Alien Virus

by Steve Howrie, ...

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Chapter 1

I woke up one Friday... woke up to Reality.

I was in the office and Trevor, my editor, was being his usual charming self, and Sandi was being, well, just Sandi. The Sandi I still loved, and... no, I was in work mode that day—no time for dwelling on the past. The present was far more pressing.

“Sandi—what happened to that piece I was working on yesterday—the one on salt?”

“What, *the salt isn’t bad for you after all thing?*”

“Yeah.”

“I showed it to Trevor, and he told me to bin it—sorry.”

“What! I hadn’t finished it... why did you show it to Dr Death?”

“Kevin, you know he hates you calling him that.”

“Yeah, well, he kills off more stories than anyone else I know.”

“I had to show him—he asked me what you were working on, and then he saw it on your desk. Personally, I thought it was great—well researched, topical, witty...”

“Then why?”

“Salt’s not on the menu today, Kevin. Salt’s bad news—no-one wants to hear otherwise. It would be like saying smoking’s good for you.”

“This isn’t about smoking—it’s about salt. And what ever happened to telling the truth? Or am I thinking of a different Universe?”

“Sorry Kevin, I can’t get into this now. I’ve got a busy day, and I’m taking Marti out to dinner tonight... it’s his birthday.”

“Oh great. Well, don’t forget the salt then.”

Hearing that Sandi was cavorting with Martin that night was the last straw. I was now pissed off with both her and Trevor. Okay, most of my research for the article was from the Salt Manufacturers Association. But it was logically worked out, scientific facts that no-one could genuinely refute. Facts that were being covered up. Oh, but what the hell. If Trevor wasn’t going to print it, that was that. I needed a drink.

Escaping to my local boozer with a copy of Focus always calms me down. I don’t know what it is about that place, but as soon as I come through the door it’s like the World’s suddenly not such a bad place after all. As I sat at the bar, sharing a joke with the barman, I couldn’t help noticing a strange bloke in the corner. He was standing up, talking to a group of people at a table. His hands waved expressively, even violently. The people—two men and a woman—watched on, smiling, as if being entertained by a stand-up comedian. One looked over to me and winked. I smiled back, not knowing what I was smiling at, but sharing some sort of bond—me and him against the odd-looking man with the waving hands and desperate expression.

And then, giving up on the others, the strange old guy came over to me and started his spiel. It was quite a turn. After listening solidly for ten minutes I tried to paraphrase his talk.

“So what you’re saying Mr...”

“Frank Peters—just Frank will do. Frank by name, frank by nature.” I ignored his dubious wit and continued.

“You’re trying to tell us that an intelligent virus from outer space has permeated the water supply and the food chain, and we’ve all been affected by it.

“Practically everyone, yes.”

“And its most deadly effect is to convince us, by tampering with our thought processes, that it is actually a good and necessary part of each and every one of us?”

“Undoubtedly. We must not underestimate its cunning.”

The man was clearly bonkers. But I was enjoying the game—though I did think perhaps I should tell someone about him. That is, until he said, “Salt is the only defence.”

“I’m sorry—did you say *salt*?”

“Yes—it’s the only thing that can neutralise the virus. And it makes sense: salt kills or neutralises all sorts of parasites on our planet—why not ones from other parts of the Universe?”

If he wanted my full, undivided attention, now he had it. He continued:

“All this recent bad press for salt is just the virus talking. It warps man’s thought pattern and turns him away from his own common sense. Take my advice and avoid hospitals.”

“Why?” I frowned.

“They’ll put you on a salt-free diet and pump you full of the virus. I know—they tried to do it to me. They said my sodium level was dangerously high—ten times the average level—and I needed drugs to take it down. I think they wanted to kill me—or at least make me the same as them. They sensed I was aware—they sensed I knew about the virus.”

Was this Science Fiction or Fantasy? The ramblings of a deluded mind, or a man who really saw what nobody else could? I just had to find out—I couldn’t let this go. I told him I didn’t believe everything I’d heard, but I thought there might be something in his ideas. Giving Frank my card, I asked him to call at my office the next morning—before twelve. He nodded. As I got up to go, he grabbed my arm.

“Trust no-one Kevin, no-one.”

I discretely shook his hand and slipped out of the bar, aware of stares burning into my back.

Chapter 2

The next day, the old man hadn’t shown by twelve. I waited another hour—then another. No sign of him. I shrugged. It just confirmed by feelings when I awoke that day: Frank Peters was just a strange geezer—a retired academic perhaps—who was not living in the real world. The mention of salt had only been a coincidence.

With my mind on Peters I hadn’t given a thought to Sandi, who had been strangely quiet all morning. That wasn’t like her.

“How was the meal last night—did you have to pay as usual?” I knew she hated my pokes at her relationships—but I just couldn’t help it; didn’t want to help it. In my mind, she still belonged to me. “Sandi?”

“It was crap, okay? The food was crap, the conversation was crap, and it’s over. I’ve had it with men—they’re all the bloody same. All they think about is themselves.” She was talking to me as if I wasn’t a man. I was going to say something witty, but thought better of it.

“Have you eaten today?”

“I’m not hungry,” she snapped. Her head was engrossed in a magazine. It was upside down.

“Well, *I* need something—a drink mostly—so why don’t we go down to the Bells and get legless. I’ll tell you about that nutter I met at the pub yesterday.” She said ‘no’, but after a few minutes, changed it to ‘okay’. Without looking at me, she went to get her coat.

We sat outside the pub watching the world go by. I began telling Sandi about Peters, which made her laugh—until she saw the front page of the newspaper on the next table.

“Kevin—did you say Frank Peters?”

“Yes, why?” She picked up the paper, quickly reading the first paragraph, and then turned it towards me. “Christ! No wonder he didn’t turn up this morning.” There was a black and white photograph of Peters and a short article about ‘an accident’ at 11.30 pm the previous night involving a hit and run driver. Peters had died in hospital, it said. There was little other information. Sandi took the article back.

“What a terrible accident...”

“That was no accident—he was murdered.”

“What? How can you say that?” she said.

My mind was racing now. I had to do something. If Peters was right, god knows what could happen. I reached over for the salt, and took a lick as Peters had demonstrated the night before. “Kevin, what are you doing?”

“Just taking precautions. Come on—we’ve got to go. I’ll explain later.”

I didn’t like being so mysterious, but it was too dangerous to talk in public. It had been the death of Frank Peters, and who knows who could be listening. Outside, I hailed a taxi and we sped off for the nearest Police Station.

With the glass partition closed, the back of the taxi felt private enough and I told Sandi the rest of my story about Peters, including the salt angle. She obviously found it difficult to accept, but she didn’t reject the idea out of hand.

“So why the Police Station?”

I sensed the Taxi Driver watching us through the corner of his eye and turned to sit in the box seat to face Sandi – just in case he could read my lips. Okay, perhaps I was getting a little paranoid; but after what had happened to Peters, it was better to be safe than sorry. I told Sandi I wanted to find out how Frank Peters had died—just to be sure. I couldn’t let this go until I knew the truth about the man—and his extraordinary ideas. And I needed Sandi to back me up, to tell me if I was crazy or not.

“But what about Trevor? He’s going to kill us when he finds out what we’ve been doing.”

“Just give him a ring and tell him we’re following up a story—something about an unusual health treatment in Chelsea.”

I didn’t like the probing stare on the taxi-driver’s face as I counted out the fare; but there was no time to dwell on that—we had to move quickly now.

I thought the Police must know what had happened to Peter’s body—and I was right. We showed the duty officer our press badges and asked about the accident. We were told Peters had been taken to the Fulham General hospital, and there would probably be an autopsy.

“So why would a hit and run case interest *Mind2Body* magazine?” the policeman asked.

“Mr Peters was a bit of a health fanatic,” I said, which was not so far off the mark.

“Didn’t help him much then,” replied the officer sarcastically.

At the hospital, we managed to bluff our way into the office of a Doctor Adams, who knew about Peters. I told the doctor we were researching an article on the dangers of salt and had heard that Frank Peters had a high sodium level. The doctor was very amenable and friendly and happy to talk about the case.

“It really was a tragic accident. Frank was suffering from sodium poisoning and had only weeks to live. The poisoning had affected his nervous system and entered the brain, causing a mental imbalance with delusional tendencies. He must have been in considerable pain—and it’s not inconceivable that he could have walked out in front of the car knowingly.”

“*Suicide?*” Sandi asked.

“It’s possible. Either that or his mental state caused him to be totally unaware of the traffic. We’ve seen this sort of thing before.”

“Not a hit-and-run case then?”

“No, not at all. The driver was very upset, of course. But I understand from the Police that there will be no charges pressed. A very regrettable accident.”

We left the hospital in reflective mood. I suggested we stop and have a coffee before going back. It was too late to call it at the office anyway, and we’d hit the rush hour if we tried to get home now. After a bit of arm twisting, she gave in.

As we waited for our cappuccinos, Sandi gazed out of the café window and I gazed at Sandi. She seemed oblivious to my stare. How I missed not having her at home, in my life, in my bed. Sure, it had been difficult. Working in the same office eight or ten hours a day and then spending the rest of our life with each other. One thing had to give, and unfortunately it was our personal relationship. If we’d had children, it might have been different. We’d have told ourselves we’d have to stay together for the kids... but it would have been a lie. And anyway, neither of us wanted children. Well, I didn’t.

The coffees arrived and we smiled at the waiter, then at each other.

“So, what did you think of Dr Adams—truth or bluff?” I asked her. Sandi looked at me, then out of the window for a moment, as if thinking how to reply. Then back to me.

“I wonder sometimes why I go along with your hair-brained ideas, Kevin. I thought what the doctor said was perfectly reasonable. Much more convincing than *aliens infiltrating the known Universe.*”

“Planet Earth, Sandi—alien viruses taking over our planet—taking over *us.*”

“Whatever. It’s still light years off the scale of sensible compared to what the doctor said.” It was my turn to look out of the window. I knew I wasn’t wrong. I reached for the salt, but Sandi caught my arm.

“Don’t Kevin—it’s bad for you, remember? Look what happened to Frank Peters.” I prized her fingers off, and took a good lick of the white granules. I moved closer to Sandi and spoke softly, but urgently.

“Listen Sandi, I know you don’t believe me. But you’ve got to trust me. I know something is going on, and I’ve got to find out what it is. Until I do that, I can’t rest, I can’t work. You know me—you know how I’ve got to see things through to the bitter end. I’m going to find Frank Peters’ next of kin. There must be someone that knows him. I’ve got to know for certain whether he’s a crackpot or has come across the greatest danger mankind has ever faced. If I don’t do this, I’ll never be able to live with myself. You know that, don’t you?” She nodded. “Okay. When we’ve had our coffees, I’m going to take a couple of days off, and I want you to cover for me...”

“Kevin, no... you can’t! If Trevor finds out...”

“It’ll be all right. Tell him I’m researching a story on the Health benefits of living in Scotland.”

“Why Scotland?”

“Frank Peters had a Scots accent—his family probably still live up there. Please Sandi?” After a shrug of the shoulders and a big sigh, Sandi capitulated.

“But if I get sacked, you’re in BIG trouble.”

* * * * *

The next morning, I returned to the Police Station and managed to get the name and address of Frank Peters’ mother. Scotland was right—Edinburgh in fact. I had no phone number or email address, so the only option was to visit in person.

The 8.40am train from Euston got into Edinburgh Waverley at 1.40pm. It was years since I’d been to Edinburgh, but I still loved the city. The place I gained my first adult experiences of life—and lost my virginity.

From the station, I took a taxi to Mrs Peters’ first floor flat in Colinton Road, Morningside. There were no lights on from the outside, and no answer at the door. Neighbours on the same floor said she kept herself to herself—they didn’t know much about her. They asked if she was in any trouble. I lied that I was a relative and had just returned from overseas to visit her.

Writing a quick note saying I’d met Frank Peters in London and would like to talk to her, I added my mobile number and pushed the folded paper through the letter box. Then off to find a bed & breakfast for a night or two.

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The Kingsway Guest House in East Mayfield suited me fine. I paid cash and settled down for the night in front of the TV with a bottle of the Chilean Merlot I’d bought from a little off-licence round the corner. The sedative effect of the wine, combined with the warmth of the room, almost had me drifting off to sleep—until I was jugged back to consciousness by BBC News 24.

A report by leading scientists states that in addition to contributing to coronary heart disease, a link between the intake of salt and several forms of

cancer has now been established. The Prime Minister, talking at a press conference today, intimated that in light of these new findings, the government intends to push through new legislation as soon as possible to ban the use of salt in all cafes and restaurants.

I was naturally stunned. All the research I'd unearthed showed conclusively that salt was essential to good health: without it we would die. To say it caused cancer was like saying that drinking water makes you an alcoholic. It really looked like Frank Peters could be right about salt. But could the Earth really be attacked by an alien virus?

Chapter 3

The next morning, I groped in the dim light attempting to silence the alarm clock – then realized it was my phone ringing.

“Mr Lee?” a woman's voice asked.

“Speaking—who is this?” I tried not to sound like I'd just woken up.

“It's Mrs Peters—I got your note.” The voice was distinctly Edinburgh, though more Tollcross than Morningside.

“Great—can we meet up today?”

“Yes—but not at the house. I'll give you the address of my brother—we can meet there. Have you got a pen and paper handy?” I pulled the curtains open and grabbed the hospitality note—paper and pen from a drawer.

“Sure—fire away.”

The address Mrs Peters gave me was a farm some way along Colinton Road, past the University's playing fields. It didn't take me long to get dressed, grab some breakfast and leave the hotel. The farm was only a few minutes' drive away and I found it pretty quickly.

I parked the car near the main house. The whole place seemed deserted and knocking on the front door brought only echoes. I tried the adjoining barn, calling out Mrs Peters' name. And then everything went blank. The next thing I felt was cold water in my face—a bucketful of it thrown by someone. And that's when I realized I was tied to a chair; both my hands and feet were bound with strong rope. As the water cleared from my eyes, I could see three figures in black balaclavas over the heads with only slits for eyes. They all wore ill-fitting boiler jackets in matching worn-out blue. Two were standing—one with a table leg in his hands, the other with the empty bucket. The third person was sitting at an old desk, writing something. He stopped and looked up.

“Who sent you?”

“No—one sent me.”

“How do you know Mrs Peters?”

“Is that know in a biblical sense?” The one with the club stepped forward and hit me across the shoulder. “Jesus!” Pain shot through me. It was no time for humour. “I met her son Frank in a bar in London...”

“Which bar?”

“My local—the Bells in Fulham. He just started talking to me.”

“What about?”

I didn't want to say anything more—I didn't know these people, and I didn't know if I could trust them. The one in the chair was getting impatient.

“Answer the question! What did Frank talk about?” The one with the club took a step towards me. I didn't feel like being a hero and decided that the truth was the best option.

“Aliens—he talked about aliens. Well, an alien virus, anyway. He said we're all infected—practically the whole of mankind. But he had some sort of immunity—because of his high sodium level. He said that salt neutralizes the virus.” The figures looked at each other. The one with the stick took a step back and the seated one spoke again.

“And did you believe him?” They were all watching me intently now.

“At first—no. But when he mentioned salt, I thought there might be something in what he said...”

“Something for a good story?” the seated one asked, picking up my Press-card.

“I already had a good story—an article ridiculing the *salt is bad for you* myth. But my editor binned it.”

The seated one motioned the other two to his desk and they talked quickly in low voices. One voice was definitely a woman's. After a couple of minutes, the seated one spoke to me again.

“You're a journalist, Mr Lee, and we don't trust the press. There's only one way to find out whose side you're on. He nodded towards the one who had been holding the bucket—the one I took to be a woman. She picked up a white dish from the desk and approached me. I soon realized that the dish contained a syringe and I stiffened. The big man with the stick held me down in the chair whilst the other one untied of my arms. I struggled at first, but when I saw the big un' look over to the table leg, I relaxed. They pulled back my sleeve so the woman could find a vein on my right arm. She quickly pushed in the needle, and then slowly extracted some blood.

She left the room and one of the men tied me up again whilst the other went back to his desk. Who were these people? Were they working for the government? What was their connection with Frank Peters—and where was Mrs Peters?

The female returned after what could only have been a few minutes with another woman, a grey-haired lady in her late sixties or early seventies with no balaclava or boiler suit. The older woman spoke.

“I believe him.”

“He's clean,” said the one with the syringe, removing her headgear. The two men followed suit, removing their own hoods. One of them came over to untie me.

“We had to be sure, Kevin, we had to be certain,” he said.

* * * * *

The grey-haired woman was Mrs Peters. She invited me back to her house, and I accepted. I wanted to find out about these people. Three of them went in a four-by-four with tinted windows, and I followed in my car with one of the guys. Inside Mrs Peters' house, we sat at a table and the younger woman brought in coffee and a bottle of single malt whisky. I was ready for a drink, I can tell you. The one who

had been sitting in the chair at the farm, Tony, seemed to be the leader of the group. He was in his mid-fifties with cropped hair. University educated and English. The other man, Gareth, was a big Welshman who could have probably drunk the bottle of Scotch on his own. He was very apologetic about the table-leg intimidation and said, "You can't be too careful, y'know." The younger woman who had held the syringe was a Scot called Kate. Born on the South Side of Glasgow to wealthy parents, she'd recently graduated in Biochemistry from Glasgow University. And she was a beauty. It wasn't only my blood I wanted to give her. Auburn hair and green eyes betrayed her Irish roots, and her youthfulness and vigour mesmerized me. I struggled to keep my eyes off her.

Mrs Peters—Audrey—was a lovely lady with great feelings for what was right. She knew about the death of her son, but was taking it remarkably well. With coffee and whisky we chatted amiably for a while. Then, after about half an hour, Tony turned to me in a more serious mood.

"Kevin—I know Frank gave you an outline of his findings, but there's a bit more you should know. Frank was a great man, and we're all going to miss him—particularly Audrey of course." He looked across to the old lady. "Frank was passionate about telling people about the virus..."

"It's true then?" I interrupted. Tony nodded.

"I'm afraid so—everything that Frank told you is true. He left for London because he became a little frustrated with the group." Kate looked at Tony without smiling. He caught her gaze and continued. "Well, mostly with me, I'm sorry to say. Since we discovered the virus, I've always been ultra careful about how we publicized our knowledge – thinking that in the wrong hands it puts us all at risk. Frank understood this, so he went off on his own." He smiled at Audrey. "Just like Frank, eh Audrey? He had his strong beliefs—stubborn at times—but he'd never drop his mates in it. He never mentioned anything to you about us, did he Kevin?"

"No—not a word." They all nodded in reverence to Frank. Gareth lifted his glass.

"To Frank." We all lifted our glasses and toasted their departed friend. Then Tony continued.

"The virus. We don't know exactly when or where it landed, but we know it arrived on Earth around ten thousand years ago..."

"Ten thousand years!" I exclaimed. Fucking hell, I thought.

"It's wiped out complete civilizations. Have you ever wondered about what happened to the Atlanteans?" I shook my head. To be honest, I'd never given it a thought. Atlantis was nothing more than a myth in my book. "The virus feeds off its hosts, and can spread quickly. It has been active throughout recent history—from the European plagues of the thirteen hundreds, to the killer flu outbreak of the First World War. Now it's threatening to wipe mankind off the face of this planet." If Tony wanted my full attention, now he had it. He paused to take a sip from his whisky, giving me time to ask a burning question.

"Why? I mean, what does it gain by destroying us?"

"It's a parasite. It lives off its host for as long as it can feed itself. When it finally kills the host, it moves on to another. You've got to remember this isn't an Earth-bound virus, Kevin, it's cosmic, it can travel across universes. Frank believed that it colonized and wiped out other races, in other parts of the Universe, before it came to Earth. It's got no soul, no sense of right or wrong—it's just a matter of

survival—procreation, and survival.” Tony picked up his whisky again. His glass was nearly empty and Audrey gave him a refill. This gave Katie the chance to speak.

“We know that the virus divides and grows very rapidly. It’s tiny, but deadly—and multiplying in numbers as we speak.”

“When you say *tiny*, what scale are we on?” I asked. “Is it the size of a molecule—or as small as a prion. Or something in between—the size of a blood cell, say?”

“Do you know much about Leukemia, Kevin?” I should do—our magazine had written an article about it a few months earlier—and I did some of the research.

“Sure—it’s cancer of the blood. It occurs when the body produces too many white blood cells. Massive numbers of rogue white cells take over the bone marrow and then spill out into the blood stream. If untreated, it’s almost always fatal. They say the name Leukemia comes from the Greek for white blood. What has this got to do with the virus?”

“Kevin, the white blood cells *are* the virus.”

I was stunned—speechless. How could this be? The white cells are our defences—our antibodies—everyone knew that. Without them we’d all die. No question. These people must be mistaken—well meaning, but mistaken. Tony could see the disbelief written in my face.

“Didn’t you ever think it was odd that cells which are meant to be your antibodies, your defence against infection and diseases, are also the cause of cancer? You would think that the greater your defences, the healthier you’d become. But according to the medical theories, the more antibodies you have, the more chance you have of disease.”

“But that’s only because of cell mutation,” I countered. “Carcinogens such as tobacco smoke cause some cells to mutate—and instead of being part of our defences, they become rogue operators, attacking the body, breaking it down.”

“And others commit suicide and sort of ‘throw themselves out of the body’,” Kate added.

The more I thought about it, the more ridiculous it seemed. And then I realized that I was just quoting things I’d seen in one or more of the many magazine articles I’d read. I’d never thought the whole thing out for myself. I paused for a moment then said, “Are you saying that the virus takes over the white blood cells? Leukemia and some cancers are the direct result of the alien virus?”

Tony finished his drink and smiled. “That’s exactly what we’re saying Kevin.” I was stunned... but it all made sense now. “You’ve had a lot to take in already, my friend, and we’ve all had quite a day. I suggest we go and relax now. They’ll be more time to talk tomorrow—if you’re still here?”

“I have to go back on the sleeper tomorrow night—but that leaves me the whole day here.”

“Good—we’ll have time to chat then.”

“One more thing though,” I added as I stood up to go. “I guess the blood test was to find out if I was infected with the virus. What if I had been?”

Audrey, who had been collecting our glasses, stopped and said, “Oh, then we would have killed you. Anyone for more coffee?”

Chapter 4

The next day I awoke with so much on my mind. Mainly questions. How did the virus get into the body? What exactly did it do when it was there? And why weren't Tony and the others affected by it? Was it because of salt?

I met the group for lunch at Henderson's Restaurant in Hanover Street. I was warmly greeted by Kate, who was the first to arrive. She looked more beautiful than ever, and I thought I was falling in love.

"How did you sleep last night, Kevin? No nightmares I hope?"

"No—but lots of questions."

"That's normal." I was suddenly aware of people around us. I glanced around the restaurant then turned back to Kate.

"Is it safe to talk here?"

"Yes—it's fine. The owner, Jim, is one of us, and no-one pays any attention to anyone else here. If he sees anyone dodgy coming in, Jim usually warns us." I nodded and smiled at her. Where had she been all my life.

"Tell me, how did you get started in all this Kate?"

She drew a breath. "Oh, it's a long story. It was through my mother really." Then she changed the subject. "Have you ordered yet?"

"No—I was waiting for you."

Just then, Tony and Gareth walked in.

"Hi Kevin—don't get up. Audrey sends her apologies—her sister's ill and she gone to Musselborough to see her. Anyone for food? I'm starving."

"Me too," added Gareth. We all sat down with our meal and ate without talking for a few minutes. Then I said,

"Y'know, I really want to do something to help. If this is all true—and I have no other explanation for what's been happening recently—then I'm on your side, and I'll do anything I can to help stop this virus." They all nodded their thanks.

"That means a lot Kevin," acknowledged Tony. "When we lost Frank, we really thought we were up against it. Frank was a great motivator and really put himself around in London. We need someone like you to help get the message out—particularly with your media background." In the back of my mind I had a worrying thought. If the virus was contained within the white blood cells, then couldn't we all get infected—to one degree or another—sooner or later? I guess that was what Frank Peters had said. Okay, salt was some sort of neutralizer. But how did we contract the virus in the first place?" Tony gave me the answer.

"It's through the food chain—or rather, the animal food chain. We eat infected animals, or their produce, and we become infected. Plant life is unaffected by the virus, as are salt water fish. So any fish from the sea is safe." The salt angle again.

"But how do animals get infected?" I asked. That's the trouble with us journalists, always having another question to ask.

"At one time, they became infected by being fed parts of other animals. But how animals originally became infected, we don't really know. We're talking about ten thousand years ago, remember."

“Possibly through the fresh water supply?” I ventured. “If the virus arrived from outer space, it would have to land somewhere.”

“Yes, possibly,” replied Kate. “Or it could have just landed on the animals themselves and burrowed through their skin to their blood supply. That’s common with many earthbound parasites.” I couldn’t help thinking how much I’d like to burrow into Kate’s skin. She was everything I could ever want in a woman. But Tony snapped me out of my fantasies.

“This virus is extremely cunning. We believe that it’s able to modify Man’s thought patterns to protect itself. Salt, as Frank told you, neutralizes the affects of the virus. So the virus implants the idea in Man’s brain that salt is inherently bad for us. Now the government has declared a war on salt—*the new tobacco*, as they’re calling it.

I sat back in my chair and took a deep breath. This was like finding out about sex for the first time: a whole new awakening that was going to change my life forever. I sipped my tea thoughtfully.

After lunch, Tony had to go off on business, so Kate and Gareth showed me around the City. It was a long time since I’d been to Edinburgh and a few things had changed. I was glad of their company (particularly Kate’s of course) and wished I could stay longer. It was such a pleasant change not to be the cranky one in a sea of conventionality.

When it was time to go, they both gave me a hug and told me—actually instructed me—to stay in touch. Kate gave me her email address and phone number. I promised I stay in contact, and thanked them both for everything. They waved me off on the sleeper to Euston, and I left feeling that somehow we’d meet up again very soon.

* * * * *

The next day, I was back at work, and I couldn’t wait to see Sandi to tell her all about the weekend. But she wasn’t there. Then Trevor breezed in, telling me it was good to see me back if I had a good story. And then he broke the news about Sandi.

“What! When did this happen?”

“Saturday morning. She came in to make up for lost time—both yours and hers—and then she suddenly collapsed.”

“Jesus Trevor—why didn’t anyone tell me this before?” I was on the point of outrage.

“We couldn’t just phone *Scotland*—it’s a big country.” I hated Trevor when he hid behind his sarcasm.

“I had my mobile.”

“We tried that, but no reply. We left a message of course.” I pulled out my mobile and checked my messages. There was a message from Judith, the receptionist, but only asking me to phone the office. Shit—I should have checked. “Don’t you check your messages, Kevin?”

“I was tied up at the time. Where did they take her?”

“Fulham General, I believe. I haven’t had the chance to check this morning to see how she is, but she was under sedation when I phoned yesterday.”

God—that was where they took Frank Peters—where Sandi and I had gone last Friday. I just had to go to see her.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” I shouted to Trevor as I ran down the stairs two at a time. He called after me,

“Kevin—you can’t just go... we’ve got a magazine to run.”

* * * * *

I took a taxi to the hospital, expecting the worst. The fuckers will pump her full of the virus—or even kill her—if they can get away with it. I knew it wasn’t them doing this—it was the virus acting through them. But I just couldn’t help thinking it was people plotting against us.

London on a Monday morning is a nightmare. You can get out of the Capital all right; but just try cutting across it.

“A tenner says you won’t beat that ambulance to the hospital,” I challenged the driver, pointing ahead.

“I’d have to break the law to do that, mate. And the fine would be thirty.” I waved two twenty pound notes in his face and he immediately took a sharp right, speeding down a side lane and then down a one way street—the wrong way. After a hair-raising drive, we screeched to a halt at the main entrance. I paid him the fare and was about to rush inside, when I realized I’d need a lift back.

“Twenty quid says you won’t be here when I get out.”

“You’re on.”

Inside, the mood was subdued, but my mind was racing.

“Sandi Green please.” The Caribbean receptionist looked carefully at a chart then turned back to me without smiling.

“I’m sorry, no visitors—Miss Green is in intensive care.”

“I’m her colleague and friend—I must see her.”

“I don’t care if you’re Santa Claus—the doctor said NO VISITORS, got it?”

“Not even with this?” I produced my press-card.

“Particularly not with that.”

I turned away and sat down in the waiting room, wondering what to do next. I was desperate to get to Sandi, and desperate situations require desperate measures. Noticing a nurse coming out of a door marked *Staff Only*, carrying what looked like a medical uniform, I got up and walked slowly to the door. Checking that no-one was looking, I went in. As I had hoped, the room was full of laundered white coats and nurses’ wear. Finding a coat that fitted, I left the room, checking that no-one had noticed me. I thought I looked more like a janitor than a doctor—but anything to get me into see Sandi would do.

The next problem was finding her. All I could do was follow the signs, looking for intensive care. I was regarded with suspicion on a couple of wards, but made a quick exit—apologising as if I’d taken a wrong turn. Then, on the second floor, I saw the sign: *Intensive Care*. I’ve always believed that if you want to get away with something, do it positively. In most cases, no-one will question you.

So I grabbed one of the empty wheelchairs at the entrance to Intensive Care, and wheeled it in, greeting anyone I encountered with a smile. It didn’t take me long to find Sandi—she was in a room on her own. I took the chair in and closed the door behind me, pulling across the blind on the door.

Sandi was out cold, by the looks of things, with a drip attached to her arm. Without any doubt, this was not a saline drip. I didn't have much time—I had to wake her up and get her out of there. I talked softly but urgently to her.

“Sandi, Sandi, it's me—Kevin.” She didn't respond, so I slapped her gently across the cheeks. She grimaced and groaned. Removing the drip, I lifted her out of bed and on to the wheelchair, putting a blanket from the bed around her. She was obviously sedated with something.

Wheeling her carefully out of the room, I tried to make a quick but quiet exit. But as I went through the doors, one of them banged and a nurse called out.

“Hey, what are you doing? Where are you going with her?” I didn't want to stay to explain, so I ran with Sandi down the corridor as fast as I could, pursued by the nurse.

I got to the lift just as it opened. A nurse was waiting to go down, but I pushed her aside and got in, pressing the ground floor button frantically. The doors closed just as the nurse from Intensive Care reached the lift, and I saw her angry face for just a moment.

As the doors opened on the ground floor, I sped towards the exit without looking back. For all I knew, the nurse could have informed security, and I had to get out as quickly as possible. My taxi was still there, and the driver helped me get Sandi inside.

“30 Fulham Road—the legal way this time.” The driver seemed almost disappointed.

As we pulled away, I could see uniformed men rush out of the hospital and point in our direction.

Chapter 5

I took Sandi back to my flat. I knew it wouldn't be safe for long, but it was better than Sandi's place. The police were bound to go there first—and then to our office—and that would lead to my apartment.

She was in pretty bad shape. I put her to bed and let her rest for a while; but it couldn't be for long: we had to get out of London as soon as possible. After about an hour I heard her moving. I went in and she was awake, looking up at the ceiling—and then at me.

“Kevin?”

“Yes—glad you still recognize me.”

“I feel like I've been hit by a horse,” she said, feeling her head. “How did I get here?”

“I brought you—in a taxi, and that.” I pointed to the wheelchair.

“Oh, god...” It was all starting to come back to Sandi now. I got her a drink of water and sat her up in the bed. She sipped it slowly.

“Do you remember what happened?” She thought for a moment, waiting for the images to come back to her.

“I went into work to catch up on a few things – things I should have done on Friday. Trevor was there, sorting out his accounts. I remember him giving me a

coffee. It didn't taste quite right—I thought it could be the water, you know how it is. I must have drunk about half. Anyway, the next thing I knew I was feeling very hot—and then that feeling you get when you're about to faint. A sickly feeling. The next thing I knew I was in a hospital bed. Do you think I was drugged?"

"It sounds like it."

"By Trevor?"

"Possibly."

She took another sip of water. I suddenly remembered about salt and got some from the kitchen.

"Take some of this."

"I will—but I just need a drink first. I'm so thirsty." I filled up her glass.

"I've got to tell you about Scotland."

"Oh yes! I'd forgotten."

"But it's not safe to stay here. Do you think you'll be all right to travel?"

"Where to?"

"Edinburgh." She thought for a moment, weighing up her own condition.

"I think so. When do we need to go—and for how long?"

"As soon as possible—but I don't know how long for. Until it's safe to come back, I guess. There's some people I want you to meet in Edinburgh."

"What about work?"

"Being drugged by the boss wasn't enough for you then?" She nodded in understanding.

"I'll get dressed." Then a sudden thought. "Well, I would if I had any clothes."

"Ah! Now you're going to think this is very strange..."

"Kevin..." she said in the playful reproaching voice that always endeared me to her. "What have you done?"

"Nothing. It's just that... remember those times you used to stay over, and you said it would be a good idea to have a change of clothes in my flat so you could go straight to work?"

"And you never thought to give them back? They're hardly your size, Kevin."

* * * * *

As we drove up the M1 en route to Edinburgh, I told Sandi all about my trip to Scotland and the people I'd met. It was nice being alone with Sandi again—it seemed like our past differences were forgotten, and we seem to be getting on better than we'd done for years. After talking for a bit, we put on the radio, enjoying the music and banal chatter. Then a news item caught my attention, and I turned up the volume.

"Police are looking for a man, in his late thirties, who abducted a woman from a hospital in London. The woman was in Intensive Care and her life could be at risk. The man is journalist Kevin Lee and the woman Sandi Green, though they may be using aliases. Full descriptions of both people are on the Metropolitan Police's website. The public are advised not to approach the couple as the man could be armed and dangerous. Anyone with any information as to their whereabouts is asked to contact their local police station, or telephone..."

"Jeeze... they didn't waste any time, did they?"

"Why are they doing this Kevin?"

“It’s not them doing it Sandi—well not directly anyway. It’s the virus—the alien virus.”

“I know you believe this, Kevin, but it’s difficult to take in. I can’t help thinking that we could be making a terrible mistake.”

“Despite what happened to you at the office?”

“I don’t really know what happened there. I know I could have been drugged—but why? If it was Trevor, what has he got to do with all this? How would he know anything about us looking into Frank Peters’ death?”

“You’ve just got to forget that people are doing this—they’re only following orders from their virus-infected minds. And it’s not unusual for extraterrestrial things to come to Earth. Every day small stones and dust hit the Earth from outer space. Is it so difficult to imagine that a virus from another planet was carried by solar winds to the Earth? We have lots of viruses on the planet already—why not another one from outside our solar system?”

Sandi was pensive for a few minutes. I knew it was difficult for her to take in. She was always the down-to-earth one in our relationship. She liked to discuss feelings and emotions, watched Audrey Hepburn movies, and read things like *Cosmopolitan* and *50 Shades of Grey*. I, on the other hand, got enthusiastic about the paranormal, ancient civilizations and black holes. It was amazing we stayed together for as long as we did.

But here we were side-by-side again—on the run from the authorities, to meet people I hardly knew and Sandi had never met, with the aim of eradicating an unseen alien virus from this planet—before it eradicated us all.

Chapter 6

Tony Stood on Carlton Hill looking down on a busy Princes Street. It was dark, and the street lights had the feel of Christmas. Would they ever see another Christmas, he wondered. What the fuck were they going to do? He was glad to have met Kevin though – they desperately needed more help. He drew on his cigarette telling himself for the thousandth time that it was his last, but knowing it wouldn’t be. Perhaps they should follow Frank Peters lead and go out on the streets, go door-to-door telling people about the virus. It did bring Kevin into the ranks, after-all. But it got Frank killed too. Win one, lose one aren’t very encouraging statistics—not when your numbers are so low. No, if they’re going to get the message out, they’ve got to get to people in their millions. And the only way to do that is by radio, television—or the internet. The internet, yes. Frank had wanted to do that, but Tony was much more cautious. ‘What if they trace website, or the twitter account—or whatever—to us? In no time at all, we could be arrested for one reason or another.’

He didn’t realize that he’d spoken the last thought aloud until he heard Kate’s voice behind him.

“Arrested for what, Tony?”

He turned to face her with a sort of guilty grin.

“For setting up a website to tell everyone about the virus.”

“ I thought you were against that?”

“Yes, I was. But I’m beginning to change my mind.

“Well, in the first place, it’s going to be traceable to us—particularly if we want email contact. Second, 99.99% of the people who look at the site are going to be infected by the virus, and will either take no notice—unless you call laughing their socks off *noticing*—or try to have us stopped by the authorities. And thirdly, I haven’t a clue how to set up a website, and I don’t know how we’re going to find a virus-free soul to set one up for us.”

“Okay, I know I haven’t thought this through fully, but I think we should consider it. What other options do we have?”

Kate was quiet for a moment. She looked away from Tony across to Princess Street and pondered. He was right—they had no other options—except books and leaflets perhaps. But then who would distribute them? Their main priority was not to get caught—otherwise, it was all over—the virus would have won. She sighed deeply and turned back to Tony.

“Yes, you’re right. Maybe Kevin could help with a website—his magazine must have one, and he might know someone we could trust. If someone could set up the basics, we could add the juicy stuff.”

“You mean the bits where we say *We’re all doomed?*”

“Yes, that sort of thing.”

“Well, we’ve got to do something. I’ll get in touch with Kevin tomorrow.”

They were both quiet for a few minutes, watching the shimmering lights below, the cars making their way from Princes Street up South Bridge, or down Leith Walk, and people milling about in the street below.

“You’d hardly know there was anything wrong with this planet, would you?” Kate shook her head. Tony continued, “And yet, there’s a time-bomb ready to go off—and it’s ticking inside every one of those people.”

* * * * *

Gareth paid for the drinks at the bar: a bottle of Carlsberg and a Vodka-coke, and took them over to the dark woman who was sitting on her own at a table in a dimly-lit corner.

“Thanks Gareth.”

“You’re welcome.”

“You’ve been very quiet tonight—is everything all right?”

“Fine, yes. I’ve just had a few things on my mind, y’know. Work things.”

“Can you tell me about them?”

Gareth squirmed a little in his chair and frowned. “Not really—it’s difficult to explain.”

“I’m a good listener—you know that.” Gareth did know that. But he couldn’t really tell her what was on his mind—not without betraying the secrecy of the group. His relationship with Emily was becoming more and more difficult as the weeks went by. Since he’d found out about the virus, all his dealings with people had suddenly changed—but most of all his relationship with Emily. She’d accepted him not eating meat any more fairly easily—a lot of her friends were vegetarian; and she even tolerated his over-use of salt, as she saw it. But she told him clearly that she could never, ever go veggie herself—and she was becoming increasingly

suspicious of his meetings in Morningside. He said he played rugby down there. Then one morning (after staying over at her place), he said he was going straight to the rugby pitch for a match—but he didn't have his rugby kit with him. Her first thought was that he had another woman.

Gareth loved Emily, but he knew the relationship wasn't going to work—not unless she could *come over* to his side—which would be his dream come true. But now he couldn't see that happening, and he felt under increasing pressure to end the relationship before he said something he shouldn't. But that wasn't going to be easy. He looked back at Emily. She was still waiting for an answer.

"Hello, is there anyone home?"

"I'm sorry it's just that... it's not really about work at all—it's about us."

"Emily's heart started to pound quicker. She didn't like the sound of this—not one bit. Ever since meeting Gareth on the rebound from a previous relationship, she had been happy—happier than she'd been at any other time in her life. She didn't want to lose him now—not now, not ever.

"What about us?"

"It's the veggie thing..."

"If you want to give it up, that's fine by me. *I* won't think you're a failure."

"No, it's not that... I don't want to give it up; I want *you* to give it a try."

"Gareth, we've been through this before. I've told you I don't want to—and you said you respected that." Now he had opened this can of worms, he had to see it through to the end—whatever that was.

"I know that.... but that was then."

"What do you mean—*that was then?*" she challenged him as he squirmed again.

"I'm not comfortable with you... you know, eating meat. And then there's the salt thing..."

"Look, I've been very tolerant with *the salt thing*—particularly now they're saying that any amount of salt is too much. I've stopped already..."

"What? That's very dangerous Emily—please don't do this!"

"You're taking it too far, Gareth. And I respect you for sticking to your principles—you know I do. Only don't try to inflict your views on me. Killing yourself is one thing—trying to make me sink in your boat is another." Gareth looked at his feet and nodded to himself. Then he looked up at Emily squarely. He knew what he had to do.

"That's just it Emily. We're in two different boats. On the same sea, but in two very different vessels, going in two different directions. You don't want to get into mine, and I'm not prepared to get into yours. I'm sorry Emily." And with that he stood up, grabbed his coat from behind his chair and left without looking back—leaving her open mouthed.

Chapter 7

We made good time and arrived in Edinburgh around nine. Although Tony had given me his address, it seemed better to go to Audrey's flat first. I thought Sandi would be more comfortable with Frank's mother.

Finding a quiet side road for the car, we walked briskly to the apartment and rang the bell. Audrey's surprise turned quickly into a broad smile.

"Kevin—I didn't expect you back so quickly. Come on in."

"Thanks." Audrey closed the door and double-locked it.

"I'll put the kettle on..."

"Audrey—this is Sandi—the one I told you about. We work together." I was careful not to say 'former partner'. The old lady smiled again and warmly shook her hand.

"Welcome to Edinburgh dear. Is this your first time here?"

"It is. I've always wanted to come, though. Kevin's told me plenty about it over the years."

"It's a grand city—you'll enjoy it. Now, you two put your feet up and relax, and I'll make the coffee—or would you prefer something stronger?"

"Coffee would be fine," said Sandi—answering for both of us. My expression was noticed by Audrey though, and she brought a bottle of Cognac with the coffee.

"Have you seen the news today Audrey?" I asked as she poured the drinks.

"No—I usually catch it around ten. Is there anything I should know?"

Sandi and I looked at each other—to see who would talk first. It was Sandi.

"We're on the run, Mrs Peters—from the Police." Audrey nodded in understanding.

"Och, we're all on the run dear. What's your particular crime?"

We started to tell her the story of Sandi's collapse at work, and the hospital rescue. After about five minutes there was a coded knock at the door.

"Tony," said Audrey getting to her feet." After a few seconds Tony entered with Kate. She was more radiant than ever.

"Kevin! What are you doing here?"

"We're just telling Audrey what happened—you're just in time." I felt Sandi's eyes watching me and Kate very closely. She introduced herself.

"Hello—I'm Sandi."

"Oh hi—I'm Kate. Kevin's mentioned you."

"A mention—oh, that's pretty good for Kevin."

I couldn't hide my attraction to Kate, and Sandi couldn't hide her resentment of the situation. That was just how it was. Tony was meanwhile talking seriously to Audrey. After a few minutes, she went into the kitchen and Tony greeted us.

"Well well—what do we have here! It's my duty as a citizen of this country to turn you in to the nearest Police Station."

"So you've heard then Tony?"

"I should think everyone in the UK has heard about it. You've got to keep your heads low now I'm afraid. But perhaps it's for the best."

"What do you mean?"

"Before I tell you that, aren't you going to introduce me to your partner in crime?"

"Oh sorry. This is Sandi. Sandi, Tony."

"How are you Sandi? You've been through a bit of an ordeal I hear."

"Oh, Kevin's driving isn't as bad as they say." They all laughed at my expense. The humour warmed everyone to Sandi straightaway.

"So what happened to you two?" asked Tony.

I was about to restart the story when the coded doorbell rang again.

“That’ll be Gareth,” said Kate, getting up to answer the door. The big man entered with a very serious expression on his face. Something was obviously troubling him. But seeing Sandi, he totally forgot about Emily, and the room lit up as they cast eyes on each other. I thought we’d need a crowbar to separate them. But I tried humour instead.

“Gareth’s the one who hit me over the head with a table leg down at the farm,” I quipped. The big Welshman gave me a sort of *ha ha very funny* look.

“Mmm—I’m beginning to like him already,” said Sandi.

“It wasn’t his head, it was his shoulder,” Gareth clarified defensively.

“Well—better aim next time Gareth,” she added.

We all sat down, and Sandi and I finally got to tell everyone our story. At the end of it, Tony’s mood was quite serious. Everyone seemed to know when it was time to listen to Tony.

“What happened to Kevin and Sandi is definitely for the best. Kate and I have been talking tonight about how we need to progress from here. Frank had the right idea in getting the message out—he just didn’t have the backup to do it. If we’re going to make everyone aware of the virus, we’re not going to do it sitting on our backsides. We’ve got to get out there—and that’s bound to mean people coming after us. So far, we haven’t committed any crimes, and we’ll keep things that way as far as we can. Despite the fact that Kevin took Kate out of hospital, he didn’t break the law—providing she wished to be discharged. So there’s no problem there—as long as we all stick together. But if necessary, we will break the law—if that’s the only way. Now, what about accommodation—where are you two staying for the night?”

I hadn’t given that any thought until then.

“We’ll probably check into the same hotel I stayed in last time,” I said.

“No no—you can’t do that,” replied Tony. “It’s not safe for you anymore; and, as I’ve said, we’ve got to stick together now.”

“Sandi can stay with me,” volunteered Kate. “I’ve got a spare room.”

“And Kevin can bunk up in my Penthouse Suite—if he doesn’t mind sharing.” We nodded in agreement and we thanked both Gareth and Kate.

“Good—that’s all arranged then. Let’s get together again tomorrow evening—if that’s all right with everyone. Can we meet here again Audrey?”

“Anytime’s fine with me Tony.” We all nodded and said good night. I gave Gareth a lift to his flat, and Sandi went in Kate’s car. It had been a long day and both Sandi and I were glad to put our heads down for the night.

Chapter 8

The next day, things took a turn for the worse. The proposed legislation banning salt in all restaurants and cafés became law with immediate effect. Moreover, all bags of salt sold in shops and supermarkets would have to carry government health warnings. And the government said they intended to bring in further anti-salt measures in the very near future.

At his Minto Street home, Tony sat in his dressing gown in front of the television with a large mug of black coffee—contemplating the news. This wasn't the government doing this—it was the virus, and it was obviously stepping things up now. To him, the fight against the virus was more like a game of chess than anything else. Only the consequences of losing the game were unthinkable. How intelligent was it? He knew that the virus could influence Man's thoughts once in the nervous system. And he'd recognized that it was but one entity with billions upon billions of units—each part somehow linked to the rest. But could it know what *he* was thinking—someone who was, for all intents and purposes, free from the virus?

His mind wandered to Gareth. His closeness to Emily had put him at risk. The virus could jump from one person to the next by close physical contact—kissing would be enough—and Gareth could be in danger if he allowed his sodium levels to drop. Tony was glad Gareth had made the break with Emily, but he needed to be monitored. He made a mental note to ask Kate to check Gareth's blood for traces of the virus as soon as possible.

When he had first heard about the virus through Frank Peters, Tony had thought his friend was crazy—as most people did. An alien invasion of microbes that could—and would—destroy Man. It was too far-fetched. Then he read an article in *Nature* about organic matter from earth being found on other planets in the far reaches of the solar system. If it could work that way round, why not the other? Western diseases had been transmitted to Asian and South American Countries in the fourteen and fifteenth centuries by seagoing Europeans. Entire populations were decimated by these alien diseases, for which they had no cure. And in more recent times, Asian bird flu had threatened Western populations.

Bird flu was nothing more than the virus, of course. And immunizations against it were useless because the immunizations contained the virus. The idea was naturally to administer a tiny amount of the disease so that your immune system would go into overdrive, wiping out the soupçon, and then memorise how to control or destroy the disease when you were exposed to it in large quantities.

But there was no vaccine to combat this virus. The only thing to prevent it was to stop eating or drinking anything that contained it, and ensure that your sodium levels did not drop too low. But with the new government regulations, passed by people controlled by the virus, it was increasingly difficult to get the salt they needed.

Tony washed and got dressed for work. He didn't know how much longer he could continue teaching at the University. But for now, he needed the money—as did the others.

* * * * *

Sandi slept well and didn't wake until after eleven. Kate had left a note saying she'd gone to work and left some breakfast out for Sandi. The flat was bright and modern, situated in Corstorphine—not far from the Botanical Gardens. Sandi thought a walk there later would do her good.

She helped herself to Muesli and soya milk—which suited her fine. She'd grown up allergic to dairy products, and her mother used to buy soya for her when she was a child. She'd tried a few times to conform and drink cow's milk—and even

goat's milk at one time—but she always had the same reactions: sickness, headaches and rashes. So now she knew to stay away from it for good.

I was thinking about Sandi when I woke up at Gareth's place. On the drive up to Scotland, it had crossed my mind that because we were getting on so well, perhaps we should try getting back together. But seeing Kate in Edinburgh again, I knew that I had to move on and let go of the idea of Sandi and I reuniting. And that had strangely drawn me closer to Sandi. Our relationship now felt more like brother and sister than ex-partners. The situation in London at the hospital had made a difference too; now we had a common enemy.

Gareth stirred in the next room. I heard him go into the bathroom and turn on the shower. I wondered how he got involved in the group and made a mental note to ask him later. Then the phone rang.

"Shall I get it?" I called towards the bathroom. He didn't hear me, so I picked up the receiver anyway.

"Hello..."

"Who's that?" I didn't recognize the voice. I obviously didn't want to say who I was – not after the media reports on Sandi's abduction.

"A friend of Gareth's. Who's speaking?"

"It's Emily. Is Gareth there?" I put down the receiver and opened the bathroom door, knocking first.

"It's someone called Emily on the phone for you Gareth."

"Oh shit! Tell her I'm on my way to work—I'll call her back later." I did as directed. She didn't sound very pleased, but said 'all right'. Gareth came out of the shower, dried his hair in a hurry and dressed quickly.

"Sorry, ex-girlfriend. I've got to run now—I'll see you at Audrey's tonight. Help yourself to breakfast—if you can find any. I don't usually have the time." And he was gone. I got dressed myself and looked at the newspapers lying around. Gareth had circled quite a few articles—nearly all about salt and the government's new legislation. Things were getting tougher.

I thought Sandi would be up by now and called her mobile.

"Hello..."

"Sandi, it's me."

"Oh, hi Kevin—I was just on my way out."

"Where to?"

"The Botanical Gardens. Kate's flat is very close. I thought the walk would do me good."

"Would you like some company?"

"Yes—if you think it's safe."

"I'll wear a hat—and dark glasses," I replied.

"Okay—hope I can recognize you!"

"I'll wear a red carnation too. There's a small tearoom in the gardens—I'll meet you there if you like."

"Okay, bye."

I didn't think it would be too dangerous to be about in Edinburgh, but I did take my sunglasses and one of Gareth's bobble hats I found lying around. (A green and red one that proclaimed *Wales Forever*). It was much too big for me, but did the trick. I didn't think even my own mother would recognize me in that.

* * * * *

It was years since I'd been in the Botanical Gardens. The last time was when I was with a student girlfriend call Sarah, a music student who showed me a lot more than the tropical plants. Sandi was waiting for me in the tearoom as arranged, with a cup of green tea with lemon.

"Mmm—that looks good. Think I'll have the same." I ordered the tea and sat opposite her.

"How did you sleep?" I asked.

"Great—how about you?"

"I slept like as baby... cried all night and wet the bed."

"Hope Gareth changed your nappy," she said.

"Actually, I didn't see him 'till this morning. He had a phone call from someone called Emily and rushed off to work."

"Emily?"

"Yes. Apparently it's his ex-girlfriend—so don't worry. She's history."

"There's nothing between me and..."

"Oh, I saw the way you looked at that big, strong Welshman..."

"So? At least I didn't ogle him like a lovesick schoolboy. Isn't Kate rather young for you?"

"Not for a schoolboy like me." We enjoyed the banter. Well, I did. After the tea we looked around the glass houses, and then the gardens outside.

"You know, looking around here, Sandi, you'd never know that the planet was infected with a deadly virus, would you?" She looked at the beautiful trees, bushes and plants – the gorgeous colours and designs.

"No, you wouldn't. And I must admit, I'm still not convinced. I mean, I know we've had bird flu in the past, but that was nothing to do with aliens or anything like that. I know the Government could be involved in a cover up of this avian flu, as they call it. They could even be experimenting with biological warfare—that wouldn't surprise me. But intelligent viruses from other universes?"

There seemed little point in trying to convince Sandi, despite what she'd been through in London, and after spending a good couple of hours in the gardens, we headed off to the City to get some food. I knew a place in the Grassmarket where we could get a decent pub lunch—and where the clientele were mainly students, who would be unlikely to recognize us, or even care who we were anyway.

We enjoyed our meal with a glass of wine, and it was late afternoon by the time we left the pub. We took the bus to Audrey's place for the meeting with the rest of the gang. As we drove up Bruntsfield Place towards Morningside, Sandi asked me about Tony.

"As far as I know, he lives on his own, teaches at the University, and found out about the virus through Frank Peters. They went to University together."

"He seems very sad at times," she observed.

"I know what you mean. I think he feels the burden of being the leader. Everyone looks to Tony for direction—him being the first to find out about the aliens—after Frank."

"Does he have anyone?" she asked.

"No—not that I know of."

* * * * *

Audrey had prepared a little supper and the usual cups of tea and coffee. We made ourselves comfortable in the lounge—Tony, Sandi, Kate, Audrey and myself. Gareth had not yet arrived. Tony waited ten minutes, then suggested we made a start.

“I’ve got some news,” he started—just as the doorbell rang with Gareth’s code. Audrey opened the door to an out-of-breath Welshman.

“Sorry I’m late—I had a bit of bother...”

“Emily?” enquired Kate. He nodded. Tony continued.

“No worries Gareth. I just started to say that I’ve got some news—and it’s not good. I heard today that the government’s tightening up its legislation on salt. The ban of salt in cafés and restaurants is now in effect...”

“Already?” quizzed Kate.

“I’m afraid so. But it gets worse. By the end of the month, all salt packets must contain government health warnings. And by the end of the year, the sale of salt in shops and supermarkets will be completely outlawed. We’re heading for a salt-free state. On top of that, with the new strain of bird flu on the loose, the prime minister wants to introduce a programme of immunizations for the whole country—starting with schools and colleges and hospitals, then going on to workplaces and old folks homes. They’ll be no choice in this: it’s immunization or deportation. And the laws are expected to be worse in other countries.

“For goodness sake, the world’s gone mad,” exclaimed Audrey. “Can’t they see how utterly ridiculous this is?”

“Unfortunately not,” answered Kate. “What are we going to do Tony?” Tony took a deep breath.

“I have a few ideas, but I want to hear what you think first. We need to put our heads together – it’s the best way of working things out. So who’s going to start?” Gareth was the first to speak.

“We either run or fight. I can’t see the point in fighting a losing battle, but I don’t want to just run away either. A strategic withdrawal would be better. Live to fight another day, that’s what I say. But I don’t know where to go.” Then Kate added her voice.

“I agree with Gareth. I know we could go for the *salt is good for you no matter what they say* promotion. But with the way things are going, we’re just going to be (a) shot down in flames, or (b) taken to prison or deported.”

“What do you think Kevin?” Tony asked me.

“I must admit, I can’t believe what I’m hearing. What’s happened to the fight you used to have? Gareth could have broken my skull when I first met him. Now he seems so timid he’d run from his own shadow.”

“Then what do you propose we do?”

“Join with other groups—get the message out there. You said yourself there’s groups like us all around the country—all round the World maybe. They can’t all just be twiddling their thumbs—or running to hide under rocks—hoping it won’t get any worse. What if it does? Let’s at least go down with a fight, for god’s sake.” Then Sandi spoke.

“As I see it, there’s seven billion people on this planet. If we could trigger just zero point one percent of these people into positive action against the aliens, that’s

seven million people on our side. If we do nothing, we know, ultimately, we're going to lose. By running away we're just delaying the inevitable. If we fight it, we at least have a chance of winning, however small." With the atmosphere charged up with feelings, it was Kate next to speak.

"There's other places where it's not so bad as here or America—isn't there Tony? Places like Scandinavia." Tony nodded.

"Yes, there are," he conceded. "Sweden and Norway in particular."

"I don't fancy going there," said Gareth shaking his head. For a big man, I couldn't believe he was so weak.

"I'm not suggesting that you do Gareth," continued Tony. "Though if it helps our cause, I'll go there happily." Everyone nodded and murmured their agreement. "What I was going to suggest is this: we set up a website—telling the World about the virus. Everything about it: where it originates from and all its effects—particularly on the mind; how it spreads; and how it can be neutralized."

"By salt?" added Sandi.

"Yes, exactly. But it wouldn't be safe to set up the site over here or in the States. Even though the Internet was pretty much control free when it started, the government's been using anti-pornography and anti-terrorism laws as an excuse for policing the net. Can you imagine any UK site promoting the virtues of salt being given free rein just now?" We all shook our heads. "Exactly. But if we were to register and control the site in a more liberal country—Sweden say—*then* we could be in business." Gareth was quiet after his rebuffs by both Tony and myself. So was Audrey.

"What do you think about this, Audrey?" I asked.

"Well, to be honest, when people get talking about computers and the internet, it may as well be Scandinavian. I'll have to leave these decisions with you young folk. But I can tell you one thing: I agree with Kevin. If Frank had had more support, he might be alive today. I'm not saying he was right, and I'm not saying you were wrong. He had his path to follow, and so did you. But I tell you this: if we can't stick together against this plague, whatever it is, then we may as well give up and go home now."

Tony turned to look squarely at the old lady. "Sound words Audrey—very much appreciated. I want you to know that I would do anything to bring Frank back. Apart from being a wonderful human being and a great friend and teacher to me, Frank was invaluable in our task, and things are going to be so much harder without his passion and drive. I can only say that from his efforts, we now have Sandi and Kevin—two people whom I know, with certainty, are going to be a great asset to our cause and will do whatever they can in any way possible." Gareth, like the other was nodding soulfully in agreement." There was a pause, a respectful silence for Frank, and then Kate spoke.

"Kevin—Sandi. I was wondering if you had any contacts though your magazine for web companies we could trust and approach?" I looked at Sandi for verification of the first and most obvious thought that came to mind. Our magazine had a subsidiary in Sweden, and they ran their own website. Sandi nodded her unspoken confirmation and I turned back to Kate.

“Yes—someone called Frida Stronson in Malmo. I’m sure she would help—she’s always been well disposed to us. Sandi and Frida are like kindred spirits—they’re the same age, and both have been lactose intolerant from a young age.”

“Good,” replied Tony.” During the previous conversation, Sandi had begun to look more and more intense, as if trying to work something out. I asked her if everything was all right.

“Yes—I just wanted to ask Tony something, if it’s okay?”

“Sure—fire away. If we’re not holding you up Audrey?” He’d turned to look at the old lady, who smiled.

“You could never hold me up, Tony. You can stay all night if you want. I’ll make us all a cup of tea.”

“It was about the virus,” started Sandi. “You said that parts of the World were not as badly affected as others. Was that to do with cultural differences, or the way the virus is transmitted?”

“Both,” answered Tony. “When the virus first came to Earth, its main affect was in the central belt. As I understood it from Frank, there were two main factors determining the distribution of the virus. One, the spinning of the Earth—which kept the virus away from the poles; and two, the oceans—where the virus feared to tread...”

“Because of the salt water?” Sandi asked.

“Exactly that. On top of that, Scandinavia has always had a healthy respect for salt and a high incidence—if that’s the right word—of vegetarianism. All in all, it’s missed out on most of the virus—and that’s what makes it a good place to keep in contact with.”

“It’s not such doom and gloom then?” asked Sandi.

“No—except that no-one really ever listens to Sweden, Norway or Finland. As populations go, they’re small fry in an ocean of big fish. But still, we do have strong allies up there. Only mostly they don’t know what going on over here. They just think we’re an unhealthy nation obsessed with salt and government control.”

Audrey brought in the tea as Tony finished talking to Sandi. She distributed the hot drinks, then said:

“If we can set this website thing up with Sweden, does that mean we can stay on here?”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think we can, Audrey,” Kate replied. “If vaccinations become compulsory in schools and colleges, it won’t be long before old folks homes and workplaces are affected. It’s going to make life very difficult—if not impossible—around here. I’m certainly not going to accept a vaccination knowing that it contains the virus. And the next step’s bound to be home visits. Also, if Tony’s gauged the mood of the government correctly, it’s only a matter of time before possession of salt becomes a criminal offence—and then we’re in trouble. Where do we get sodium from? And without it, we’re open to virus attacks.”

“Kate’s right,” confirmed Tony. “We can’t stay here for much longer with or without the website. Moving to Sweden is one alternative. But working there isn’t going to be easy for any of us. There must be alternatives in the UK. Anyone got any ideas?”

We all stopped to consider places in the far reaches of the Country. Then Gareth spoke:

"I just want to say that I was wrong to be so bloody negative. I don't want to give you any excuses, but I've been having a difficult time with Emily. I thought it was all over, but it wasn't. Going away somewhere different would personally be the best thing I could do. I'll even go to Malmo if need be." We all smiled at Gareth and thanked him for the sacrifice, though it shouldn't be necessary. Then inspiration hit Kate.

"Orkney!" We all looked at her quizzically. "My folks used to take me there on holiday when I was young. We flew up from Glasgow, I remember. We could also fly from Edinburgh – or drive up to Thurso and take the ferry. There's hundreds of islands in Orkney, though not all inhabited, mind."

"Which direction are we talking?" Gareth asked. "The Western Isles?"

"No... the North of Scotland, head for John O'Groats—right at the top, you can't miss it."

"Oh, now I know—Old Man of Hoy and all that. Yes, I've seen it on documentaries. Safe enough I would think—particularly if you find one of the Northern Isles. Next to nobody lives there. And we wouldn't be that far from Norway if we ever need to abandon the place."

"Good point Gareth, observed Tony."

"And another thing," said Gareth, now anxious to make up for keeping quiet most of the evening. "Being so near the sea, it might be possible to produce our own sea salt."

"Nice one, Gareth," I said, encouraging him.

"Sorry to be a complete ignoramus," apologised Sandi. "But can anyone show me a map of the Orkney Islands? I'll never know where they are 'till I can see them."

"Just be a minute, dear," said Audrey, "I'm sure Frank left his old maps here." A few minutes later she reappeared clutching a few dog-eared Ordnance Survey maps. "There you are—I knew I could find them. They'll be a few years out of date now, but they should give you a good idea." We all gathered round the well-worn maps laid out on Audrey's dining room table. There were dozens of large islands, and scores more tiny ones—no doubt uninhabited.

After carefully studying the old maps, Tony straightened and said,

"Kevin—you seem to know something about the area, and Kate's been there as a child. How about the two of you going to have a look – see what you can find for us?"

"Great—but what about your work Kate?"

"I'm only working in Superdrug at the moment – trying to pay back my university loan. If they won't let me off for a few days, I can always get another job like that."

"Then that's set," said Tony. "The sooner you can go, the better. Whilst you're away, I suggest we get in supplies of salt before the ban comes into effect. Can we store stuff at your place Gareth—you've got quite a large shed haven't you?"

"No problem. I wouldn't mind a hand rearranging a few things first though—to make a bit of space." He looked at Sandi.

"Okay with you Sandi?" asked Tony.

"Fine, no problem," she smiled at Gareth.

"Good, so that's all arranged then. See you all tomorrow."

Chapter 9

There was no way of communicating with the alien virus. Frank Peters knew that. He had spent eight years working in the Virology department of Edinburgh University, and in that time had identified both the cause and the effect of the strain—but he could do nothing to alter its behaviour. His colleagues couldn't entertain the idea that Frank had discovered a virus that originated from outer space. They saw him as a radical eccentric, a misled scientist with wild ideas. No-one was prepared to take him seriously, and his paper on the theory had been refused publication. And why should anyone listen to him? Practically everyone was affected by the disease, and as such they couldn't see what had become patently obvious to Frank: the virus was not of animal or plant origin and its DNA did not conform to anything else living on this planet—past or present.

Only one man showed a glimmer of acceptance of the idea—and he was an astrophysicist, not a virologist. Frank met Dr Tony King one day in the Refectory of King's Buildings—the University's Science Campus two miles out of Edinburgh City Centre. Frank was sitting having lunch on his own and Tony joined him—one academic making contact with another. Tony had only just recently joined the University's staff and was keen to make new friends. He'd heard rumours about Frank, but Tony wasn't the sort of man to be influenced by gossip. They got chatting about the possibility of alien life arriving on Earth—then Tony said,

"I've often wondered about the effect we might be having on the Universe. There's so much stuff that we put into space—how do we know for sure that we're not putting microbes up there that could find their way to other planets supporting life? It happened on our planet in the past: Westerners visiting Asia and South America brought diseases to the natives who had no defence against them. Hundreds of thousands were wiped out then. What if the same happened in space?" Frank sipped his coffee, listening, and then added,

"Why not—it's only a matter of scale. I don't think there's really any doubt now that there is intelligent life on other planets." Tony was nodding in agreement.

"What do you think would happen if a space mission to Venus, say, brought back alien matter to the Earth? How would our immune systems deal with it? Would it cause an epidemic we could never recover from?" Frank thought for a moment wondering whether to test his theories on this man who had crossed his path that lunchtime. They'd only just met, but here was someone who, seemingly, had no preconceived ideas about Frank or his views—and he seemed pretty open minded.

"It's already happened," replied Frank. Tony thought Frank couldn't have understood his question.

"Sorry, perhaps I didn't phrase the question correctly. I was taking about an alien virus from another planet—Venus as an example...."

"I understand the question, and I'm saying that this planet has already been invaded, taken over, by an alien organism and it is killing millions everyday—man and animals." Tony sat back in his chair and pondered. So this was what the

rumours were about. He wanted to pursue the matter further, but he glanced at his watch.

“Look Frank—I’ve got a lecture starting in five minutes. What about we meet up later—here or in town. I’d really like to talk more.” Frank got up. He’d had more brush-offs than he cared to remember—one more shouldn’t hurt.

“It’s okay, I know you must be busy—I’ll see you around...”

“No,” Tony said firmly, gripping Frank’s arm as he was turning to go. “I really do want to talk about this—seriously, okay?” Frank saw the determination in Tony’s eyes.

“All right. Five o’clock at the Minto Hotel?”

“Fine—I’ll see you then.”

* * * * *

The Minto Hotel in Nicolson Street was a good place to meet. Comfortable chairs and some quiet places to talk. Frank had a half pint of heavy and Tony a gin and tonic. Not being one for social talk, and desperate to start quizzing Frank, Tony went straight into the subject, keeping his voice down.

“You said we’d already been invaded—what did you mean by that? Invaded by what?”

“Invaded by a virus, a very intelligent virus that has taken over the minds and bodies of Man—and other animals.” Frank paused—it was a big statement to make and he wanted it to sink in. He continued. “Its survival depends on you accepting it, nurturing it even, defending it. More than anything else, defending it.” Tony was trying to grasp what Frank was driving at.

“But where is it? In the atmosphere, in the water?”

“It’s in you, Tony – and seven billion other people on planet Earth, with just a very few exceptions. It’s in your blood, it’s in your brain. It’s controlling you. Only, I don’t think in your case it’s winning. You wouldn’t be here with me now if it was. Do you take much salt?” Tony sighed deeply, like a man caught out for smoking when he’d told everyone he’d given up.

“I know I should cut down, but food tastes so bland without it. I think it was my mother’s fault. She swore by it for everything—cooking, cleaning, washing. We always brushed our teeth with it, gargled with it and had plenty on our food.”

“Well, whatever you do—*don’t* cut down. Your sodium level has saved you.”

“Saved me? Saved me from what?”

“From being taken over. The virus is neutralised by salt—I found that out long ago. The moment you reduce our sodium level below a certain point, you’re in trouble.” Tony took a sip of his G&T and thought seriously.

“What sort of trouble? What does the virus do?”

“It eats you. It’s a parasite—an alien parasite. It feeds off the body, it feeds off *you*. It doesn’t want to kill you, because it needs living matter. Then as soon as you’re dead, it moves on to another host.”

“What are the side effects?”

“Heart disease, cancer, diabetes, arthritis—to name but a few. All the diseases of modern man. Many diseases, the one cause.”

“And the one cure?” added Tony hopefully.

“That’s the problem—there is no cure; not that I know of anyway. Same again?” Tony nodded and Frank went to the bar with two empty glasses. When he came back, Tony had another question.

“You said that the virus had taken over the mind and bodies of Man... I understand the body side—what about the mind?”

“The virus has a way of altering thought patterns—like a computer virus that creates alternative programs to run your computer. The alien virus hijacks your thought processes and puts out an alternate mindset to the brain, which then accepts it. In many ways this alternate ‘reality’ is the complete reverse of your normal worldview. For instance—*Smoking Causes Cancer*.”

“You mean it doesn’t?” Tony asked incredulously.

“No—the virus causes Cancer. Smoking merely aggravates it. But by making smoking—even passive smoking—the cause, attention is diverted away from the virus, which is what it wants. Earth-bound viruses are clever—they can mutate to become immune to just about whatever we throw at them. But they’re nothing compared to this alien virus.” Tony was listening intently, and each question led to another.

“How did you discover all this?”

“Ah, that will have to wait to another day—I have to get back. But I hope we can talk again—tomorrow perhaps?”

“I’d like that.”

“Oh, and don’t stop taking the salt... like this.” Frank wet the back of his hand and sprinkled a few grains from the cellar on the table. Then licked the salt. “There,” he said working it round his mouth. Tony followed suit.

And that was how it all began for Tony. Their meetings after work became a regular occasion, and it wasn’t long before Frank introduced Tony to his mother Audrey. Through her, they found Gareth—and Kate was next. Eventually, Frank’s job at the University became untenable. His colleagues became more and more vindictive of his research. And when Frank was no longer allowed to tell his undergraduate classes about *this fictitious virus*, that was the beginning of the end.

Tony, on the other hand, was more cautious about the people he spoke to. Their two characters complimented each other in many ways. But when Frank was adamant about going public about the virus, and Tony wasn’t ready to do so, the inevitable rift occurred. Neither Gareth nor Kate wanted Frank to leave, but Tony was more laissez-faire about it.

“I’m not going to stop him,” he said.

Audrey tried to talk Frank out of going down to London into ‘Virus Hell Hole’; but he wouldn’t be stopped. That was where the greatest concentration of the virus was, so that’s where he was going to start. On reflection, Frank probably underestimated the power and strength the virus had down there. If people didn’t listen in Edinburgh, he wasn’t going to get much reaction down there either.

He personally delivered a letter to the Prime Minister, posted circulars to members of parliament, and stood on a soapbox at Speaker’s Corner. He even took a handwritten note to Buckingham Palace for the Queen. He went to every major television and radio station in town, and called at the offices of London’s newspapers. Then, after getting no reaction from those in power, he went directly

to the people—speaking to anyone and everyone who would listen. On street corners, in the underground, in museums and art galleries (from which he was thrown out many times) and in pubs—where I met him of course. Most regarded him as one of those cranks who carry bill-boards saying *The End is Nigh*. He didn't do that—but his message was just as deadly: if people did not wake up to the danger within them, then the end of life on planet Earth was just around the corner.

Who could say the effect that Frank Peters had on the population of London. Many thousands must have heard him speak—and then there were those who told their families and friends about the strange man who spoke to them on the train, bus or underground as they travelled to and from work. But there's one thing certain, he gave it his best shot and was an inspiration to us all. In the next phase that was now unfolding, one without Frank Peters, Tony hoped we could achieve just half of what Frank had done in his life, and eventually rid mankind of this unseen virus that was a threat to our very existence.

Chapter 10

After Kate and I had left for Orkney, Sandi invited Gareth out for a coffee. She knew something was troubling him and thought a chat and a drink would do him good. The fact that she fancied him like crazy had nothing to do with it—nothing.

Gareth took the bus over to Inverleith Row where Sandi was staying, and they walked around the busy streets looking for somewhere outside they could sit and enjoy the air. They found a small Italian café and ordered two large coffees. They chatted amiably about nothing much for a few minutes, then something caught Gareth's eye.

“Jesus!” he muttered.

“What is it?” But before Gareth could explain, a dark woman recognized him and approached the couple hurriedly. It was Emily.

“Who is this?” she demanded looking at Sandi.

“This is nothing to do with you,” he replied.

“Oh, so now I see what's going on. You just wanted to dump me for her— whoever she is. How long's this being going on?” She was angry and bitter.

“Just calm down Emily—that's not the situation...” Then Emily stepped back in a moment of realization.

“Wait a minute—I know who you are. You're the one in all the papers—the one who was abducted!”

Oh shit, Sandi thought. She stood up quickly, grabbing her coat and handbag. Pulling some money from her purse she whispered urgently to Gareth, “Let's go... now.” She dropped the change into a saucer and they made their getaway.

“I'm going to call the Police—you're harbouring a criminal!”

They left the café without looking back, and quickly walked back along Inverleith Row. Suddenly realizing they could be leading Emily to Kate's flat, Sandi forced Gareth to take a sharp turn into the Botanical Gardens.

“Where are we going?” he asked.”

“Anywhere safe.” They walked for about five minutes through the gardens before stopping for a rest. Finding a bench in a secluded spot, they sat down, hot and flustered.

“Do you think we lost her?” asked Gareth.

“I think so. What was that all about?” Gareth took a deep breath and proceeded to tell Sandi all about Emily—how they met, how long they’d been going together, and what he had said to her in the pub the other night.

“I suppose you thought she could be one of us—seeing things like we do, and be part of the team.” He nodded wistfully.

“At one time it seemed like that. Then she got scared. Her mother was worried about her health—what with all the scares about salt and that—and asked her to go to the doctor. She wasn’t ill, not in any way, but she wanted to put her mum’s mind at rest, y’know. Anyway, the doc says: ‘You’re putting your life in danger—don’t you know how dangerous it is going without meat and taking in so much sodium? You’re heading for a heart attack.’ Anyway, she was frightened and thought it best to be safe than sorry and when back to the animal eating and cut out salt. That’s when she changed. I think the virus took over then—we never saw eye-to-eye after that.”

“But she still wanted to see you?”

“She did. I’d like to think she still loved me. But now I know about the virus, I don’t know what’s controlling people any more. You know, another potential victim—one more human for the parasite to control and *eat*.” Sandi winced at the picture. Being eaten from the inside by an alien bug was not something she wanted to dwell upon. After spending nearly an hour in the gardens, watching the autumn leaves fall from the huge trees, they decided it was safe to wander back to Kate’s flat—keeping their eyes peeled along the way.

Inside the two-bedroomed apartment, Sandi put on the kettle and invited Gareth to relax in the lounge.

“Kate said I could play anything from her CD collection—so what d’you fancy?”

“I don’t suppose she’s got any Zero Seven?”

“What! You can’t be serious...”

“I know they’re not everyone’s taste,” Gareth replied defensively—a little hurt.

“No, I mean—I love Zero Seven. *When it Falls* was so cool.”

“Amazing! Well, put it on then.”

Sandi made some tea, and fetched the bottle of Shiraz she’d picked up from the local corner store. They sat closely on the sofa relaxing with the warmth of the drinks and each other.

“Gareth, how did you get into all this?” He settled further back into the sofa, recalling those memories.

“I was working in a Wholefoods store off Nicolson Square, in the student area. An English guy comes in and asks for cashew nuts. I tell him the ones we have are very, very salty, and the boss had told us not to sell them. He says—great—the saltier the better, and asks for two kilos. So I say—you’re having me on, right? That much salt is harmful. He says—no, salt isn’t bad for you—quite the opposite. I asked him where he’d heard that, and he tells me he works at the University and one of his colleagues of his is doing a load of research in Microbiology and come up with some interesting results. So I’m intrigued now, right, and ask where I can

read this research. He says it's not published yet, but if I wanted to come down to the Minto Hotel at around five pm, the man would be there.

"So after I finish at five, I walk down to the Minto and there's the English guy with his mate. Both of them sitting in a corner, chatting. The one I know gets up as soon as he sees me and buys me a drink. A pint of eighty shillings I think it was. Anyway, I find out that the one who came into the shop is Tony, and the other guy – the one who's done all the research—is Frank. No second names, very informal and very friendly. Frank starts to tell me about his research project, and then suddenly—right out of the blue—he says, 'Do you believe in alien life Gareth?' I'm like, 'Whoa—what's *this* all about!' So he repeated it, and I had to say that I did, but everyone else thinks I'm daft. And then he adds, 'Well, the aliens have landed.' And at that point he had me—I would have signed on the dotted line there and then, because I always knew there were aliens on this planet – only I didn't know how fucking small they were!"

Sandi smiled as she listened to Gareth. He was like a big kid really. That was partly his attraction. Plus the fact that he was a hunk of a man.

"So you started to get involved from then on?"

"I had to—once they'd told me the situation."

"And you never doubted it?"

"No. I can't say I understood everything they said, but it all made so much sense. And the strange thing was, the more I stopped eating animal, the more I realized things for myself."

"Such as?" She gently brushed his dark brown hair out of his eyes and looked at him lovingly.

"Well, animals—wild animals. Have you noticed that no matter what we do to try to protect them, they are still disappearing from this planet—and at an alarming rate. The animals have all these protection agencies, and funds set up to preserve them—yet still they are being driven to extinction. The aliens feed off the animals—they're parasites. And once the animals have gone, Man's next."

Sandi didn't hear the last few words—she had fallen asleep curled up next to Gareth. And after a few minutes, his eyes were also shut.

Chapter 11

Tony stood pouring over a map of Orkney, and pondered. It was at times like these that Frank Peters was sorely missed. Frank would be there at Tony's side, enthusing about the future, about where they could go and what they could do. There would never be any question of whether this action was right, or that decision correct; and no concerns of what if this happened or that occurred. Not in the beginning any way.

He turned to the old, grey lady sitting in an armchair reading a magazine.

"Audrey—what do you think about going up to Orkney?"

She put down her magazine and looked over the top of her spectacles.

"You're not going to ask me what Frank would have done, are you?" Tony gave her a sort of pinched look. "To be honest," she continued, "I know nothing about

Orkney—and nor did Frank. I'm afraid you're on your own on this one Tony.” There was a touch of coldness in her voice, as she picked up her magazine—as if she thought that Tony only missed Frank when he could be of some use to him.

“I know it's hard without Frank. I just want to do the right thing.”

“Frank was never concerned about *doing the right thing*—he just did it,” she replied without looking up from the magazine.

At least Tony was never in any doubt about sending Kate and I to reconnoiter the area. It made sense for several reasons: Kate had been to Orkney as a child, and I was a journalist and didn't mind probing for information about anything. Plus the fact that Tony couldn't have missed the mutual attraction we felt for each other.

After my recent escapade in London, Tony thought it wise if I leave my car and take his—he would hide my motor until I got back. For the same reason, he suggested I leave my mobile with him. He said he had a spare—which I suspected was Frank Peters' old phone. I thought that Tony would really have liked to go up to Orkney to explore himself; but he knew it was best for him to stay home at the *Control Centre*. I promised him we'd get started on setting up the website as soon as possible. I had contact details on my laptop for the Swedish Internet company we had discussed, and I could email Frida Stronson from Orkney.

* * * * *

It's a straightforward, but often tiring, journey up to the Orkney Isles. The best route from Edinburgh is across the Forth Bridge, then head up North on the M90 to meet the A9 at Perth. That takes you all the way to Thurso—and the nearby port of Scrabster, from where a car ferry departs for Stromness.

Kate and I made good time after leaving Edinburgh, and after stopping off in Inverness for an hour—lazily resting on the banks of the river Ness—we arrive in Thurso after a winding, uphill road, negotiating several hairpin bends on the way. We were in time for the seven o'clock evening crossing from the port of Scrabster.

On the way up we'd talked about the past, and I asked her how she'd met the others.

“Frank was speaking at a Seminar at Glasgow University. It was on the reaction of Lymphocytes to external stimuli. Half way through his talk he threw in an astounding remark about the white cells being controlled by an alien virus. There was very little reaction to this from the rest of the audience, but it had a big effect on me. I cornered him after the Seminar and asked lots of questions. He told me he regularly held meetings at a small hotel in Edinburgh with interested people—and if I wanted to come along I'd be very welcome. I couldn't get there fast enough. My Masters was on the causes of irrational behaviour in white blood cells, and I was intrigued by his viewpoint. I came over to the meeting at the Minto Hotel in Edinburgh, and that's where I met Frank, Tony and Gareth.

“Why do you think you were so interested in Frank's research when no-one else was?” I asked.

“At the time, I didn't really think about it. I suppose I rationalized that it was right up my street—the subject of my research. But that applied to others there as well. Looking back, I think it was because it was it meant to be... almost as if the lecture was set up just for me. Oh, that sounds very self-centred, I'm sorry.”

“No no, I do know what you mean. I had the same feeling when I met Frank in London.”

“I know I’m trained as a scientist, but I believe there’s much more to life than scientific logic or reason. Ancient civilisations knew this—the Egyptians, the Greeks. They recognized there was a pattern to life—and it didn’t end with the death of the physical body.”

“Are you religious, Kate?” I asked.

“No—not at all. My parents were a little—but they never went to church. I grew up without any particular beliefs—though I could never accept that when you die that’s it. It didn’t make sense. So when I went into Science and saw all the patterns in nature, it was just too much to believe that all this came about through random events.”

“Not a Darwinist then?”

“No, not at all. But not a ‘Universe created in five days’ person either. I’d never found anyone who shared my view about the Universe—until I met Frank.”

I hadn’t known this about Frank—that he had wider views. I wondered how his philosophy fitted in with his ideas about the alien virus.

“I used to have such long discussions with Frank. I’d often miss the last train back to Glasgow, and have to stay at Audrey’s. The big question I had was this: was the introduction of the virus a random event, or was it part of an experiment?”

“An experiment!”

“Yes. If you take the view that there is Intelligent Design in the Universe, then you have to ask the question: did the intelligence allow or even arrange for the virus to come to Earth; or was this a flaw in the Intelligence... it literally didn’t see it coming? It’s a very important question. If it’s a flaw in the Intelligence, then we’re in trouble because we never know when we are at risk from unforeseen events. But if the whole thing was planned and controlled, then whatever happens the virus can never really win—it can’t spread to other Universes.”

“Unless that’s part of the plan,” I countered.

“That’s right!” Kate smiled.

The more Kate talked, the more I fell in love with her. I was drawn to her innate intelligence and beauty... where had she been all my life? I asked her what conclusion she came to regarding Intelligent Design.

“Frank and Tony were always divided on the issue, and I tended to side with Tony. We believed that the introduction of the virus was an experiment—in the same way that we would introduce viruses in the laboratory. Controlled experiments where we knew exactly what we were doing, and no harm could really be done.”

“Except to the guinea pigs,” I pointed out.

“Yes,” admitted Kate a little guiltily. She continued: “Frank, on the other hand, recognized there was some sort of Intelligent Design in the Universe, but believed that the Intelligence might not be equipped to deal with unknown threats...”

“Like the virus?”

“Exactly. And he believed that the consequences of Man being wiped out by the virus were catastrophic—and not just to this planet. This was the rift between Tony and Frank in the end. Whilst Tony was inclined to watch the experiment

unfold, Frank thought the only hope was for us to take an active role and do whatever it would take to defeat the virus.

“So that took Frank off to London to do his bit?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“And now—who do you think was right?”

“I know we can’t sit back and do nothing. Whether it’s an experiment or not, if mankind is wiped out, then that’s the end for all of us, whatever way you look at it. Where the virus goes from there—if it is allowed to go anywhere—doesn’t really matter... not to us anyway.”

* * * * *

Arriving in Thurso, we had time for a bite to eat before boarding the ferry and stopped at a small café before the short drive to Scrabster. Kate got us a table whilst I ordered the food. Then I noticed that there were no salt cellars to be seen in the café.

“It’s started,” I observed, my eyes indicating the lack of condiments. Kate nodded. The food soon arrived, and we were glad to stop moving for a while.

“What’s your angle on all this, Kevin? What do you think we should do?”

“I suppose I just want people to know the truth about the virus. After I met you all in Edinburgh, there was no question about what I should do. It wasn’t the sort of thing I could turn my back on.”

“How did you meet Sandi? Through work?”

“Yes. You probably know how it is—you work with someone, and the more time you spend together, the more you get to like them. It started with just drinks—then a movie after work. It just happened really. We liked each other, and it seemed the natural thing to get closer. The next thing I knew, we were living together.”

“And now?”

“Oh, that ended about a year ago. We’re still friends—but the relationship thing has ended. We won’t go back now. Too much has happened since then—we’ve moved on.”

Kate smiled. “Sandi and Gareth seem to be hitting it off,” she observed, changing the subject.

“Yes—just like Sandi to find a toy-boy.”

We talked about our families for a while, then finished our drinks and headed off for the Ferry.

* * * * *

Scrabster is a cold, soulless port, with the roll-on, roll-off ferry the main feature. A small hotel is located along the entrance road to the terminal and, on the cliffs above the road, stands a village. We parked the vehicle in a queue for the boat, and I left Kate in the car whilst I purchased our return tickets from the ferry office. To say the staff was unfriendly is a gross understatement. Everywhere we went, there seemed to be no warmth, no brightness or life in people—particularly in Scrabster. I talked about this with Kate as we waited to board the boat.

“It’s the virus,” she said. “People are now no more than automatons at times—you’ve probably noticed. The last time I came up here—as a child—everyone was so welcoming and friendly. Now it’s hard to even get a smile.”

We were beckoned towards the boat by a serious-looking man, and we drove through the ship's hull into the parking lanes. On board the ferry, people stared out of the windows or read newspapers. Nobody spoke.

As the boat departed, Kate and I left the warm cabin to stand on deck—looking back as we pulled away from the mainland. It was cold and windy in the sea air, and we were glad of our warm coats and woolly hats. Automatically, I drew her towards me. She looked up into my eyes and smiled, encouraging me to hold her closer.

The swell of the sea made the boat roll and dip. Ahead of us lay the Orkney Islands—faint outlines on the horizon. Was this to be our new home? The journey took us close to Hoy, the most mountainous of the islands, and we marvelled at the Old Man of Hoy, a sandstone sea stack standing 137 metres high. Time passed quickly, and it wasn't long before we were heading toward the town of Stromness—and old fishing port on the West side of the Main island.

It was nine in the evening by the time we drove off the boat, and we decided to stop in Stromness before driving to Kirkwall, the main town of the County, the next day. Kate remembered a small hotel in Stromness where she had stayed with her parents, and fortunately they had a room for the night. The owner was surprisingly friendly and hospitable, and it made me wonder if the virus had not penetrated this far north. I surmised that the sea air would not be to its liking. Our room was warm and comfortable, and after the long journey, fresh sea air, and two large brandies, we drifted off soundly to sleep.

* * * * *

The next morning after breakfast, we packed our bags in the car and headed off in the direction of Kirkwall. The route was a narrow road, flanked by grey stone houses in rough grassland. The lack of trees was compensated by views of other islands at practically every turn. There was something untouched about Orkney that made me feel comfortable and safe straightaway.

Whereas Stromness had felt old worldly, like an eighteenth century fishing port, Kirkwall had more of a modern feel in comparison. We parked the car in the town centre and looked for signs to the Tourist Office. Our plan was to get information on the islands, and properties that might be for sale. From Kirkwall we could sail to all the Northern Orkney islands, and we decided to try each one in turn—in alphabetical order (it was Kate's idea). Studying the map in the Tourist Centre in Albert Street, I saw three islands with names beginning with an 'S', one with an 'N', one with 'R' and another with 'W'. Then Kate pointed to a small island right in the centre of a group.

"Here Kevin—there's one beginning with 'E'—that's our island!"

"Ah, you're right! So *Eday* it is then."

Chapter 12

In London, the Special Branch had been busy. They'd pulled together just about everything about Sandi and I that was on record—passport details, drivers

licences, bank account details, car registrations, mobile phone numbers and lists of calls made. Plus full medical records, criminal record checks, school reports and work references, including background information from interviews with Trevor and other work colleagues. What pubs and restaurants I frequented, my favourite drinks, which shops I purchased goods from, and the football team I supported—no stone was left unturned. They also knew—from Trevor—that I'd been on an assignment to Scotland, and knew I stayed in Edinburgh (from hotel records).

It was just as well I'd left both my car and mobile with Tony. Several days after I rescued Sandi from the hospital, it was easy to forget that the police never do forget—not when they're controlled by the virus. What I didn't know, as we were perusing the island brochures in the Tourist Information Centre in Kirkwall, was that someone had already put the finger on Sandi.

"Are you sure it was her?" the policewoman asked the dark woman who was standing in front of her at the counter.

"No question—look..." Emily pulled out the newspaper article about the *abduction* of Sandi from the hospital in Fulham. "I was reading this article in the hairdressers just the day before I saw her. I'm certain it's her."

"And you say she was with your boyfriend at the time?" Emily nodded. "Well, it would really help to have his contact details—email address, telephone number... anything like that."

Emily stopped for a moment. It was one thing rubbing that woman's nose in the shit after what she'd done to Gareth—it was quite a different matter getting Gareth into serious trouble. She pondered. "What will you do to Gareth—what'll happen to him?"

"We need to find the woman because she could be seriously ill and need hospital treatment—and she could lead us to the man who abducted her. I don't know how much Gareth is involved with them—I'm sure he's not done anything wrong. But we do need to question him—only about the woman."

Emily thought again for a minute. "Okay," she said eventually, "do you have a pen and paper?"

The officer passed her an A4 pad and a biro, and Emily wrote down Gareth's details—still feeling a little uneasy about the whole thing.

"I do want him back, y'know."

"I know you do dear," the officer smiled.

* * * * *

As arranged with Tony, Gareth and Sandi were out shopping—for salt. It was important to get in as much as possible ahead of the proposed ban on sales—except for emergencies. The quantity of salt in their trolley at the Supermarket raised the eyebrows of the cashier.

"That's a lot of salt!"

"Very observant of you," quipped Sandi.

"I'm not sure if we can allow that..." The cashier pressed a buzzer near the till, then smiled falsely at Sandi. "Won't be a minute." Sandi looked at Gareth quizzically, as if to say, 'shall we leg it?' Gareth shook his head and intimated that

everything was all right. After a few moments, a supervisor arrived. As soon as he saw the trolley full of salt, he turned to Gareth.

“Can I ask the purpose of your purchase of so much salt, sir?”

“It’s for the slugs...” replied Gareth. “God, you should see them.”

Sandi caught on straightaway and added, “We’ve tried pesticides, but the slugs are immune. Salt’s the only thing that works.”

“It’s not illegal to buy salt, is it?” Gareth asked the supervisor.

“Er, no—not yet.” He reluctantly nodded to the cashier, smiled awkwardly at Gareth and Sandi, then left.

On the way to the car, Sandi looked at Gareth.

“I’m glad you said that—I was about to duff him one.”

“We found this was the best way—there’s nothing they can say. They have it to sell, and until it’s withdrawn they haven’t a leg to stand on. Aliens or not.”

With the salt loaded in the boot, they drove back to Gareth’s apartment. As they turned the corner, Gareth saw something.

“Shit!” he exclaimed.

“What is it?” asked Sandi.

A police car was parked outside the front door of his apartment block.

“Keep your head down...” Sandi did as instructed and Gareth drove past the door without looking at his apartment. When they’d driven for a few minutes, he stopped in a side street.

“It should be okay now.”

“What was that—surely not about the salt?” she asked.

“No, it can’t be that.” He thought for a moment, and then it dawned on him. “Emily!”

“You mean she told them about me?”

“I’d put money on it,” he said.

“So what do we do now?”

“We’ll drive to Audrey’s—the long way round. Then I’ll call Tony.”

* * * * *

Sitting in Audrey’s lounge, Tony was not in a good mood. Gareth had just told him about Emily.

“Fuck it Gareth you should have told me about this before. Sorry Audrey,” he added seeing her reaction to his language. “We’ll have to be much more careful from now on—we can’t afford to slip up. They’re looking for the least excuse to take us into custody – then who knows what will happen? It just takes a medical exam, and then you’ll be pumped full of the virus—and that’s the end. It doesn’t matter how dedicated you are now—once the concentrated virus is in your bloodstream, you’ll shop your own mother.”

“I’m sorry Tony... I didn’t mean...”

“It’s not safe for you to go back to your place—not now. Maybe not ever.”

“What about Kate’s apartment?” Sandi asked. Tony turned to Gareth again.

“Is there any way they would know about Kate? Did you ever tell Emily about Kate—or Audrey or me?” Gareth was offended.

“No—I’d never do that... what do you think I am?”

“I’ve just got to know for sure, Gareth. It’s very important. I’m sorry. We’ve really got to watch our backs now—too much is at stake.

“Okay. Well, I never told Emily anything about the group—or about you or Kate or Audrey... or even Frank.”

“What about in your flat?” Gareth looked puzzled. Tony explained. “If the police go to your flat, is there anything there leading them to us—address book, notes?” Gareth thought very carefully.

“I don’t know for sure, Tony. I can’t say—I’m sorry.” He was clearly upset. Tony patted him on the shoulder.

“It’s okay. It was always going to come to this one day. Did you get the salt?” Sandi nodded. “Good. Then this is what we’ve got to do...”

* * * * *

At four-thirty pm, Tony drove Audrey to Gareth’s apartment. They stopped in the next street, and Audrey got out with cleaning materials—bucket, mop and cloths. With Gareth’s key, she opened the front door, watched by two plain-clothes policemen sitting in a car on the opposite side of the road. On seeing her, they quickly got out of the vehicle and reached the door just before she had time to close it.

“Excuse me, Madam,” one said. “Can I ask what you’re doing here?”

“Who are you?” Audrey asked. The policeman pulled out his ID.

“Oh, well, I’m breaking into Mr Morgan’s flat to steal his silver...” She winked at him.

“Oh, right,” the officer said, seeing her cleaning materials and implements. “Can you tell us when Mr Morgan will be back then, hen, we’ve a few questions to ask him.”

“He’s usually back at six. You should catch him then. Now if you don’t mind...”

“Oh, sure—no problem. And thanks very much.” The officers returned to their vehicle whilst Audrey closed the door, locking it, and started to search the flat for Gareth’s address book, notebook and any other references to the group he might have left in the apartment. He’d told her the usual places he kept these things, and she found the address book straightaway. The notebook was harder. But after five minutes, she located two notebooks – one under the bed and another in a chest of drawers. Next the leather jacket Gareth had asked for. Whilst she was looking, she also found his bank books, some spare cash and his passport and driver’s licence. Hiding the valuables and books in her bucket, she switched the radio on and hovered around the lounge with the vacuum cleaner she found in a cupboard. A squirt or two of disinfectant in the bathroom to freshen it up, and after fifteen minutes she was done. Picking up her things, she left the flat and double-locked the front door.

Outside, she smiled and waved to the police officers, pointing to the leather jacket.

“Dry cleaning,” she called out. The officers nodded and waved back.

Meanwhile, Gareth and Sandi drove to Kate’s apartment. They collected everything that Sandi thought Kate might need, as well as Sandi’s own belongings, and put them in two suitcases they found in the flat.

Back at Audrey’s house, they resigned themselves to the next step.

“Well, this is it, folks. Much earlier than anticipated—but it was always going to happen one day.” As Audrey came from the kitchen with a tray full of hot drinks, Tony turned to her.

“Audrey, what about you? I know you weren’t keen to move just yet – and at the moment there’s no need to. Nothing can connect you with us. If you stay here for now and hold the fort, we’ll set something up in Orkney. And when you’re ready, we’ll come back for you.”

“Well, I must admit, I’d like that better. This is my home, and I’m not really ready to go yet. But if you need me...”

“You know we’ll always need you. But if you stay here, we know we’ll always have somewhere to stay when we return.”

“That’s fine by me,” replied Audrey.

“Fantastic. So if Sandi could stay with you tonight, Gareth can come with me. We’ll be back here at nine tomorrow morning, and make our way up to Orkney then.”

Everyone kissed and hugged, and Tony and Gareth headed off to Tony’s flat, leaving Sandi wondering what was going to happen when they got to Orkney.

Chapter 13

We had several hours to kill in Kirkwall before taking our ferry to the Isle of Eday, so we found a café with wifi so I could check my email. The night before, I’d emailed Frida Stronson in Sweden to ask about helping us to set up a Swedish-registered website. I was hoping for a reply—and I was in luck.

“Hi Kevin—good to hear from you. How’s Sandi?”

No problem with the website, very happy to help. Just give me an idea of what you want and I’ll start putting something together for you. Any idea of a domain name? It would be good to arrange that asap. Best Regards, Frida.”

I looked at Kate.

“What do you think about a name?”

“How about, *alienvirus.org*? Or *alienvirus.se* if you want a Swedish domain.”

“Both sound great! Let’s do it.”

* * * * *

Tony and Gareth picked up Sandi just after nine the next morning and the three began their journey up to Thurso. None of them had been that far North before, and they were looking forward to the adventure. Plus it was a relief to get away from Edinburgh now the authorities were looking for them.

The road was pretty clear up to Inverness, and they reached the city just after midday, where they stopped off for fuel and food. Tony tried to phone Kevin and Kate for the second time that day, but again there was no reply. He added to the message he’d left the night before and put away his phone.

“Probably no signal where they are,” he said. “I’ll keep checking my mobile for messages from Kevin.” They got back on the road and followed the signs to Thurso. About a mile out of Inverness, Tony noticed a police car in his rear-view window. It was indicating for them to pull over.

“Oh, shit” he said under his breath.

“What is it?” Sandi asked.

“Police,” replied Gareth, looking back.

They pulled over and waited. Two officers, having run a check on Tony’s car, walked over to the driver’s window.

“Everything all right?” Tony asked.

“Just routine sir,” the smaller of the officers said. “Can I see your driver’s licence and vehicle documents please?” Tony nodded and reached across Gareth to the glove compartment for the documents. He glanced back at Sandi to make sure she was all right. He hardly recognized her in the wig that Audrey had suggested she wore for the trip. She nodded. The first officer handed the documents to the second, then turned back to Tony.

“Can I ask where you’re heading sir?”

“To John O’Groats—bit of a vacation.” The second policeman handed the documents back to the first, nodding to him. They were then returned to Tony.

“Have a safe journey, sir—and enjoy your holiday.”

“Thank you,” replied Tony with a thin smile.

They drove off thinking that had been a close call.

“I don’t think they recognized you,” Tony said to Sandi.

“How about some music?” Gareth suggested, wanting to lighten the mood.

“Fine—as long as it’s nothing by *The Police*,” quipped Tony.

* * * * *

As Kate and I sailed out of Kirkwall Harbour en route to Eday, I suddenly felt so much more relaxed. Edinburgh was better than London, but Orkney was something else again. I smiled at Kate as we stood on deck, surveying the view from our second ferry in as many days. Ahead of us the blue water was relatively flat. Quite a contrast to the rough seas of the Pentland Firth the day before. Kate took out her Ordnance Survey map of the Northern Orkney Islands and traced her finger along our route from Kirkwall, To starboard was first Shapinsay then Stronsay, whilst on the port side stood the small islands of Gairsay, Wyre and Egilsay, with the imposing and mountainous Rousay behind.

I checked my mobile. Since arriving in Orkney, the phone signal had been patchy at best.

“Ah, a signal!” I exclaimed with delight. “And a text message from Tony.”

“What’s he saying?” Kate asked excitedly. I was quiet for a second. “Kevin?”

“He’s on his way up.”

“To Orkney?”

“I think so—with Sandi and Gareth. Look.” I showed the brief message to Kate.

“SGT on our way... is that all?” she asked.

“Seems to be. We’ll just have to wait to find out what’s happened when they arrive.” The message left us with a troubled feel, taking the edge of the bliss we’d felt moments earlier.

“I’m sure everything’s fine,” I said, trying to convince myself as much as Kate.”
“Yes, must be,” she replied, not believing it at all.

* * * * *

My mind was still on Tony’s message as we sailed close to Sanday, a low-lying land mass on our right. But I was more concerned with a different type of Sandi—the one I’d rescued from the London hospital a few days earlier. God, it seemed like weeks ago now. I hoped she was okay, that nothing had happened to her. I still hadn’t worked out why Trevor should have drugged her in the first place—if it was him. I could only think it was to cover up Frank’s death. I’d given Frank my work card in the pub, and they would have found that on his body. Then the doctor in the hospital met both of us when we were looking for Frank. If I hadn’t gone away to Edinburgh looking for Frank’s next of kin, it could have been both of us drugged and mugged. And I wouldn’t be in Orkney now.

Kate suddenly jogged me out of my day-dream by pointing towards some rocks close to the Sanday shoreline.

“Look, Kevin!”

What at first seemed to be rocks, were seals at the water’s edge. We were both very taken with the sight. I’d seen seals at London Zoo, of course, but seeing them in their natural habitat was fantastic.

“Amazing!” I said.

Eday was now on our port side, and the boat was turning towards the pier. I’d read that the population of the island was around a hundred and twenty—which was less than the number of people in my street back in London. The ferry took a few minutes to dock, and then we were soon rolling off the gangway and up the ramp onto the main road. We later discovered that this was practically the only road on the island; and it was really nothing more than a ‘B’ road.

We really hadn’t any idea of where we were going to start, but thought there must be a village of some sort. As it turns out, there was nothing like that: just two shops (general stores), a couple of pubs, and a few houses that provided bed & breakfast. We were about to ask for directions to one such guest house, when my mobile rang.

“Tony! Where are you?”

“Just coming into Stromness.”

“Great! Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine. Sandi and Gareth are with me, and they’re looking forward to seeing you both.” I told Tony where we were. They wouldn’t be able to get over to Eday until the next day, so I suggested they stayed at the same Guest House in Stromness where we stopped.

“All right, Tony, we’ll do that. I’ll call you again tomorrow. Have a good night.”

We got directions to a grey stone house at the North End of the island. It was pretty basic, but we were glad to find it. The weather had turned decidedly nippy as the sun went down. There was only one spare room in the house, so Kate and I shared. It was what both of us wanted anyway. Before turning in, we switched on the television for the news. It wasn’t good.

“In a vote on the new salt bill today, the government won by a majority of forty-nine. The legislation means that from the 1st of September, it will be illegal to buy or sell salt in the UK. The Prime Minister and the Government’s Chief Medical Officer, both welcomed the news.”

Kate looked at me for my reaction.

“All news is good news,” I said, quoting my old man.

“What does that mean?” asked Kate.

“It means Tony and co have made the right decision.”

Chapter 14

The next day, I couldn’t believe that I’d just spent a whole night in a room with a beautiful young woman whom I fancied like anything, and nothing had happened. But the journey to Eday had made us both tired—and there would be plenty of time for Kate and I to get to know each other.

With a cloudless blue sky and warm sun, we both felt brighter the next morning and soon began to explore Eday, driving from one croft building to another, looking for empty property and getting to know the island. There really was only one road, with smaller tracks branching off to the west and east. We were amused to see that despite Eday possessing only two shops, the island did have an airstrip—which was known as *London Airport*. Nothing to do with Heathrow or Gatwick of course—this one received its name from being located at London Bay.

“Well, that could be handy,” observed Kate, scanning the airfield. “A quick escape route if ever we need it.”

“Yeah—assuming we have an aeroplane, and you can fly it.”

“My sister flies her own microlite,” she said matter-of-factly.

So not such a dumb idea after all then.

Great sandy bays flanked the airport east and west. If the climate was a few degrees warmer, this would be paradise. But then it would probably be thronging with tourists, and not be the safe retreat we needed. To the west lay another, smaller, island called Faray. And at the north end of Eday was The Calf—a sanctuary for seals and seabirds. The more we got to know the island, the more we liked it. It was remote, yet had a homeliness we liked. We wanted to show the others as soon as possible.

“Yes, it is really peaceful here—and it’s got something I really can’t put my finger on,” observed Kate. “But there are other islands to see—this is just the first one in the alphabet, remember?” She was right of course. So I suggested that the two of us go over to first Sanday, then Westray, and ask Tony, Gareth and Sandi to take a look at Shapinsay and Stronsay.

When I finally got through to Tony, he was very much up for the idea. I asked him if he’d caught the news last night.

“I did—and it’s just as we expected, don’t worry about it. Sandi and Gareth picked up supplies of salt just before we left Edinburgh, so we’ll be fine for the next twelve months at least. We’re not going down with the virus just yet.”

That news put our minds at rest. We set off for Sanday, whilst the others took the first available boat from Kirkwall to Shapinsay. The plan was to meet up in Kirkwall in two days time.

* * * * *

The islands of Orkney are all different. From the Mountainous Hoy to the dead flat North Ronaldsay, and from the tiny Calf of Eday to the large main Orkney island (formerly known as Pomona, but now boringly called *Mainland*). Sanday impressed us. Similar in many ways to Eday, but with a micro village at Kettletoft. It even had a hotel! On balance, though, we still preferred the feel of Eday. Next, we headed off to Westray, the largest of the northern Orkney islands with a population of over one thousand. We'd got so used to small islands that Westray just seemed too big and impersonal. Having come from London, I couldn't believe I was thinking like that.

Whilst we were on Westray, we couldn't help noticing there was an airport with a one minute flight to neighbouring Papa Westray, affectionately known as *Papay*. Billed as the shortest scheduled air flight in the World, we just had to try this out; it was an opportunity to see another island at the same time. The total duration of the flight was only two minutes – including taxiing on the runway! From the Papa Westray airstrip, a taxi took us to the centre of the island, where we found a Community Centre and a row of holiday chalets. We'd missed the last ferry back to Kirkwall, and there wasn't another flight to Westray for a couple of days, so we stayed the night on the island. Fortunately, there was plenty of room available—we were the only guests.

Piping hot, home-made barley soup and bere bannocks were laid out before us for supper in the little restaurant in the Community Centre. The bannocks were made from the local bere wheat—a cross between wheat and barley. They had certainly been cooked with plenty of salt, which I asked the landlady about.

“Aye, well—between you and me mind—I canna understand these government people. We've always had salt through the generations. And it's never done anyone any harm—quite the opposite. And my boy was telling me the other day how the ancient Egyptians, and all these other advanced civilizations, used plenty of salt. And they were healthy enough.” We nodded in agreement. I wanted to tell her about the alien virus, but thought better of it.

“Are you folks staying up here long?”

“Oh, possibly. We're playing with the idea of moving up to Orkney.”

“Well, you canna 'ave picked a better place. Aye, it's a grand place to live. I've been here all my life, and I'd never want to move away. Oh, I've been down South...”

“To London?” asked Kate.

“Oh no! That's like going to another country... to Glasgow. And I can tell you, you can keep it. Everybody's in such a hurry, no-one's got any time for anyone else. And everyone's so unhappy. You'd think they'd been hit with a misery virus.” Kate and I smiled. We thanked the lady for the supper and asked if we could pay her for our stay.

“The morning will be grand—there's no hurry. I'm no going anywhere.” We said goodnight and headed for our room.

* * * * *

The next day, I had a smile on my face that I had difficulty hiding. I was floating on air, and we held each other all the way to the ferry. We talked nonsense, looking into each other's eyes, smiling, laughing, happy.

We'd arranged to meet the others in Trennabies, a cosy coffee shop in the main shopping street in Kirkwall. After we hugged and kissed each other, Kate got the drinks. Then Tony spoke.

"Well, how did you two get on? Find anything suitable?" We looked at each other and smirked. Sandi looked out of the window. "What were the islands like?"

"Oh, right." I tried to compose myself. "It seems to be a toss-up between Eday and Papa Westray as far as feel and location goes. We both liked Papay very much," I tried not to look at Kate – it would only start me grinning. "But there wasn't really any ready-to-move-into property. Unless you count a stone-walled croft with just that: stone walls. No roof, and a mud floor."

"But the walls were straight," added Kate.

"Oh, yes very straight," I confirmed. Tony nodded, trying to offset out flippancy with some seriousness.

"I see. What about Eday?"

"We liked that—liked it very much, didn't we Kate?"

"Yes. Probably Kevin more than me. But it had the nicest feel of all, I'd say—and very safe there I think. Sanday was a difficult to get to know because of the shape. Westray a bit too big, and we couldn't be so private there. You'd be expected to take part in community life—and we might not want to do that. On balance, I'd probably pick Eday. But I'd like to go back to Papa Westray." She smiled at me.

"Yes, me too," I agreed. Tony nodded, pensively.

"Good. Well, it sounds like we all need to look at Eday. As for Shapinsay and Stronsay, we had an interesting couple of days. Shapinsay has its own castle, and we all liked the island, but the castle is open to the public, so we'd always have visitors around us—tourists coming across from Kirkwall or Stromness. In contrast, Stronsay seemed more of a possibility—didn't you think so Sandi?"

"Yes, at first. Gareth and I certainly felt at home there." She looked at him, and he smiled back. If a picture could paint a thousand words. Sandi continued, "The only drawback was Papa Stronsay—the small island nearby."

"It's full of religious freaks," explained Gareth. "Some sort of weird Christian order. They all wear habits and beads, and look very odd—like they've just time-leaped from the thirteenth century. You can't go direct from Papa Stronsay to Kirkwall without going through Stronsay, so we'd end up bumping into the buggers all the time. Not good. There were two of them on our ferry and I felt like bopping them one."

"Thanks for your Christian viewpoint," said Tony. "But I agree—I don't think it would be a good idea to be so close to them—we've no idea how they would react to us, particularly if they've been contaminated by the virus."

"I agree," nodded Sandi.

"So it sounds like Eday is our best bet just now," confirmed Tony. We nodded our agreement. "But before we sail to Eday, there's something I've been wanting to talk to you about. It's never really seemed like the right time before; but now we're

all together up here, I need to let you in on something. But not here. Gareth spotted a quiet place earlier...”

“It’s got the local brew,” Gareth smiled.

* * * * *

Everything in Kirkwall was close at hand, and *The Bothy Bar* was only a minute’s walk from the coffee shop. It was dimly-lit with a large, open log fire at one end and cosy, private areas around the bar, with chairs and tables constructed out of large wooden logs—mimicking a traditional Orkney Bothy.

Once we’d sat down with our *Dark Island* ale, Tony quickly scanned the bar to make sure no-one else could hear, then looked at us in turn to make sure he had our complete attention.

“It’s about Frank,” he said. And then he dropped the bombshell: “Frank’s not dead.” You could have knocked me down with a feather, as they say.

“What? But that’s impossible—I saw it in the paper... we both did. Right Sandi?” I looked at her for confirmation and she nodded quickly. “And both the doctors and police confirmed it.”

“I honestly believe they did Kevin; and if Frank was a normal human being, then you would be totally correct. But Frank can’t die—he’s not human.” We all looked at Tony in complete disbelief, waiting for his explanation of what seemed totally impossible. Tony took a deep breath. “He didn’t come here in a spaceship or anything like that. He used a body, a human body—just like we use a spacesuit when we go to the Moon or another planet. He has to have a body to connect with us, to talk with us. So in one way, he is human. It’s his inner self—his soul—that’s alien.” We were all astounded. “Whatever the Police or the hospital told you was a cover up. Frank has a natural immunity to the virus—he understands it better than anyone else on Earth.” So many questions flooded my brain... I couldn’t access them quickly enough. “I know this is a shock,” Tony continued, “and I know your natural reaction will be to reject the idea. That’s okay, it’s normal. It’s exactly what I did when I heard this... until he proved it.”

“Proved it? How?” asked Gareth. Tony took a sip of his drink, then another quick look around the bar. Nobody seemed interested in us.

“Frank knew that I would never believe he wasn’t from this planet unless he demonstrated it. So one night he took me to the University’s Medical School, next to the Infirmary. He seemed to know all the right doors for where he wanted to go. They keep bodies in the basement for the third year medical students to work on—to learn their trade in anatomy. Some are very fresh—they have to be for the dissections of certain organs—otherwise they atrophy. I don’t know exactly how Frank managed to get the key to the basement, or even if he needed one. But the next thing I knew we were in a room full of stainless steel body draws. He instinctively went straight to one, pulling out the draw and exposing the corpse. I’d never seen a dead body before, and was taken aback at first. Then he said, ‘Watch me.’ He lay down on the floor took a deep breath and closed his eyes. After about four minutes, he seemed to be in a deep sleep; and then the most amazing thing happened—something I’ll take with me to my grave. The body in the drawer actually *sat up*, and *opened its eyes*. I didn’t know whether to run or scream. Then

the head turned to face me and said in a croaky, unrecognisable voice: “It’s me, Tony—don’t be afraid. It’s Frank.”

“You mean, Frank had actually transferred his consciousness to a dead body?” I asked in complete amazement.

“Yes,” Tony answered. “Exactly that.”

“And he can do it at will?” Kate asked.

“Yes—but only with dead bodies—where the *occupier* has departed. Ideally, just at the time of death—before the decay of the body begins in earnest.” We didn’t know what to say—we were shocked, dumbfounded and totally bewildered. Tony sat back and studied our reactions, as we looked at each other. This was a revelation none of us could ever have anticipated. Then Sandi posed the question we all wanted to ask.

“Where is Frank now?”

“Ah, I thought you’d ask that.” He put down his drink. “The answer is, I don’t know. From what I’ve heard, he couldn’t have gone back to the same body—it was too mangled from the ‘accident’. He could be anywhere. But you can bet he’s still on Earth.”

“How can you be so sure?” I asked.

“It’s no coincidence that Frank and the virus are both alien. He came to Earth at the roughly the same time: he *followed it here*.” This was getting more and more incredible. But we didn’t want Tony to stop.

“Followed it from where?” Kate asked.

“I know you’re going to find this fantastic—and I don’t blame you if you think this is completely off the scale of reasonable. But Frank told me he followed the virus from his own planet—from his own Galaxy.”

We were shocked for a second time. There was silence as we tried to comprehend what we were hearing.

“Why... why would he do that?” asked Gareth.

“Benevolence. Not all races are like Man—in fact, very, very few are like Man. The majority have an inherent need to look after others—to help out, to benefit other races—regardless of self.”

“How do you know this Tony?” Kate asked. “I know you’re an Astrophysicist, but how can you possibly know about other life-forms in the Universe? We’ve only just reached the stage of accepting that there *could* be other life in the Universe... we’re nowhere near knowing it’s nature.”

“From Frank... he’s told me everything.”

There was another stunned silence. My mind was racing now.

“You must know how unbelievable, how utterly crazy this sounds Tony...” He nodded. “But just for the sake of argument, supposing this is true, why would a single alien from another galaxy travel alone to another part of the Universe to try to stop a virus affecting a planet with a population of seven billion?” That was about as rational as I could be at the moment in time.

“Whoever said he was alone?” replied Tony.

Gareth sat back in complete disbelief. “I need another drink,” he admitted. “Anyone else?” We *all* needed another drink. After Gareth returned with a tray of beers, we couldn’t wait for Tony to continue.

“There are thousands of aliens here from Frank’s planet, Kevin—all with the intention of helping us to understand and eliminate this alien virus.”

I was suddenly aware of people watching us, as was Tony, and we decided to continue our conversation back at Tony’s hotel. Everybody wanted to hear more.

Chapter 15

On an evolutionary scale, Frank’s race was a million years in advance of human kind. Entering or leaving their physical bodies was as normal as you or I getting in or out of our cars. And without the hindrance of a body, they could travel at the speed of light with ease, enabling intergalactic travel to anywhere. So evolved were they that even the most advanced brains on Earth would seem like very primitive savages to those of Frank’s race.

Yet the nomadic virus had hit his planet hard, decimating the population. It would have wiped out his race completely, had they not developed an immunity to its functioning. As soon as the virus knew it was blocked, it left the planet as quickly as it had arrived. Without hosts, it would eventually wither and die. It could not exist on thin air, or even on vegetation. The parasite needed animal life to survive.

Where it had come from, no-one knew for certain. But they suspected it was the result of some tragic catastrophe at the boundaries of the known universe—some sort of accident that caused the mutation of an intelligent life into minute mindless beings—and the loss of their home planet. Consequently, they were condemned to wander space and time—programmed to seek out and live off other live forms.

Frank’s race—which he spoke of as The Great Ones—was able to communicate with every type of life within its Universe. But all efforts to communicate with the virus were to no avail. When the virus finally left their area of space, it was essential to stop it destroying other worlds, and towards this end Frank and others from his lands volunteered to track it down and—if necessary—destroy it.

Though destroying life was totally contrary to the Great One’s code, protecting other intelligent life forms was a far higher priority. Frank and his race still hoped that there was a way to reverse the virus’s programme and bring it back into the fold; but failing that, termination of its life-force looked like the inevitable endgame.

How long Frank and his fellow souls had been on Earth, Tony couldn’t say exactly—but he knew it was at least ten thousand years. Aliens from Frank’s planet were spread around the globe—mainly in areas where the virus was densest and at its most virulent. Capital cities were the most infected. With millions of potential hosts in close proximity, conditions were perfect for the virus to multiply.

* * * * *

Unbeknown to Tony, Frank had already found another body by the time they had reached Orkney. With death an hourly occurrence in London, it wasn’t difficult to find a suitable cocoon. Every day, somewhere or other around the

Earth, a person clinically dies and then suddenly comes back to life. He or she is not the same person after the experience—which their friends and family put down to the trauma of them returning from the brink of death. Many seem to have developed a completely new attitude to life—more of a selfless nature. A feeling of being at one with the Universe. Whilst some people are pleased by the change in their friend or relative, others find it very distressing, and so bodies have to be carefully chosen before *entry*. Those with fewer connections to other beings are generally best.

So it was with Frank—who now was officially Steve Saunders.

Frank smiled at himself in the mirror in the hospital: he was happy with his choice. A decent body—an athletic twenty-eight year old with jet black hair, brown eyes and rugged features. The only damage was from an overdose of sleeping pills—taken in a successful suicide attempt after the death of his wife and child in a tragic fire. Frank was glad that he didn't have to endure the tortuous thoughts and emotions that Steve Saunders had lived through before taking his own life. Memories always left the body with the soul, and Frank's knowledge of Steve's life would be pieced together by what he read in the newspapers and conversations with the nurses at the hospital. But amnesia after the trauma of the death of his family was perfectly understandable in his case, so Frank was never worried about doing too much research into the former inhabitant's life.

But staying in hospital for long was not on Frank's agenda. For one thing, the virus was rife in there, as it was in most hospitals these days. It may go under many names: MRSA, Staphylococcus Aureus, Salmonella, or E-Coli, but it was merely the same virus under different guises. Now, as Steve Saunders, he had work to do: he could not rest until the virus was defeated.

* * * * *

After our earth-shattering night in the Bothy Bar with Tony, we couldn't think about Frank in the same way again. We couldn't even call him 'Frank', I suppose. Who was he—where was he? And where were the others of his kind? Tony said there were thousands. Did he know any more of them? As I lay next to Kate in the Kirkwall Hotel, I couldn't get that evening out of my mind.

"Kate—are you awake?" I whispered. It was three am, but I had to talk.

She groaned softly, her face towards her pillow.

"What is it? I'm so tired Kevin..."

"I'm sorry, but I need to talk, Kate. I can't get over last night."

"Go ahead," she groaned, "but you'll have to talk to yourself," and with a deep sigh she tried to go back to sleep.

"Katie—I've got to ask you something." She sighed deeply again, but didn't answer. "I need to know if you believed everything that Tony told us tonight."

"No, of course not—he's bonkers," she groaned. With that, she fell into a deep sleep. I nodded to myself. Kate was a scientist—and what Tony told us that night was more science fiction than science. But astronomers were already admitting that life on other planets, in other galaxies or Universes, was far more likely than not. And if life did exist beyond our own solar system, we're not talking about one or two life-forms—they'd be millions. The chances of all of them being less evolved than Man must be practically zero—when you think of how humans have treated

each other, other animals, and their planet in general. And if there is more intelligent life than Man, it must follow that it would achieve intergalactic travel in some form or another eventually.

* * * * *

The next day, I was woken with a call from Sandi: she wanted to talk to me—to find out what I thought about Tony’s incredible revelations. So I left Kate sleeping and arranged to meet Sandi for breakfast at Trennabies.

“Do you recall my Aunt Penny?” she asked me as I sipped my coffee.

“You mean the one that went all religious?” I said.

“Yes, that one. The reason she became a Buddhist was her experience during an operation. She went in for a hip replacement, but it went horribly wrong. Some mix-up with the oxygen and anaesthetic—you know the sort of thing that can happen in hospitals.” I nodded. “Anyway, she died on the operating table—flat lined, as they say, for a full three minutes. Then, miraculously, she recovered. Brain activity returned, heart restarted. Fortunately she suffered no brain damage—just a loss of feeling in her left arm for a few weeks. But the biggest effect was on her personality. She really was a different person after that.” I put down my coffee and thought about this for a moment, letting it sink in.

“Are you saying that your Aunt Penny’s body could have been taken over—*by an alien force?*” Sandi considered for a moment.

“No, I don’t think I’m saying that.”

“What then?”

“I don’t think we are our bodies—I think we just inhabit them for a time on Earth, then leave to go somewhere else. I don’t believe that once you’re dead, that’s it—big void, no thoughts, nothing... cease to exist. There’s no point in that—it doesn’t make sense. There’s got to be some purpose to life, and though I can’t say I believe everything Tony told us last night, it’s a lot more credible than what you hear from any religion.”

“What about Tony’s story about the body in the medical school?”

“A good one for Halloween!” We both smiled. It was good to know my friendship with Sandi had not been killed off by my closeness to Kate.

“How did Gareth react to Tony’s *Frank’s an alien* story? He didn’t say much at the time.”

“I think he took it quite hard. Having spent a few days with Gareth, I know how much he looked up to Frank. It was always, ‘Frank said this, or Frank did that.’ It was a big shock to find out that Frank isn’t actually Frank at all—he’s an alien!”

Then a thought struck me. “What about Audrey?”

“What about her?”

“She’s Frank’s mother. Do you think she knows who he really is? Assuming that what Tony told us is true, of course.” Sandi sat back in her chair.

“God—that’s a point. I hadn’t thought of that.” We’ll have to ask Tony.

“Where is Tony, by the way?”

“Oh, he’s gone back to the Bothy bar for another drink with Gareth. They wanted to try another Orkney beer before we left.”

“It’s only ten in the morning!”

“That’s Gareth for you.”

* * * * *

Gareth and Tony were seating close to the open log fire in the Bothy Bar, nursing pints of *Skullsplitter*. Tony knew that Gareth always thought the world of Frank, and wanted to help him to come to terms with the bombshell he'd dropped the previous night.

"What do you think about it?" Tony asked, having taken a sip of his brew. Gareth nodded slowly.

"Not bad. Not quite as smooth as the one last night. That was fucking brilliant."

"It didn't leave a bitter taste?" Tony asked.

"Now you come to mention it, it was hard to swallow at first."

"But at the end? Was it a beer you could believe in?"

"Frankly speaking?" replied Gareth.

"Yes," Tony smiled.

"Well, I'd always thought there was something *other worldly* about Frank. I'd put it down to him being a microbiologist at the time. Did you know that I nearly followed him down to London when he left?"

"No, I didn't know that. What stopped you?"

"Emily. Not that she said I shouldn't go, or anything like that. I mean, I didn't even tell her about Frank. It was just that I didn't want to leave her. I liked her a lot, y'know. And I thought that Frank would come back. When he didn't, I was very hurt. I felt like packing it all in. Then I thought of going down to London to carry on where he left off."

"So?"

"Well, Kevin and Sandi came up, and I thought I was needed up here." Gareth smiled at Tony, who smiled back.

"I bet you did," he replied picking up his drink. "But seriously, how do you feel about Frank now?"

"Well, if it's true, it's fantastic. Unbelievable, but bloody fantastic! And I don't see why it shouldn't be true—it all makes sense... if you believe in aliens. Where do you think he is now, Tony?"

"I would guess still in London. There's no way of knowing who he is, or what he's doing now though. We'll have to wait until he contacts us."

"D'you think he will?"

"I hope he will."

Chapter 16

Audrey's heart skipped a beat when she heard the coded knock on the front door. She tiptoed to the entrance and peered through the keyhole magnifier at the figure standing there. He was about five foot nine and wore a green parker, which covered his head. She had to be careful. She make sure the chain was in place and opened the door, looking through the crack. He pulled down his hood to reveal a shock of jet black hair.

“It’s me mother.” She stared into his deep brown eyes—and she knew it was him. Removing the chain, she threw open the door.

“Frank!” He grabbed her and they hugged like long lost friends.

“It’s Steve now, Audrey,” he said.

“Oh, I can’t keep up with all these names—you’ll still be Frank to me. Come on in and I’ll make us a drink. We need to celebrate.”

Frank entered the living room he knew so well and removed his coat. It was always strange going back to the same old place in a different body. The first thing he always noticed was the change in height. Frank had been two inches taller. He looked at the photographs of himself.

“You’ll have to get some new pictures,” he called into the kitchen.

“Couldn’t you have a face-lift,” she quipped as she brought a pot of tea and biscuits into the lounge.

Frank sat down and relaxed. It was good to see Audrey again.

“I tried to call Tony, but it switched over to his voice mail.”

“Probably no reception where he is—it’s not very good in Orkney.”

“Orkney! What’s doing there?”

“They’re all there—Tony, Kate, Gareth, Kevin and Sandi. Oh, you won’t know Sandi. But you did meet Kevin, didn’t you? He’s the reporter.” Frank had no trouble recalling Kevin. His mental processes were sharp, and his mind felt fresh and invigorated.

“Yes—I met him in a pub in London. He wrote for a magazine...”

“*Mind2Body*.”

“Yes, that was it.”

“Well Sandi works with Kevin in London—or used to. After your accident, they got into a bit of bother and came up here.” Audrey filled Frank in on what had happened in Edinburgh whilst he’d been away. He listened intently.

“It sounds like a good move up to Orkney. I was listening to the news today, and the virus is pulling out all the stops.”

“Fighting for its life,” observed Audrey.

“Yes, could be. Anyway, we’ve got to act soon. I’ll travel up to Orkney as soon as I can.”

“Why don’t you stay down here for a few days. Give them time to settle in—and make an old woman very happy.” He smiled and hugged her, and she kissed him on the cheek.

* * * * *

The next day, we took the morning ferry over to Eday. It didn’t take Tony long to realize the potential of the island. It could easily be our home—just about the perfect retreat. After a good drive around the island looking for property, we stopped off at one of the long sandy beaches on the west side and took out the sandwiches we’d brought with us.

“So what do you think Tony. Possibilities?” I asked.

“Absolutely,” he replied enthusiastically. Then as an afterthought, “What are the natives like?”

I was about to admit we hadn’t met any yet, when a couple arrived in their Landrover and parked close to our vehicle on the beach.

“Well, why don’t you ask them yourself?” I said, waving to the couple. They waved back, and walked over to where we were encamped.

“Hi,” the woman said, “Enjoying the sun?” We all nodded.

“And the sea air, the view, the atmosphere... and now the natives,” I replied.

“So you’ve met the locals?” the man enquired.

“Well, I think Kevin was referring to you two,” Sandi added. We all laughed and introduced each other.

“Just visiting, or something more permanent?” the man asked, whom we discovered was called Harry. His partner was Joanne.

“Possibly the latter,” replied Tony. “Do you know of anywhere available?” The couple looked at each other, and then Jo said:

“We’ve got some self-catering chalets for rent at the north end. You’re welcome to stay there whilst you’re looking around. You really need a week or so to find out about property up here – who owns it, where the solicitor is...”

“That sounds great,” I said. Can you accommodate us all?”

“There’s six chalets, and five are free at the moment—so yes,” replied Harry. “We can give you a group discount.”

After leaving the beach, we followed Harry and Jo to their chalets at the far end of Eday. They were hardly visible from the main road, which explained how Kate and I had missed them the previous time we came over to the island. Down a rough track, we turned into a car park, and there was the accommodation in front of us.

“Cool!” exclaimed Kate. “Right next to the sea—and so private.”

“A little oasis,” remarked Sandi. “What a find!”

“I hope you’re comfortable here,” said Harry. We all expressed our satisfaction, as Jo whispered something in Harry’s ear. He then added, “Why don’t you come over to our place for dinner tonight? We stay near Millbay, the other side of the airport—you’ll be very welcome.” We all looked to Tony.

“That would be very kind of you,” he said. “What time would you like us there?”

“We usually eat at seven. Say six thirty?”

“That’ll be lovely,” replied Sandi.

* * * * *

Harry and Jo showed us our chalets, explaining how everything worked, then left us to settle in. The rooms were bright and clean, and made us feel very comfortable straight away. Kate and I shared one Chalet, Sandi and Gareth another, and Tony had another to himself.

When we were on our own, Kate jumped on the kingsize bed and smiled wickedly.

“Mmm... a lovely big bed for me... where are you going to sleep Kevin?”

“I’ll show you,” I said tying her down to the covers with a bit of arm-wrestling. “But I wasn’t thinking of *sleeping*...”

* * * * *

Harry and Jo lived in a two-storey house next to Millbay on the east side of the island. The house lay in a slight valley and had views across the bay to neighbouring Sanday. The couple grew their own vegetables in poly-tunnels adjoining the house, and seemed to be pretty self-sufficient.

The house was beautifully kept and they obviously took great pride in everything they did. Despite the rough and ruggedness of island life, they maintained a very civilized standard of life and obviously loved Eday.

“It’s great here—we love it,” said Harry as we sat in their lounge-cum-dining room overlooking Millbay. “We both worked our arses off for twenty years in London. Made loads of money...”

“And enjoyed the money,” added Jo as she brought in bowls of steaming hot home-made vegetable soup.”

“It’s true, we did. But there were costs. Always up early and back late. Okay, we had a lovely house, great cars, and holidays in the sun...”

“When we had time,” observed Jo.

“Yeah—and that was just the thing. We both loved the countryside, the outdoor life, growing things—being close to nature. But we just didn’t have time for that. Then we came up to Orkney one summer...”

“My mum had taken a coach tour up here, and she raved about it,” explained Jo. Harry nodded.

“Orkney wasn’t a place we’d ever really consider for a holiday. But June was so excited by it, we just had to go. Took a flight from Heathrow to Edinburgh, then a small plane to Kirkwall.”

“It was like stepping into another world,” smiled Jo, recalling that day.

“Yeah, it really was,” agreed Harry holding Jo’s hand. “And the rest was history, as they say.”

Dinner was great. We’d told them we didn’t eat any animal products, which wasn’t a problem at all. Both of them were practically Vegans.

“When we first came here, we found ourselves closer to animals than we’d ever been in our lives...” explained Harry. “We were very much city folk in London, and big meat eaters in London. After about a week after we arrived on Eday, we were invited round for dinner by a farmer neighbour, and he said: ‘Hope you enjoy the beef—I had the bull killed ‘specially for you.’”

Jo recoiled at the memory. “We’d seen it running around in his field just the day before,” she explained. “So the day after the dinner, I said to Harry, ‘That’s it, no more meat for me, thank you very much.’ And neither of us went back to it.” They looked at each other and smiled fondly. They were clearly very much in love. We enjoyed their company, and I think they enjoyed ours. From the way they talked, it seemed they didn’t get much opportunity to meet like-minded people.

After we’d worked our way through three courses of delicious home-made food, Harry turned to me.

“So what brings you up to Orkney, Kevin? Had enough of the Rat Race too?” I didn’t want to say too much at this stage. Despite the friendliness and apparent openness of Harry and Jo, we really didn’t know much about them. For all we knew, they could be carriers of the virus – though I did doubt it. I told him about my work with the magazine, and that Sandi worked with me, and then fabricated a story about meeting Tony, Kate and Gareth when writing a story on the health of academics. It was only a slight diversion from the truth, and the others backed up my story, knowing I was being cautious. But then something strange happened. Jo looked me straight in the eye and said:

“And what made you go into journalism, Kevin? What were you doing before Fleet Street came calling?” I went completely blank. There was just nothing there. I searched my memories for a clue, but nothing. Everyone was looking at me quizzically.” Eventually Tony said,

“There you are Kevin, I always said you were a born journalist. Straight from the womb to the front page—nothing in between.” Everyone laughed, and I smiled—but only to try to cover up my embarrassment.”

At the end of the night, we said goodbye and thanked Harry and Jo for a lovely evening—promising to call again soon. On the way back to the chalets, I had only one thought on my mind: I had to talk to Sandi. I made the excuse to Kate that I needed to get a phone number from Sandi’s mobile, and knocked on the door of her chalet.

“I know it’s late, but have you got a minute, Sand—it’s important.” She turned back to speak to Gareth in the room, saying she just had to talk to me for a few minutes, and then stepped outside into the cool night air. We walked over to lean on the fence overlooking the sea, now very still and tranquil. “What is it Kevin?” There was concern in her voice.

“It’s probably nothing to worry about,” I started. “But when Jo asked me what I did before working on the magazine, I really couldn’t remember.” Sandi suddenly looked relieved. It obviously wasn’t a big deal to her.

“Oh that!” I thought—I’m sure we all thought—you just didn’t want to say because it might have sounded weird. Or you didn’t want to reveal something from your past none of us know about... maybe a gay lover?

“Very funny. No—I really couldn’t remember Sandi, and I still can’t remember now.”

“Well, don’t worry—it’s probably just old age approaching, your Alzheimer’s kicking in early. You always said you’d get it eventually.” I smiled at Sandi’s humour. But I couldn’t let this go.

“So what did I do before I became a journalist—before I started work on the magazine?” Sandi suddenly found herself scanning her own memories—racking her brains.”

“I honestly can’t say I remember, Kevin. Perhaps I never did know. We didn’t meet until the magazine—perhaps you never told me?” I nodded. It was late, and both of us had had a few glasses of home-made wine. It could wait until the morning.

“Yeah, you’re right—both of us are tired. I’m sorry to have brought you out like this. I’m sure it’ll all come back to me tomorrow.” I kissed her good night, and we went back to our respective chalets. It had been a long day, and we could have a busy day tomorrow.

Chapter 17

I awoke the next day with exactly the same memories I’d had the night before, or should I say lack of memories. I wondered if this was caused by the virus. If I

was infected, I needed to know about it—we all did—so I asked Kate to test me after breakfast.

“Are you getting your sodium,” she asked.

“Yeah, Gareth divided up the salt yesterday—we’ve got plenty.”

“Okay, but are you taking it?”

“Yes doctor, three times a day after meals,” I replied flippantly, prompting Kate to hit me over the head with a pillow.

“Did you notice that Jo and Harry used plenty of salt on their food?” she said.

“Yes—a good sign, isn’t it? If we want to spend more time with them, I mean. They’re quite nice people.”

“I liked them.”

I offered my right arm to Kate. She wanted to take the blood from my upper thigh, but having a needle that close to my manhood was out of the question. After five minutes, she came back with the results.

“Well?” I asked. “What’s it like?”

“It’s a rich, red, cabernet merlot with plenty of body. Tastes all right too.”

“Come on Kate—it is safe?”

“Cholesterol-free, high red cell count, plenty of oxygen, and enough iron to make a magnet—and *no viruses*. Happy now?” My head nodded yes, but my thoughts said no. If I was contaminated with the virus, at least I would have had an explanation for my amnesia. Now I didn’t know what to think.”

“Come here,” Kate commanded. I went willingly to her arms, and we embraced. “Let’s go back to bed Kevin—I’m feeling randy... it’s seeing all that blood.” Much as I fancied spending the morning in bed with Kate, I couldn’t get this memory loss out of my mind. And anyway, we had some serious home-hunting to do, so I reluctantly prised myself away from her claws.

“Later, my little Black Widow. We’ve got places to go, people to see...”

* * * * *

Tony had been up early, investigating the north end of Eday. To the north-west of the chalets lay the Red Head—a red sandstone cliff marking the entrance to Calf Sound, the stretch of water between Eday and the Calf. All around was the smell of the sea and the sound of Arctic Terns crowing to each other as they detected fish below the sea’s surface. Tony started to walk along the coast to the Red Head, and then realized it was much further than it looked. He thought it would make a nice trek for everyone in the afternoon—if the weather stayed good.

The chalets were ideal for their base—close to the water with an escape route should they need it (there was a boat jetty nearby); and the accommodation was very secluded. He wondered if there was any chance of taking the chalets on a long term basis from Harry and Jo—if the price was right. They seemed very amenable and he didn’t think they’d try to grab every last penny.

He knew that meeting the couple was not a chance occurrence (he’d stopped believing in chance a long time ago), and he was certain that Harry and Jo had a part to play in ridding the Earth of the virus. Everything seemed to be working out for the group now: they must be doing something right.

Then he thought of Frank. There were other things Tony hadn’t told the others. But for the time being, Frank being an alien from another galaxy was big enough a

revelation without dropping any more bombshells. Those could wait till later—when everyone was ready. Where was Frank now? Would he come looking for them? And if he did, how would the others regard him? Would they believe it was Frank?

Thoughts were now coming at ten to the dozen, and he made a mental note to talk to Sandi and me about the Swedish website, and Gareth and Kate about the possibility of extracting salt from seawater. There was certainly no shortage of the latter.

Gazing across to the Calf he observed seals basking on the rocks in the autumn sunshine, seemingly carefree and unaware of an alien virus threatening to wipe out humankind. Oh to be a seal, he thought.

* * * * *

Audrey was so glad that Frank had returned to her. He didn't have to, of course. He could have gone anywhere else, anywhere on Earth. But he wouldn't have gone back home to his own planet, Audrey knew that. Frank was too dedicated. In a previous life, they had been lovers—or so Frank told her. She couldn't remember her previous lives—few could. But Frank was special: he could recall most things—including previous incarnations.

She knew her role was as a supporter—not like Frank, or even Tony—and she liked that. Now Frank had returned, she could go and join the others. She would cook and clean, and look after their house—when they found one. She hoped it was warm, and ideally near the sea. She liked being close to water—particularly the sea. Cities were all right, but the coast reminded her of home, and at times she really missed home.

Frank came in from the spare bedroom with a serious look on his face.

“I've got to go.”

“I know,” she replied, “but not just yet—stay a few more days, then I'll come with you.”

“It can't wait. I can feel it—the virus is growing stronger. It's happened like this before. We've got to stop it expanding.” Audrey didn't want Frank to go so soon: he'd only just arrived. But that was just like Frank. She sighed deeply.

“All right—I'll pack.” Frank nodded to her—his way of saying thanks—and returned to his bedroom. He had little to pack himself—just the clothes the hospital had returned to him. They had been amazed by his recovery, of course. But flat-liners coming back to life, though rare, were regular enough for them to accept the occurrence without a huge song and dance. He had left with Steve Saunders' car, saying goodbye to the hospital staff who had been very respectful of his personal loss—his wife and daughter. These meant little to him. He had no emotional connection to Steve's wife and the young girl. And in any case, his view of death was radically different from theirs. He knew their souls, after death, would be taken care of, and would probably be reborn one more time on planet Earth—where they would attempt to overcome the obstacles they had failed to deal with in previous incarnations. Frank didn't just hold this as a belief, he knew it as a fact—as did Audrey.

“Do you want to phone Tony?” she called into Frank's room.

“No—not yet. I’ll call him when we get to Orkney... just in case something else comes on the way there.” That was just like Frank. Within the hour, they were on their way out of the door. Audrey had been waiting for this day for a long time, and already had some things packed into two suitcases. She smiled at Frank as he drove towards South Queensferry and the Forth Road Bridge. Such a different look he had this time—and it suited him. A real looker for the girls now. But Frank had no time for such things—his mission was far too important.

* * * * *

As we walked along the track leading to the Redhead, I still couldn’t get the previous night out of my head. I desperately tried to think back to the time before I worked at the magazine, and still got nowhere. Perhaps I needed some sort of regression therapy, I mused. Kate had dropped back to talk to Tony, so Sandi ran forward to catch me up.

“Well? Any recollections of the past yet?”

I shook my head. “Sandi, I still can’t remember what job I did before *Mind2Body*—I feel I’m losing it.”

“Then why don’t you call Ron and Jean and ask them about the past?”

“Ron and Jean?”

“Your parents!”

I was stunned... I’d no idea who Ron and Jean were, but I was sure they weren’t my parents.

“No no... my dad’s not called Ron—and my mum is definitely not Jean.”

“Then what are their names?”

I thought about it for a minute. “I really don’t know! Did you ever meet my folks Sandi?”

“No—you hardly ever talked about them.”

“This is driving me crazy...”

“Don’t worry, it’ll come back soon. It’s probably not important just now. Memory’s like that – the more you worry about it, the more you won’t remember. If you just forget about it, it’ll pop into your head one day out the blue.” She smiled at me.

“Thanks,” I said. “I think you’re right.”

It took nearly an hour to reach the top of the Red Head, and from there the views were stunning. Across the other side of the inlet was the Grey Head, the headland of the calf, and out to sea was Westray in the distance. To the North we could just make out North Ronaldsay, the most northerly of the Orkney Islands. Beyond that lay Shetland.

“Breathtaking, isn’t it?” observed Gareth, who was standing with me, taking in the view.

“Beats Anglesey then?” I asked. Gareth nodded.

“It’s bloody brilliant here man. I can tell you that.”

“What do you think of Eday?” I asked.

“Awesome. Makes me feel at home in one way—but it’s got a life of its own. I feel like I’ve been reborn.”

“So you’d be happy here then?”

“Absolutely. And the chalets are great.”

“And the company?” I smiled at Gareth. He smiled back and nodded.

“She’s something else.” We walked back together talking about Sandi, with Gareth comparing her with his previous girlfriends. He had no trouble telling me about his own past. And despite the fact that I had agreed with Sandi that I should forget about my memory loss, I couldn’t help thinking about it.

Back at the chalets, we got out the car and drove round looking for property. Wherever we went, we couldn’t find anywhere that lived up to the standard and location of the chalets. Tony said he’d talk to Harry and Jo about the possibility of a long-term rent on three of them. We all thought this was a good idea.

After the drive, I invited the others to our chalet to talk about the website. I showed them the email from Frida.

“Great!” said Tony. “Have you thought of a name?”

“Kate thought of ‘alienvirus.org’”

“Sounds good to me. Is it available?”

“Yes it is,” Kate replied.

“Well, let’s go for it then. Everyone agreed?” He turned to the others. We were all in favour, so I emailed Frida straightaway to ask her to reserve the domain for us.

“Step one completed then. What about content?” enquired Tony.

“I could draft some ideas with Kate and run them past you later,” I said. Tony nodded.

“Let’s do it then.”

Chapter 18

At their Mill Bay house, Harry and Jo sat quietly watching the Prime Minister talking on satellite television.

“And so, in light of the irrefutable evidence from our top scientists, this government has no choice but to outlaw the possession of salt with immediate effect. At last we can rid mankind of heart disease and many forms of cancer by this simple and healthy step. It is no longer a case of personal choice: sodium is suicide, and we do not tolerate suicide in this country...”

Harry looked at Jo. She nodded, and Harry picked up the telephone receiver and dialed a number.

* * * * *

Frank had never been to Orkney before—not in any of his previous incarnations—and neither had Audrey. They talked very little on the journey up north—mostly listening to music and the news on the radio. Once they finally reached the ferry terminal at Scrabster, Frank turned off the engine and looked at Audrey.

“Did Tony give any reason for choosing Orkney?”

“I recall it was Kate’s suggestion—she’d been there as a child. It seemed isolated from the main spread of the virus, and far enough away from any trouble.” Frank

nodded thoughtfully. He'd been very distant all day and Audrey didn't like to see him like this. "Is everything all right Frank?" He looked at her and smiled his serious face away.

"Yes, it always is. Only I don't think we can leave the virus much longer. Before I came over to see you, I was in contact with some of our other groups. Parts of the Far East are completely overrun now; the Middle East is in a bad state, and America will be next—followed by Britain no doubt. We can't let the virus go on like this—and you know what that means?" A look of horror swept over Audrey's face.

"Oh no, not that—there must be another way!"

"I'm sorry Audrey, you know there isn't." The old lady suddenly looked older and greyer. Despite the oddities of the planet, it had been her home for as long as she could remember, and to wipe it from the Galaxy would be a devastating blow. With tears welling in her eyes, she nodded in capitulation.

"If there's no other way..."

"It's been over ten thousand Earth years, Audrey. We've tried everything, you know that. If we do nothing, the virus moves on to devastate yet another world, and then another. The only way is to annihilate this planet, and the virus with it."

Frank knew it was the last resort. But his brief had always been to take this final measure if necessity demanded it. Over the many lifetimes he had experienced on Man's Earth, he and those of his kind had managed to slow down the virus, but never to completely eradicate it. And they had never, ever managed to communicate with it in any way—despite its base intelligence. How the virus would react if it knew their plan was to destroy its hosts, he could only guess. But from all his studies of the virus over the millennia, both on Earth and his home planet, it seemed that the virus would stay with its host for as long as it could feed off it.

Audrey suddenly remembered something.

"They said they're going to set up a website—telling everyone about the virus. The whole world will see it." Frank nodded in understanding. He wanted to stop the virus and save mankind if they possibly could. They could afford to make one final effort before the final *coup de grace*—but they could not afford to let the virus get away this time.

"Well, it's a thought—something we've never tried before. It's no use talking to the virus, but there's still a chance we can get through to people." Audrey smiled with relief at this stay of execution. When she first came to Earth, she couldn't stand the place and was desperately homesick. But the longer she stayed, the more she fell in love with the people and their quirky ways. Just as people would fight to save their injured pet from being put down by the Vet, so she would fight for Man's survival.

Frank went to buy tickets for the boat journey across to Orkney. The wind was fierce, and he had to battle to get to the ticket office. Unlike Audrey, he would not be sorry to leave the planet. Ten thousand years was long enough to sorely miss his true home.

Frank was also looking forward to seeing Tony and the others again. Despite their differences, he knew Tony shared the same objectives and it would be good to talk with him and catch up.

* * * * *

When Gareth returned to the chalets with Sandi after a long walk around the island, he was in for a shock.

"It's gone!"

"What is it—what's gone?" Sandi asked.

"The salt—I can't find it."

"What, none of it?"

"No—all the large bags have gone. I can't even find the salt cellars." Gareth was clearly in a panic.

"Okay, we have to look at this calmly. Just sit down and stop for a minute. I'll put the kettle on." Gareth did as he was told, removing his coat and sitting down, his mind racing.

"We'll have to tell Tony," he said.

"Perhaps Tony took it," she called from the kitchen. "Maybe he needed it for something?" Gareth shook his head.

"Why would he do that?" He was clearly distraught. Sandi came through with two cups of peppermint tea and two glasses of brandy.

"When did you see it last?" she asked.

"I checked the bags yesterday. But I used one of the salt cellars this morning."

"So if anyone took it, it must have been when we were out this afternoon." Gareth nodded. "I think we should call Tony now." Sandi phoned his chalet on the internal phone. There was no answer.

"What about Kevin's room?" Gareth suggested. Sandi dialed the number.

"It's engaged," she said.

"Well at least they must be in. Come on..." He got up and grabbed Sandi's hand. "Let's find out what's going on."

Kate opened the door and ushered them in. Tony was there with Kate and me.

"I was just trying to phone you," I said.

"Our salt's been stolen!" Gareth blurted out.

"It's not stolen," I replied. "But something else has come up." I looked at Tony. His mood was serious.

"We've just had a phone call from Audrey," he said. "She's in Orkney."

"Fantastic!" exclaimed Sandi. "Is she alone?"

"Er, no—that's the point. She's with Frank." The room was suddenly quiet.

"How do we know it's Frank?" Gareth asked. "Does it look like him?"

"She didn't say. But if he's changed bodies, that's rather unlikely."

"Then how...?" Gareth was obviously concerned; and we all wanted to know how we could be certain it was Frank.

"Well," said Tony, "for one thing, Audrey would know. She knows Frank better than anybody. They have a connection."

"But what if he's holding a gun to her head—shouldn't we be more suspicious? He could kill us all!" Gareth was clearly upset by this revelation.

"I know this isn't going to be easy for any of us," Tony replied.

"What's his name?" I asked, strangely thinking that if we knew his name, it would be easier to accept."

"Audrey said it was Steve—Steve Saunders," Tony replied.

“Well... Steve, Frank—both got five letters... it’s a start. Everyone except Gareth smiled at my attempt to lighten the mood.

“We could test his blood,” suggested Kate. “Even if he’s not Frank, if he’s clear of the virus he’s not going to be a danger.”

“Good thinking!” I exclaimed, turning to Kate. “So you’re not just a pretty face after all,” to which she dug me in the ribs.

“Okay, if that’s what you all want—we’ll do that,” conceded Tony.

“And frisk him,” said Gareth.

“Fine,” replied Tony flatly.

“It’s better to be safe than sorry, isn’t it?” I pointed out. “If he really is Frank, he’ll understand. I remember you employed the same method for one ‘unknown journalist’ who visited Edinburgh.” Even Gareth smiled at that.

“I’ll get the table leg,” he said. Then he remembered the salt. “Hang on, what about our salt—it’s all gone!”

“It’s okay Gareth,” I said, “it was Harry and Jo. They phoned Tony about it. We tried to let you know, but you were out.”

“Yes, that’s right,” Tony confirmed. “They were watching the news this morning: it’s now official—salt is an illegal substance and possession can result in imprisonment. They thought they better tell us because the chalets get regular inspections from the Council and Tourist Board—sometimes unannounced. They’ve put the salt in oat bags in their Byre for safety—no-one will think of checking there. They’ve left us a key.” Gareth was relieved. But Sandi said,

“Sorry to be contrary, but how do we know we can trust Harry and Jo? I know they seem friendly enough, but how do we know they haven’t called the Police? Shouldn’t we test them too?”

“I think that from now on,” said Tony, “we’ve got to be extremely careful about whom we trust. We should assume that everyone we meet is out to get us—until they prove otherwise. So, yes, we should be very cautious about Harry and Jo—though personally I think they’re safe.” Everyone nodded in agreement.

“When can we expect Audrey and Frank?” Kate asked.

“They were in Stromness when they phoned, so probably sometime tomorrow,” he replied.

Chapter 19

The virus was not malicious—and there was nothing personal about its actions. It was just a matter of survival. Not so different from the way humans slaughter and eat animals. What made the alien virus different from any other Earth-born virus or bacteria was its cunning ability to affect the mental state of its victims. It had intelligence. Once affected, the victims would defend its attacker to the hilt. They would claim that they could not survive without the alien organism. In fact, they would not even see the invading virus as alien; rather, it became an integral and necessary part of their being. The virus would reverse the truth, twisting it one hundred and eighty degrees. Black would become white; dark would become light.

Its purpose was simple: divide and multiply. It did this mindlessly, relentlessly. But it hadn't always been like this.

It started out as a magnificent race, a highly evolved group of beings that could manipulate matter to an incredibly high degree. These beings were not independent: they had a benevolent Controller who lovingly looked after them like a mother caringly tending to her own children. Then one day, something tragic happened. The raw, gross substances of its area of space began to run out. Without these substances, the Controller had nothing to give its beings to process into the finer substances they needed for their survival. It would be like our race running out of coal, oil and gas—and having no alternative sources of power.

In its quest to seek out more and more raw material, the Controller built a machine to probe new, uncharted areas of space. The machine was designed to search out and process substance, and then return the refined material back to their own area. The idea was sound, and the design highly intelligent. But when the huge machine was launched, disaster struck. It went completely out of control from the launch pad, and spiraled in ever increasing circles, destroying everything in its wake—including the Controller. It left behind it a trail of utter devastation—and a race of beings without any guidance.

As a defence mechanism, the Controller had built a default programme for its beings that they would revert to in the event of losing contact with their host. When the Controller was destroyed, every being became manipulated completely and utterly by that default programme. Any other race coming across the Controller's Beings would never be able to gain control over them—such was the nature of their programme.

For some reason, the beings followed the trail left by the substance-processing machine, which led them into the area of space occupied by Frank's Universe. Frank and his race were within a hairs-breadth of being wiped out by the alien invaders. But at the eleventh hour, they discovered a defence mechanism of their own which would repel the mindless aliens. Soon, that mechanism became a means of immunity; and with no hosts to occupy, the alien virus (as it could now be called) moved swiftly away from their area, onwards and upwards, searching for life in other galaxies.

Arriving at the Earth's Solar System, it was drawn to our planet like flies to a light. As it filtered through the atmosphere in its billions upon billions of parts, it dropped into the oceans and onto the land masses. All the parts that fell into the oceans were immediately neutralised, though not destroyed by the salty sea water. But the parts falling on land infiltrated the water supply in many lands and soon found their way into the food chain. Once inside animals—including man—they acted like alien parasites, taking over the organism and eventually eating it alive. Man was easy meat. By eating animals, he took in the virus from the affected meat, and so in turn became infected. All the current diseases of Man could be put down to one cause: the virus. But in ten thousand years, Man had still not discovered that truth.

Frank and others from his race had been telling Man about the virus for centuries—with mixed success. At times, they seem to be making great headway and managed to convert many areas into virus free zones. Then there would be an outbreak in another area, which would spread like wildfire. It was generally a case

of one step forward and two back. But they couldn't give up. For the sake of mankind, and all other races in the Cosmos, they had to keep on task – however small their success.

Over the years, more and more beings from Frank's Universe had come to Earth to help out. Then races from other areas of space heard about the plight and volunteered their assistance, driven by the thought that this alien virus could threaten their own Universe.

But in the end, if they could not stop the virus, they all knew what they would have to do: completely destroy the Earth and everything on it—the virus included. It was the very last resort, but one they were not afraid to carry through. Audrey hoped it would not come to that.

Chapter 20

Frank liked Orkney straightaway—and so did Audrey. It had a good feeling for both of them from the moment they landed in Stromness. They admired the narrow cobbled streets, and the old stone buildings. And they loved the proximity to the sea. But most of all, they liked what wasn't there—the troubled and intimidating atmosphere of the cities. In Orkney, they felt relaxed and very much at home.

But as they approached Kirkwall, Audrey began to think about the others and she started to feel a little concerned about how Frank would be received when they reached Eday. Frank seemed to sense this.

"Everything's going to be fine—don't worry. What's the worst thing that could happen?"

"They could kill you," she answered.

"You know they wouldn't—it's not in their nature. The worst thing is they'll reject us—reject me, I mean. But Tony won't—he's seen too much." Audrey nodded. She knew Tony was dedicated—but she also knew he would rigidly stay true to what he believed was correct. As he did when Frank left for London.

As they drove into Kirkwall, Audrey thought again about their reception on Eday. No, the worst thing that could happen wouldn't be Frank dying another death on this Earth—it would be to never see Frank again.

* * * * *

That morning, a car drove down the narrow track towards Mill Bay, and stopped outside Harry and Jo's house. Inside, Jo stopped what she was doing, and looked out of a window to see who the visitors were. She got a shock.

"Harry," she hissed, "It's the Police." Harry peered through the window and nodded to himself.

"Okay, stay calm." We've not broken any laws..."

"What about the salt?" The police were already knocking on the door.

"It'll be all right—they'll never find it." The door knocked again, more urgently this time. Police visits were rare. With no policemen on the island, officers had to

come over from Kirkwall. And they would only do that if they knew of any suspicious activity. "You go—better if it's a woman."

'Gee, thanks,' thought Jo as she opened the door. There were two officers. A tall one with his cap hiding any hair he might have, which Jo thought would probably be red, in keeping with his eyebrows and freckled complexion. The other was shorter and harder-looking, with black hair and eyebrows that met in the middle. It was the dark-haired one that spoke first.

"Morning... Mrs Shaw, isn't it?"

"Yes... what's the problem?"

"Oh, no problem—just a routine enquiry." With the Police these days, there was no such thing as a 'routine enquiry.' "Can we come in to talk?" To say no would be an open admission of guilt, so she let them in with a smile.

"This is my husband, Harry," she said. He was going to shake hand, but realized they had no intention of doing so. He kept his hands in his pockets.

"What can we do for you?" Harry asked.

"Are you familiar with the new sodium laws, Mr Shaw?" Harry could feel the tension in the air increasing. He tried to remain calm.

"Yes, yes I have. About time they were brought in." Jo nodded in agreement. Feigning to side with the enemy seemed the best strategy in this situation.

"Exactly what we think, sir. And in line with the new legislation, we're required to check all the farms in the area for salt supplies." The second officer then spoke.

"It's just precautionary—we don't want the substance to fall into the wrong hands, you understand." Harry nodded and said 'Of course'. The dark-haired policeman then continued.

"Do you own all the outbuildings here sir?"

"Yes, they're all part of the farm. We're one hundred per cent organic here, so naturally we wouldn't have any salt here. But go ahead and check them out for yourself..." The taller officer nodded, as if to say 'that won't be necessary, sir.' But the rat-faced one answered.

"Thank you—it won't take long. Do we need a key to any of the barns?" Jo reluctantly went to get a set of keys from the kitchen, and handed them over to the taller officer, who accepted them apologetically. When they'd left, Jo turned to Harry.

"Now what do we do?" He looked out of the window, thinking, watching the policemen open the first shed.

"Admit robbery and assault?"

"Harry, this isn't funny—we could go to jail."

"I know, I'm sorry. I don't believe for one minute that this is a *routine call*—someone's tipped them off."

"Who would do that?"

"Oh, one or two names come to mind. The thing is, we need to phone Tony to warn him. But I don't want to do that just yet—they may be able to trace the call."

"But what do we say if they find the salt? What then?" Jo was clearly very worried.

"Plead ignorance. The salt's in barley bags, remember? If we'd bought the barley in good faith, how would we know that anything but grain was in it?" This calmed

Jo down. Once she knew how to deal with a situation, she was fine—she could give it her all.

“You’re right—I’m sorry for being so neurotic. We don’t even know they’re going to find the salt, and if they do...” She was interrupted by another knock on the door.

“Could you come with us please?” the dark officer was at the door, looking more serious than ever. Harry and Jo followed obediently. In one of the byres, the taller officer was standing over six bags of salt that had been hidden in a Barley sack. “Could you explain this, Mr Shaw?”

“Oh my god!” exclaimed Jo.

“What the...?” Harry burst. “Where’s my Barley? I paid three hundred quid a tonne for that seed!”

“You’ll have to give us the name of our supplier, Mr Shaw.” Harry had no problem with that. The man who had sold him the seed would probably sell his own mother down the river, if the price was right. He’d tried to palm Harry off with inferior grain in the past, and had made ‘mistakes’ in his prices on more than one occasion.

“I’ll get the details,” said Jo, helpfully.

“We’ll have to confiscate this illegal substance, of course...”

“You can keep it, but I want compensation for my grain.” Harry was playing the angry victim now—the unjust seeking vengeance. The taller officer answered him.

“If the matter goes to Court, we would hope to seek a conviction. You may be able to get compensation then—but we would need you to give evidence in Court.”

“No problem,” replied Harry. “That bastard has cost me a fortune.” Jo gave a copy of their invoice to the taller policemen, who left apologizing for the inconvenience, and promising he would do what he could for them. Jo and Harry watched them drive away, and then turned to each other.

“That was close,” Jo said.

“Mmm... I wonder who grassed on us?”

* * * * *

Kate heard the sound of wheels on the gravel pathway leading into the chalets, and stopped what she was doing. Visitors were so rare, anytime they heard a vehicle they was a sharp intake of breath. She looked out of the window to see an old woman being helped out of a car by a young, dark man.

“Audrey!” Kate exclaimed. I looked up from my laptop to see Kate wave out of the window, then throw open the door. I followed her out, intrigued to meet ‘Frank’. As the two females hugged, I looked quizzically at the slim, dark, unshaven figure in front of me.

“Hello, Kevin,” he said with a smile—how’ve you been?” When we heard that Frank was coming up, I’d pondered on how I’d react to seeing him. I’d thought that there would be something about him that would make him instantly recognizable. Some small thing that would convince me, beyond doubt, that this really was Frank Peters—the middle-aged academic I’d met at my local in London. But when I saw him standing there, and heard his voice for the first time, I could honestly say that this idea was bollocks. He looked nothing like Frank—not in any shape or form—and there was nothing in his voice to indicate it was Frank. Yet Audrey

obviously had no doubt about his authenticity; or was this just the wishful thinking of a mother after losing her only son? Inside she knew it wasn't him, but to have a fake son was better than none—and if he wanted to be her son, why should she deny him a mother?

So I was friendly, without being familiar. And I didn't call him Frank.

"Steve, isn't it?" he nodded and smiled again.

"Yes—if you like."

"Let's go and find Tony and the others," I said, wanted to lose myself in the company of people I knew as soon as possible.

"Great," he said. He didn't have to look far. Gareth practically flew out of his chalet, then stopped when he saw what I had seen.

"Frank?" he asked. Steve nodded and smiled. Not comfortable with Frank's appearance, Gareth went to greet Audrey, whom he certainly did recognize. Meanwhile Tony appeared. A huge grin spread across his face, then he held out his arms.

"Frank!" and he proceeded to hug what to me was still a stranger.

Sandi had stayed in the background for a few minutes, presumably not knowing how to react to Steve. While Tony and Steve were talking, she beamed a big smile at Audrey and then gave her a kiss and big hug.

"It's wonderful to see you Audrey!" We've all missed you—especially your cooking, Gareth thinks I'm hopeless—and all he makes is curry." Audrey was clearly overwhelmed by the occasion.

"It's lovely to see you all again—I didn't know it would be so soon. But then Frank came back... Oh, you've never met Frank, have you?" Sandi shook her head. "Frank—over here." Steve excused himself from Tony and came over to meet Sandi.

"We've never met—but I've heard a lot about you, she said." Sandi looked nervous, and I could understand why. She was never one to stand on ceremony, and this would be really difficult for her. It was hard enough for me to accept that the young, dark stranger in front of me was the same man I'd met a week ago. How was cynical Sandi going to manage? Steve looked at her closely, almost scrutinizing her, making her more uncomfortable than ever. Then his face broke into a charming smile,

"We'll have to get to know each other," he intimated. Just then, a phone rang, and Tony went to answer it. I suggested that we all went into our chalet for a drink and sit down. Kate put on the kettle, and I opened a bottle of single malt. None of us could stop looking at Steve. Every time he caught our eyes, we'd smile then look away for a few minutes. Then Tony came in.

"Kevin—can I have a word. Won't be minute folks—nothing's wrong." Once we were outside, I asked Tony what was the matter.

"I'd just had a call from Harry. The police have been to his place and found the salt..."

"What! How could they know?"

"Harry thinks they were tipped off."

"By whom?"

"He doesn't know. Any ideas?"

"How about Steve Saunders?"

“What? You mean Frank?”

“Yes, *Frank*, as you call him. If he’s so clever at activating dead bodies, why didn’t he just reactive the one that was killed. At least we’d all recognize him then.”

“He couldn’t—it was too mangled. He was run over by a car for Christ’s sake!”

“I’m sorry, Tony—it’s all just a bit too convenient. I’m not convinced. I agree with Kate’s idea—we should test him as soon as possible. None of the others are comfortable with him—you can see it in their eyes. At least if he’s clean, we’ll know he’s one of us—no matter who he is.” Tony nodded. He couldn’t deny it was a sensible step, albeit, in his eyes, an unnecessary one.

“All right—I’ll have a word with Kate tomorrow...”

“Tonight,” I insisted. “I don’t fancy sleeping in the same house as someone who could be infected with an alien virus.” Tony nodded, and we went back to my chalet.

Chapter 21

We now had two problems: one, no salt supply, and two, a man who claimed to be Frank. The latter didn’t seem to be a problem for either Audrey or Tony—quite the opposite for them. But for me and the others, it certainly was a problem we needed to resolve, and the blood test seemed the best way of doing that.

Tony took Steve Saunders to one side and reluctantly conveyed our feelings. Even if the test was negative, it didn’t make him Frank in my eyes; but at least I’d know he was one of us. He was surprisingly eager to take the test.

“Of course, Tony,” I overheard him say, “no problem. They should be skeptical about me—I know I would be. Let’s do it.”

“What, now?” asked Tony.

“Why not?”

“Okay Frank. Shall we go somewhere private?” Tony asked.

“No, here’s fine,” he replied. So Tony nodded to Kate and she went into the bathroom to get her kit. Minutes later she emerged with a black bag. Steve seemed to know what was required and had his sleeve rolled up already. After she’d taken the sample, she checked it out on her equipment. After just a few minutes, she turned to us with a smile.

“He’s clear.” We were all relieved—particularly Tony. I shook Steve’s hand.

“I’m sorry we had to put you through that.”

“It was nothing—don’t worry about it. In any case, I think we should all be tested.” He looked straight at Sandi. I followed his gaze. She suddenly looked a little uncomfortable. He turned back to me. “Don’t you agree, Kevin?” I could hardly disagree. I nodded, and looked at Kate. She looked at Tony.

“Do you mind, Sandi? You’re the only one who hasn’t been tested.” She seemed put on the spot, and I felt for her.

“Fine,” she said, trying to control her haltering voice. “Only, I’ve got this thing with needles—makes me faint.”

“We can do the urine test instead—it’s just as accurate,” Kate said to Tony. He nodded. Kate took a small plastic container out of her bag and held it out to Sandi. She hesitated for a moment, then grabbed it and got up to go to the bathroom. Only she made a quick u-turn to go out the front door. But Gareth was too quick for her.

“Not so fast.” She struggled in his grasp.

“Let me go, you freak! You’ll all freaks—talking about *salt* and *aliens*...”

“Do it Kate,” he instructed while Sandi fought him. Without hesitation, Kate took the syringe and jabbed it in the top of her leg. Sandi yelp in pain, and Kate drew out the blood.”

As she tested the sample, we all waited with baited breath.

“It’s positive.”

“Oh, shit!” I exclaimed.

“What do we do now?” asked Gareth. He was still holding on to Sandi, but she had stopped struggling now.

“First of all, we tie her up,” replied Tony. Then we’ll discuss it.

* * * * *

Gareth said he’d keep a watch on Sandi whilst we went outside to talk. Tony and Steve stood with me, looking out across the water to the Calf, whilst Kate took Audrey for a walk. It had been a bit of a shock for Audrey—she really liked Sandi. I couldn’t believe that she was infected by the virus.

“When did this happen?” I asked.

“It could have happened at anytime,” Steve replied. Probably when she was a child.

“You mean that all this time...?” Tony nodded.

“I’m afraid so,” he replied.

“But what about all the salt she’s taken?”

“Have you ever actually seen her take any?” Steve asked.

I thought back to our chat in a café in London, after we went to the hospital for the first time, and I took a lick of salt: *‘Don’t, Kevin—it’s bad for you, remember? Look what happened to Frank Peters.’*

Then the time in my flat after taking her out of hospital. *‘Take some of this.’ ‘I will—but I just need a drink first. I’m so thirsty.’*

And right from the beginning, there was my magazine article on salt: *‘I showed it to Trevor, and he told me to bin it—sorry.’*

Suddenly, a terrible thought crossed my mind. I turned to Tony.

“The salt at Harry and Jo’s... you don’t think that...?” Tony nodded sympathetically.

“I’m sorry Kevin, but I think it must have been Sandi who informed the Police. Who else would know about it?” What a fool I’d been. Steve had been watching me during this time.

“Kevin, can we talk?” I looked at Tony.

“I’m just going to see if Gareth’s okay,” he said. “Why don’t you walk down to Castles—Kate and Audrey have gone that way. I’ll meet you there later.” Castles was an area of caves set on a sandy beach along the headland—to the east of the chalets.

We turned and walked slowly in the light wind, pulling our jackets tight to keep out the cold.

“I know you’re finding it difficult to accept that the person you met in the bar in London – Frank Peters—is actually the same person you’re with now. I understand that it doesn’t make sense, doesn’t compute with anything you’ve been fed through the years. Most people call it education and schooling—but I call it indoctrination. Most of us are given the impression that we all have just one life on this Earth, and that’s it: annihilation. So we cling on to that one life like grim death—if you know what I mean.” He smiled at his own humour. “But the truth is, nothing dies. The real you, what most people call the Soul, lives on. Okay, not always in the same form—but it does not die. If it did, there wouldn’t be any point to life—and I tell you, Kevin, there most definitely is a purpose to life on Earth—in fact, on every planet.” I couldn’t say that I completely accepted what he said, but it made sense in a way. But it was what he said next that stopped me in my tracks. “I just have to tell it how it is, Kevin, that’s how I am: Frank by name, frank by nature.”

“What did you just say?”

“There’s definitely a purpose to life...”

“No—after that. You said, *Frank by name, Frank by nature.*” I looked deeply into his eyes, “Tell me where I’ve heard that before?” I said earnestly.

“In a pub in London, Kevin, in the Bells.”

Could this really be Frank Peters—the man whom Tony said was from another world? Could this be him?

* * * * *

Gareth faced Sandi, who was tied securely by her arms and legs with rope to a chair in my chalet.

“Why?” he asked.

“Why what?” she sneered.

“Why pretend—why go along with it?”

“You’re the ones pretending—but you’re only fooling yourselves. Frank Peters was crazy enough, but you lot win the prize. You’re all nutters—talking about an alien virus. The only virus is in your heads—you need help. I’d hoped Kevin would see it for himself—but he just got in deeper. Sucked in by your sect. He told me all about you when he came back from London—about the balaclavas, the intimidation—you with your stick. And the death threat...”

“What *death threat?*”

“He said Audrey told him that if his blood didn’t check out, you’d have to kill him.”

“She was joking—she wasn’t serious. No-one would do that!”

“Really. Then what are you going to do with *me?*” Gareth hadn’t thought about that. What would they do with her? Just then, Tony came in.

“All right?” he asked.

“Can I have a word?” replied Gareth.

“Sure. She’ll be all right for a few minutes.” They stepped outside, keeping an eye on the window.

“What are we going to do with her?”

“I don’t know yet Gareth. We can’t let her go straightaway. But we can’t keep her tied up either.”

“Can’t we cure her?” asked Gareth. After having left Emily, he’d fallen in love with Sandi and he desperately wanted her to be okay. “What about giving her a big dose of salt?” Tony smiled and shook his head.

“I’m sorry, it doesn’t work like that Gareth. You can’t cure anyone of the virus who doesn’t want to be cured. We should have been more careful with Sandi—we all just accepted her because she came along with Kevin. I just assumed Kevin had vetted her. This is what we’re up against now; we can’t trust anyone.”

“You’re not going to kill her, are you?” He was suddenly very concerned.

Tony laughed. “No—of course not!” Gareth was greatly relieved. “We do need to decide what to do with her tonight, though. As soon as the others...” There was a sudden crash from the Chalet.

“Sandi!” exclaimed Tony, and they rushed inside.

The chair lay on its side with the ropes on the floor. The back window was wide open. “Shit!” spat Tony, putting his hands to his head. He looked out the window and saw a figure scampering off to the farm next door. “I thought you’d tied her securely!” Gareth looked sheepish. “*Now* what do we do?”

Chapter 22

It was dark by the time we came back from Castles, the small farm next to our chalets. After Kate and I heard the news of Sandi’s escape, we tore Tony and Gareth off a strip for letting it happen, but we agreed it was no use searching for her any more at that hour. She had probably sought refuge with the people at Castles and we didn’t want to show ourselves just then. The best thing was to get a good night’s sleep and decide what to do early the next morning.

* * * * *

I naturally blamed myself for bringing Sandi into the fold. I’d known her longer than anyone else, after all. Not that the others blamed me. I suppose each felt responsible for not noticing she wasn’t of the same mind. Perhaps they were like me and wanted her to be one of us—and that wanting had blinded us to seeing the truth. It was an important lesson to learn.

Frank knew though. He was the one who suggested we test her. There was more to Frank than met the eye, and I decided to find out more about him. I didn’t have to wait long.

“After the events of yesterday,” said Tony, “We’ve got to think about not just our next move, but what we aim to achieve in the future. Frank is going to talk to us about a few things, and then we’ll have a brainstorming session to see what ideas we can come up with. Okay?” Everyone nodded.

We were sitting in a circle—well, as close to a circle as you can get with seven people. Oh, I didn’t tell you—Frank had invited Harry and Jo too. We were surprised by this move at first—particularly after the Sandi situation. But Frank and Audrey said they’d met the couple yesterday when they arrived on the

island—before driving down to the chalets. They had no doubt that Harry and Jo were like us, and they said they'd be happy to be tested. Both negative.

Frank smiled at everyone and started talking.

"Yesterday, we lost one person from our group, but we've gained two more. That's the way it's going to be from now on. No-one is irreplaceable. This virus we've come up against, is stoppable. It is very cunning, as we know, but it has a weakness—and that weakness is its predictability. The virus has a pattern of operation, and it never veers from that pattern. We're going to learn how to understand it, and stop it. I'm going to tell you things now that are going to be difficult for you to accept; but I want you to keep an open mind, and don't try to understand it all at once. Above all, don't try to fit in this new information with your existing ideas—because it won't fit."

"I've been on this planet for the last ten thousand years." There were raised eyebrows. "And so have you." There was shock. My heart was racing. "You won't remember the other lifetimes you've lived on this Earth, because as soon as you change from one body to the next, the memories of that previous life are lost along with it. Sometimes, you have to change bodies before the natural span has reached its conclusion. As happened to you, Kevin." Everyone was looking at me. "Isn't it true? What do you remember before your job as a journalist?" I cast my memory back again—as I had done every day since the meal at Harry and Jo's. I could recall NOTHING. "It's all right—there's nothing wrong. It happens to many other people on this planet. And there's something else I need to tell you: I knew you before you had the magazine job—before you became Kevin Lee." I was stunned.

"How... when? Who was I?" I asked, not sure if I wanted to know the answer.

"John Philby—a property developer. You worked in London, and we were good friends." I was shaking my head. I was in denial—but I had reasonable grounds. "What happened to me?"

"There was an accident—when you were inspecting a building. A roof fell in. You died instantly." A shiver went down my spine.

"I don't remember anything..."

"No—you wouldn't. And it's better if you don't remember. Life is very complicated if you can recall all your past lives—believe me."

"Then what about you Frank?" asked Kate. "How can you remember *your* lives?"

"I'll explain that later. The important thing is that you know where you've come from: you are not from planet Earth—you originate from another Universe, and you've come here to assist this one." We looked at each other in stunned silence. Then Gareth spoke.

"I've always thought I was here for a purpose. And I've never really fitted in with anyone else. I don't feel like an alien though..."

"What do you expect an alien to feel like?" asked Audrey, to whom this wasn't a surprise. Frank had talked to her before about his Universe.

"I dunno—just different I suppose."

"Is there any time when we know who we are?" I asked. "I mean, know that we're not from Earth." Frank and Tony nodded. Tony obviously knew a lot more than he had every told us.

“Oh yes,” replied Frank. “In the few minutes between ending one life and starting the next—*then* you know. But once your new life begins, the memories quickly fade. In my case, that fleeting few minutes of knowing didn’t stop on one occasion, and I found I still had an awareness of my previous existence as well as my new one. It was very disorientating at first. But gradually, over time, I found I could be selective over what I recalled. I don’t know what caused it—but I’ve only come across one other person with the same characteristic.” There was a bit of a buzz now—excitement around the room. I then noticed that Harry and Jo had been very quiet.

“Are you two all right?” I asked. Jo nodded and thanked me.

“In one way, it’s quite a shock Kevin—about aliens and other Universes. But we’ve both always believed in other lives. Having just one—and then nothing—has never made any sense. Life is all about learning, and there’s no point in learning anything if you’re going to a black abyss of nothingness when you die.”

“We’ve just never thought of aliens,” added Harry. “But when you think about it, there must be millions of other Universes in the Cosmos – and some must support life. So why shouldn’t they get in contact with us?”

“That’s right, Harry; but you’re actually one of them—you’re just visiting this Earth.” Frank knew it was going to be difficult for them to accept, but he knew they’d come round eventually.

We stopped for coffee—Audrey insisting she made the drinks, and Harry and Jo supplied the biscuits. Frank thought we’d had enough information for the day—*enough to last a lifetime*—Gareth said—and after coffee we began to discuss the Sandi and salt situations.

“What was your feeling about the Police, Harry?” asked Tony. “How long do you think we’ve got before they come back to you?” Harry looked at Jo.

“We were talking about this last night” he said. “I think a week at the most—maybe less. Shaws will deny they put the salt in the barley sacks, and probably blame their source—a farm near Stromness I believe. All that police procedure takes time—but we can’t afford to stay around too long, just in case.”

“Then there’s Sandi,” I said. “After being tied up, you can bet she’s going to the Police. We really need to get away and lie low for a few days—that’s what I think.” Tony nodded.

“Anyone else?” he asked.

“I think Kevin’s right,” replied Kate. “We also need some salt, and I can’t see us getting that on Eday.” I suddenly recalled our visit to the other islands.

“What about Papa Westray? Remember, Kate?”

“Oh yes, of course! The woman there was very friendly and helpful.”

“And there’s places to stay there—very comfortable,” I added.

“Great! What do you think, Frank?”

But Frank was nowhere to be seen.

Chapter 23

Mrs Shearer finished cleaning the kitchen and went to put the kettle on. It had been very quiet at Beltane House now that the tourist season was over. She wondered if the people who'd stayed a few days ago would be back.

"Such a nice couple," she'd said to her son.

"Where were they fram, ma?"

"Edinburgh, I think they said—though come t' think of it, they sounded English. Aye, well *he* certainly did. But they could come from the planet Zog fr'all I care. It's not where you've come fram that counts, it's where you're going to." Hamish nodded. He'd heard his ma say that a hundred times, but he still didn't understand it. Still, it sounded very wise.

He was quite happy when there were no tourists on the island, but he knew his ma liked to have company. Since she took over the guesthouse at Papay's Beltane complex, she had had a new lease of life. Something she needed after the death of his dad. Whereas Hamish liked being alone, losing himself in his work on his fishing boat, Liz was a people person—and to deprive her of company was torture.

Beltane house was the centre of Community life on Papay. Apart from the guest house, there was a youth hostel and co-operative shop on the site. Liz enjoyed cooking for visitors, and was famous for her bere bannocks, made from the local grain. The opening of the facilities at Beltane, with the introduction of mains electricity, was a lifesaver for the island. There was still a battle to keep the island's mini economy afloat—but the seventy or so residents were determined to stay and make a living on Papay.

Liz gazed out of her window looking for visitors—almost willing them across the short stretch of water that separated Papay from its parent Westray.

"It'll be okay ma, I know it will. We've got so much going for us. No-one's going to take this island from us." Liz looked up and smiled at her son. He had been good to her, and not gone off to seek work on the mainland, as many of the other youngsters had. The death of his dad had made his mind up about that. Hamish was the man of the house now, and just couldn't leave his ma alone after his dad had *gone home*, as she put it.

"I've got to go now—take care ma."

"Aye, I'll be fine. Thanks Hamish, I'll see you at supper." The door closed, and he was gone, leaving Liz alone with her thoughts and her dreams.

* * * * *

Sandi didn't know what to do next. Whilst she was tied up, she vowed to go straight to the police as soon as she escaped. But now she was free, a pang of guilt held her back. At first, she'd gone along with their strange ideas only because of Kevin. She didn't really believe any of it herself. She'd been very low when Kevin took her to the pub that day—after her break up with Marti. When they found out about Frank Peters death, she never thought it was anything more than an accident. She really thought she was doing the right thing when she showed his article to Trevor. He'd have to see it eventually. But looking back on it, she thought that was wrong of her. It was Kevin's article, and she shouldn't have interfered. It was just that she didn't want him to get into trouble—or get fired.

Kevin always said she was on a drug called 'Interferon'. Perhaps that was her motherly instincts. Or perhaps she just liked everything her own way. She really

did like Kevin's friends (Gareth in particular of course), even though they were a bit weird, but she didn't trust Harry and Jo. She called the Police because she really thought she had to protect Kevin and Gareth from the salt—she really thought the government was right when they banned it. And if Harry and Jo were arrested, so what? She didn't mean any harm to the others.

But despite that, she felt guilty. She hadn't been open with any of them—least of all Kevin. So, as long as they left her alone, she wasn't going to squeal on them again. From now on, whatever happened would be the consequences of their own actions. She wouldn't even write the article she was planning for the magazine: *Salt—another reason to kick the habit: confessions of an addict*. If they wanted to kill themselves, good luck to them.

Somehow, though, she had to retrieve the handbag she'd left in Kevin's chalet. It had all her valuable inside, and she must get it back before leaving the island. But how?

* * * * *

Frank was an interesting character. Not only had he put the finger on Sandi (which surprised us all), but he'd neatly packed up all her belongings with the intention of putting them in an outhouse with a big sign saying *SANDI*. After deceiving us, and actually putting us in danger, I would have thrown all her things into the sea. But then, I'm not Frank.

"Better than her breaking a window," he said. "And Gareth won't have to see her this way."

"Do you really think she'll come back?" I asked. Frank nodded.

"She left her handbag with all her valuables – money, car keys, credit cards. She'll be back."

I took the bag for Frank and put it in an outhouse with the sign on the door.

"I suppose we should tell the others what we've done?" Frank agreed. Reactions were very varied. Tony said cautiously, 'Well, if Frank thinks so...' Audrey exclaimed, 'Oh, what a good idea!' Kate replied, 'Shall I wait outside for a bit to make sure she sees it?' And Gareth said (almost crestfallen), 'Oh, I thought she might come back to our room for her things'.

Harry and Jo had gone back home by this time. They'd invited us all for dinner later – an invitation we couldn't refuse.

With everything that had gone on, I'd completely forgotten about the Swedish website. It was Kate that reminded me.

"Oh shit, yes! We need to start working on it."

"Whose name will the site be in Kevin?"

"Frida's company name. There's no problem with that—they register hundreds of names in a holding capacity." I wasn't one hundred percent sure about this, but it sounded logical. Kate was happy with it anyway. I'd just got my laptop plugged in when Tony arrived. He seemed to have a sixth sense.

"I've been thinking about the website—we should get started on it as soon as possible. Probably best if I go over the content with Frank." We nodded. "Of course, let me know any ideas you have—the more input the better." Tony left to see Frank, and I turned to Kate with a grin.

"Let's celebrate!"

“What did you have in mind?” she asked. My eyes moved towards the bed.
“Later, Tiger—I’ve got to go and see Audrey.”

Chapter 24

In past ages, repeated efforts had been made by Frank and others from his planet to stop the virus—but every time these had failed. In some incarnations, they had been caught and put to death for their actions—or even merely their views. But their captors, working under the influence of the virus, could only kill their bodies—not their souls. And there were always other body-machines for Frank’s team to occupy. Now things were reaching a head: the virus could not be allowed to leave the Earth alive.

Whilst the virus clung to Man, and Man accepted the virus as good and necessary, there was no hope for the occupants of planet Earth. It was the task of Frank and the others to open Man’s eyes to see the virus for what it was. Only then could he put it from himself. In this sense, the elimination of the virus was simple. But in practice, it was proving impossible.

It wasn’t that Man didn’t recognize that he was vulnerable to viruses and parasites. The Black Death and other plagues, flu epidemics, superbugs and cancer were all known to Man. But he had no lasting cure because he couldn’t see the single cause. Consequently, his attempts to eliminate the virus were doomed to failure.

The 1918 flu epidemic, which killed more people in six months than the war killed in four years, was spread quickly by the virus jumping from one person to the next. Vaccines were useless—as were most other remedies. Many people assumed that the 1918 flu virus had been cured. But the truth was it had merely moved on to other areas—and other people.

Frank was dubious about the value of the website, but he knew they must give it their best shot. He thought the virus would try to stop the site—probably by influencing Man to create computer viruses that would attack the website, or the server that held it. It wasn’t just the virus they were fighting: they had the majority of mankind against them—humans acting as agents for the alien virus.

Species of animals around the World were rapidly dwindling, and that could sound the death knell for Man. Once the animals had been eliminated from the planet, the virus would only have Man to live off—and with an all out invasion of the virus, he would not last long. Then the virus would migrate to another planet, to destroy another race of beings. Frank could not allow that—would not allow that.

Tony knew what would happen if they failed. He knew that his race would have to initiate the complete destruction of planet Earth—and the virus along with it. But he never knew exactly how they would achieve that. Unlike Frank, Tony and the others had no recollection of their previous lives on Earth or their home planet. He relied on Frank to tell him about his own Universe. And whatever Frank told him, he would believe. Or, at least, he wouldn’t reject. The demonstration in Edinburgh of Frank’s ability to move from one body to another would stay with

Tony to the end of his days—and he would never dismiss anything that Frank would tell him.

Frank had said that Tony had exactly the same ability—to move from one body to another. Tony never dared to try it—just in case he couldn't get back to his own body. But Tony never, ever doubted that he was not of this Earth. His ideas, his thoughts, his very being, were so different to anyone else he had come across—until he met Frank.

However, although Tony held Frank's words in great esteem, he didn't always agree with the means of putting those ideas into action. Hence their disagreement about going to London.

Before he went away, Frank had told Tony about a very special substance that was being channeled to Earth from their Universe. It was this substance that held the key to the survival of Man and his planet. How it would be applied and what effect it would have, Tony didn't know. Frank was always very conservative with this sort of information. He'd hint at something, then later Tony would get a few more details. He'd mull these around for a while, seeing how the idea could be right, how it would work in practice and what the implications were. Then, when he'd made some effort towards understanding, Frank would come along and tell him clearly how it all worked—really spell it out for him. And then he'd understand it clearly.

At one time Tony wondered if the whole thing was made up: the alien virus, other Universes, other lifetimes. But then he thought: what other explanation is there? In the end, he'd only know when he died what was beyond the grave: another incarnation on Earth, life on his home planet or total oblivion. If there was nothing else to life, it wouldn't matter if he acted as if he *did* originate from another Universe; as though there *was* a virus affecting mankind, and as if this Earth *would* be annihilated if he couldn't help to stop it. So in the end, he decided that was the best way to be, and he hadn't looked back since.

* * * * *

Early the next morning, there was a knock on our chalet door. It was Frank.

"We've got to leave as soon as possible: you've got half-an-hour to pack—okay?" I nodded, suddenly very awake.

"I'll tell Kate."

Kate asked why we had to leave so quickly. I told her I'd no idea; but if Frank said we needed to leave, then we'd better go. I realized later that I was starting to sound like Tony. Before we left, Kate insisted on checking the outside shed to see if Sandi had been back for her things. Kate returned with a smile on her face. I looked at her questioningly, and she said "All gone."

Within thirty minutes we were on the road. Tony had telephoned Harry and Jo, and they said they'd meet us at the ferry. It was thirteen miles from the chalets to the pier, and we got there in just under twenty minutes. Harry and Jo were already in the queue. As the ferry boat docked, I noticed two police cars on the boat. I tapped Tony shoulder and pointed. He nodded. Frank said,

"It'll be fine—just keep your eyes straight ahead." The vehicles rolled off the boat, and the police cars sped past us, obviously more concerned about getting to their destination than looking at the queue of vehicles waiting to board. On board

the vessel we took a quick look around to see who else was there, then locked the car and headed upstairs. I wondered if Sandi had contacted the Police about us.

"I don't think so," replied Frank as we made our way towards the coffee lounge. "It's more likely they were going back to follow up on their visit to Harry and Jo's place." Frank was about to open the door to the lounge, but I stopped him.

"How did you know they were on their way?" I asked. Frank looked away for a moment, then straight back at me.

"Let's just call it intuition." He opened the door and we were greeted by Harry and Jo.

"Have you lot got some sort of contact with a higher power?" Harry asked Frank, partly in jest. "I'm sure the cops were on their way back to our place." Jo nodded in agreement.

"We're going to need all the help we can get—so everyone needs to get in contact with their own 'higher power'," Frank replied, removing his coat. Kate, Audrey and Gareth entered and greeted Harry and Jo.

"Lovely meal last night Jo, thanks." Kate said.

"It was nice to have your company," Jo replied. "Frank was a bit mysterious on the phone this morning—he didn't say where we were going, just to pack a bag for a week or so."

Audrey nodded. "It's safer that way. Frank will tell us more about it in Kirkwall.

The boat from Eday went directly to Kirkwall that morning with no other stops. The plan was to take the afternoon boat from Kirkwall to Papa Westray. The trip was calm, with the sea water like a millpond. I stood on the deck with Kate, drinking in the panoramic vista, and the smells and sounds of the sea.

"I think I've travelled more in the last week than I ever did as a journalist in London," I said.

"Regrets?" asked Kate.

I shook my head. "No way... this is an adventure of a lifetime."

"You seem to have accepted Frank." Kate was right—I had. But when I thought about it, it seemed crazy. It wasn't *logical*, and it wasn't the sort of thing you could explain to anyone else.

"What about you?" I asked. She looked out to sea, considering the question. "Suppose he's not Frank," I continued, "what difference would it make?" This was a question I honestly could not answer myself.

"In one way, none. If we believe the things Frank taught us, they still remain true. And Steve is only saying the same things Frank said. But if he's not Frank—why pretend? What's he hiding from us? Are we safe with him? We've all adopted him as our leader—but we don't know where he's leading us." I understood her line of thinking.

"I know what you mean—but he did pass the test. He can't be motivated by the infection."

"Unless the virus has mutated and is now undetectable by our tests," Kate added. That was a frightening thought. It meant that anyone of us could be infected, and we'd never know. Just as we were contemplating this, Gareth arrived on deck.

"I heard Sandi came back," he said. I nodded. "Did you see her?" Kate shook her head.

“No we didn’t Gareth—but to be honest, I think we’re better just forgetting about her now. I know you were close, but we’ve got to move on—I’m sorry.”

“Oh, that’s all right, no worries. I seemed to be jinxed at the moment.” He hung his head over the railing, staring down at the foam below as the ship cut through the water. Kate put an arm around him.

“I really think Sandi is a good person Gareth—but she’s not one of us. I don’t think she’s dangerous—she’s just infected by the virus.”

“Doesn’t that make her dangerous?” I asked.

“There’s different degrees of infection—it’s not black or white. Sandi is probably a marginal case, her own cells battling with the virus. Sometimes they get the upper hand, other times the virus has control. She’ll probably do or say things, then wonder why the hell she did them. Didn’t you say she was lactose intolerant Kevin?”

“Yeah, she told me she was allergic to dairy when she was a child—her mother used to give her soya milk.”

“Well, that will have saved her from the full infection. We don’t have to worry about Sandi, she’ll be taken care of.” They seemed wise words, but I don’t think either Gareth or I knew exactly *who* was going to take care of her. I know Gareth wanted it to be him.

Chapter 25

After arriving in Kirkwall, five of us headed for the Bothy Bar for a drink and something to eat. Harry and Jo had some business to attend to first, so they said they’d meet us there. Home-made fish and chips was on the menu, and we all settled for that—with glasses of the local ale. As we sat with our drinks, waiting for our food, we watched the midday news on one of the television screens in the bar.

‘It was confirmed today that a new and extremely virulent strain of avian flu has reached Britain. The Home Secretary has ordered supplies of a vaccine thought capable of providing protection against the virus, and the government is considering measures to implement compulsory inoculation of all UK citizens. Here’s our medical correspondent, James Harvey...’

‘This new strain is worrying health officials in the government. They’re concerned that the Asian virus, known as AV021, could signal an epidemic more deadly and widespread than the flu outbreak of 1918, and the Prime Minister is urging his party to back the proposed legislation. If it goes through, vaccinations could start as early as next week...’

We all looked at each other. Then Frank spoke,

“It’s all right—it was predictable.”

“But doesn’t vaccination mean injection of the virus?” I asked. Frank nodded.

“Yes it does; but we’re not going to have it,” he replied.

“What will they do if we refuse?” asked Gareth.

“To be honest, I don’t know—and I don’t think they know either. It will probably depend on *how* we object—whether we make a stand and say this shouldn’t be allowed, or we simply run off and hide.” Whilst we were thinking about that, our food arrived. As we were eating, a thought occurred to me.

“Frank—when we met in London, you told me that you had...” I was going to say *ten times the normal level of sodium in your body*, but suddenly realized that only Frank would know he told me this. This was a great opportunity to test, once and for all, whether or not the man sitting next to me was really Frank Peters. I paused.

“I told you what Kevin?”

“Sorry, I’ve just gone blank.”

“Kevin, it’s very important that we’re open and honest with each other. If you want to test me, go ahead—I’ll play your games. But whatever I say, it won’t convince you. When I used to go around talking to people in London, and told them about an alien virus, they inevitably thought I was crazy; to tell them I was immune because I was born on another planet would have had them calling the funny farm.”

“So you’re saying that you’re immune because you’re an...” I looked round the bar to see if anyone was listening. There were only three other people in the pub, and they were engrossed in a football match. “...because you’re an *alien*?” I whispered.

“Yes—and it’s got nothing to do with having ten times the average level of sodium in my body, or whatever I used to say.” He had said it—the exact phrase that Frank had used in London. And yet, he was absolutely right—it didn’t prove anything. If he’d spoken those words to me in the Bells, he could have said the same thing to thousands of other people in London, including Steve Saunders. And then Steve Saunders could have killed Frank.

“But salt *does* neutralize the virus?” asked Kate.

“Yes, of course... it prevents it being active; but the virus can still be inside you. Salt keeps acts as a barrier to the virus so it can be dealt with—but it doesn’t destroy it. If it was that easy, I wouldn’t have spent the last ten thousand years on this planet—none of us would.” Just as I thought I’d understood something, Frank had the ability to throw a spanner in ointment (if you’ll excuse the mixed metaphor) and make me question this *new reality*. How could I, how could any of us, believe that we’d lived on Earth for ten thousand years?

As we were contemplating Frank’s words, Harry and Jo appeared. They said they had to head off down South to visit Jo’s mother, who had become very ill. Tony seemed unhappy about this, but Frank said it was fine: they had to do what they thought was right. It was the last time that the seven of us would be together.

* * * * *

In London the next day, the affects of the virus exploded onto the streets. With the arrival of the new *bird flu*, the medical services provision reached bursting point and then collapsed. Doctors and nurses fell ill alongside their patients, so there was no-one to tend the sick. There was little they could have done in any case. Last minute attempts were made to vaccinate anyone and everyone, but these only exacerbated the situation; the inoculations contained the virus itself.

With the mass of the population already infected, it took little to push them over the edge.

It started with normal flu symptoms—a sore throat and a cough, followed by fever and general aches and pains—particularly in the chest—and complete lethargy. Those who attempted to carry on working merely spread the virus. Just like the 1918 pandemic, it wasn't only the very young and elderly who were hit: those in their twenties and thirties were equally affected; and once the virus took hold of them, death followed quickly.

From London, the virus soon spread outwards to other UK cities—and then other countries. Parliament struggled on in London for a little while with a drastically reduced number of MPs, then had to move out of the capital to Edinburgh. Those MPs who had not yet been hit by the virus moved up North to join their counterparts at the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood. And still it went on. The army was called in to maintain basic services in the cities. Hundreds of thousands moved away from the towns into the countryside, thinking it safer there. But all they succeeding in doing was to spread the virus to the country areas.

In a desperate attempt to stem the tide, local councils ordered anyone infected with the virus to stay at home. It was a death sentence for their whole family—reminiscent of the Great Plague of the sixteen hundreds when red crosses were put on the doors of infected households in London. The scientists, what was left of them, couldn't understand how the virus could spread so quickly and so far. They had no idea that the mass majority of humankind had been infected with this virus for dozens of centuries, and the recent avian flu merely acted as a trigger for the alien organism to overrun their hosts. They had no answer to the epidemic—nothing they did would slow down its pace in any way. The pattern was soon repeated in many other places around the globe. Only the cooler places in the far north and far south managed some sort of containment. Orkney was safe—for the time being.

Chapter 26

After leaving Eday, Sandi headed back in the direction of the place she knew so well: London. She hoped her job was still open for her, and it flashed through her mind that her experiences with the group would make a great story, and perhaps convince Trevor to reinstate her at work.

At first, she had no idea of the severity of the flu epidemic that had recently hit London, and she booked a ferry and long-distance coach back to the capital at the Tourist Office in Kirkwall, staying overnight at a small guest house in the town that they'd recommended. The next day, she took an early morning bus to Burwick, from where she would board the passenger ferry to John O'Groats. The bus took her south through mainland Orkney and across several islands via the Churchill barriers, huge causeways built of huge concrete blocks during the second World War to keep out the German U-Boats.

The bus stopped briefly at the Italian Chapel, a converted Nissan Hut built by Italian prisoners of war—no doubt the same prisoners who had worked on the Churchill barriers. Several tourists got out and took photographs. Sandi smiled at them and thought how nice it would be to have an ordinary life again, one where no-one was talking crazy stuff about viruses or aliens from other galaxies.

The bus reached Burwick in just over half an hour, and the passengers transferred to the small ferry. A couple in matching blue anoraks struck up a conversation with her—talking about the wildlife in Orkney. They had been on a walking holiday and travelled to most of the islands—including Eday. Sandi didn't let on she'd been there—not wanting to explain what she'd been doing on the island.

After a fairly rocky forty-five minute journey under grey skies and a cold wind, the boat docked at John O'Groats. Now Sandi just wanted to get home, and quickly boarded the coach for Inverness, settling down in her seat with a good book. London couldn't come soon enough, she thought.

The journey to Inverness is a long and winding road, following the east coast for the main part, and taking twists and turns through several hair-pin bends which wind their way downwards through rugged, but beautiful, terrain. Sandi was glad to reach Inverness, where she had to change to the London Coach. Having a break of one hour before the next bus departed, she wandered into the main street to find some food.

* * * * *

As Harry and Jo headed south from Thurso, Jo wondered if they were doing the right thing. She always worried in this way. Things would start out clear and straightforward, and then doubts would fill her mind—then she couldn't tell right from wrong. It had seemed the right course of action—in fact, the only course of action—to go south to see her mother. But at the same time, it didn't feel right leaving the others in Kirkwall. Her concern was interrupted by Harry.

“Oh shit!” he exclaimed.

“What is it?” asked Jo.

“I've forgot my bloody mobile!”

“Don't worry—I've got mine. And we're not going to be away long, we told them that.” Jo was very good at telling other people not to worry.

“Have you got Tony's number on your phone?”

“No—I thought you had all their numbers?”

“Well I have... on my phone. Did Tony tell you where they're going—after leaving Eday?”

“No... I thought he told you.”

“Great!”

“Don't worry, we can call Tony when we get back to Eday—when you find your mobile.”

“Yes... hopefully.”

Whilst they drove, Harry turned on the radio to catch up on the news.

“...The main points of the news again: the Home Office is undertaking emergency vaccinations in London after a massive outbreak of avian flu. The

virus is spreading rapidly through the City, and people are advised to avoid all journeys in and out of the Capital unless absolutely necessary...

Harry and Jo looked at each other.

“*Now* what do we do?” she asked.

“We can’t go back—not now. We have to make sure your mum’s okay. We’ve plenty of salt in the back—the others seemed to think that helps against the virus.” Jo wasn’t convinced; but at the same time, she couldn’t let her mother down either. If they could reach London, they would take her back to Orkney with them. She’d be safe there. They drove the next couple of hours listening to the radio, which gave regular updates of the situation in London. Things were getting worse by the hour.

At Inverness, Harry said they needed fuel so drove into town for a top up. Whilst they were there, it seemed a good idea to stop for a bite to eat. Harry said he knew of a café near the river, so they parked near the bus station and walked through the town. As they were looking for a table, Jo’s eyes lit up.

“Sandi!”

“Where?” asked Harry. Jo pointed over to a corner, and then he nodded. They only knew what happened to Sandi from Frank—and all he said was that she’d decided the group wasn’t for her, and she was returning to London. They didn’t know of any reason why they shouldn’t talk to her.

“Hello Sandi,” said Jo. Sandi turned with a start.

“Oh! Hi Jo—Harry,” she looked very nervous.

“Is everything all right?” enquired Harry.

“Yes—fine,” she said, wondering what she should do now. Did they know what had happened on Eday, she wondered.

“Can we join you,” asked Jo.

“Yes, of course.” She made room for them to sit down, moving her bags to one side.

“Have you eaten yet?” asked Jo.

“No—I’ve just ordered.”

“I’ll get something for us,” said Harry, leaving Jo and Sandi to talk.

“We were sorry you left the others,” confided Jo. “We thought you were getting on so well with them.”

“Well, you know—these things happen. I was missing London, and I thought if I went now I could get my job back.”

“With the magazine?” asked Jo.

“Yes.” Harry came back from ordering food.

“Have you heard about the virus—in London?” he said. Sandi was alarmed.

“No—what’s happened?” Harry turned to look at Jo for support. He thought it best if she told Sandi.

“We heard on the radio this morning—there’s been a massive outbreak of bird flu in London—people are dropping like flies.” This was not the news Sandi wanted to hear.

“What parts of London?” Sandi asked. She lived in Finchley, North London, and worked in Fulham.

“They said it started in the City,” Harry explained, “but it’s spreading rapidly. People are being advised not to go in or out of London—they don’t want it to spread.” Sandi nodded in understanding. So Kevin and the others had been right.

“What are you doing down here?” she asked. Jo explained about her mother, and how they intended to take her back to Orkney with them—if they could get into London safely. Harry asked Sandi how she was travelling. When she said by bus, they insisted she travel with them. Whilst at one time she didn’t trust them, the news of the outbreak in London had changed everything. It probably seemed a bit crazy to go to London now; but her car and all her things were back there. Even if she decided to return to Orkney, she needed to go home and sort things out first—collect her bank book, pay her bills. But interest in retaining her job had suddenly waned.

They ate whilst talking about Eday and Kevin and the others. Harry and Jo obviously thought the world of them, and Sandi couldn’t help thinking she’d made a big mistake by leaving; but the group hadn’t made things easy for her. She questioned Harry on the situation in London. He told her all he knew. After eating, they returned to the car and Sandi sat in the back whilst Harry drove. The road was far better going south from Inverness, and they reached Glasgow in three and an half hours. After stopping for a quick break, they headed down the M74 towards Carlisle. Sandi was grateful for the lift—and the company. She viewed Jo and Harry differently now.

It was a long drive from Carlisle to London, and it was the middle of the night by the time they arrived. They was an eeriness about Finchley, where Harry and Jo dropped Sandi. She invited them in for a drink, but they needed to push on to reach Jo’s mother. Sandi and Jo swapped mobile numbers and promised to keep in contact, whilst Harry offered Sandi a lift back to Orkney if and when she was ready to return. They had no idea how bad things had become in the capital.

Chapter 27

Eight weeks later.

We had been on Papa Westray for two months now. The authorities lost completely interest in enforcing the new salt laws—dealing with the effects of the virus and maintaining law and order were their priorities.

Liz and Hamish at Beltane house had been a great help to us, making us very comfortable and welcome. There was enough food grown on the island for us to survive, and Hamish went fishing every other day—assisted by Gareth, who took to his new vocation like a fish to water, so to speak. Liz made delicious bread and bere bannocks, and though the fare was simpler than we were used to, it was certainly more wholesome—and probably far healthier for us.

Kate acted as a general factotum. Liz was glad of her help (and her company) in the kitchen and learned how to cook dozens of non-animal recipes from Kate. I spent some of my time updating the website which Frida had recently set up for us with Tony and Frank. We already had a great deal of interest in the site and signed

up thousands of people to our newsletter. There was lots of information about the virus on the site (supplied by Tony and Frank); an interactive forum where visitors could post messages about the virus in their area of the World; and videos of Frank talking about the virus. Visitors to the site could join our mailing list. We had over ten thousand already, and the list was growing every day. Kate and I put the newsletter together—my journalistic skills making a contribution at last. I was interested in what sort of people would be responding to our mailing list.

“Mostly those of our own kind at first,” replied Tony as we stopped for a tea break one afternoon. I still hadn’t adjusted to the idea that I didn’t originate from planet Earth. Tony was understanding of my situation. “All life originates from the same source if you go back far enough. It’s just that you don’t belong to this planet—any more than you belong to South-East Asia. You can visit countries like China and Indonesia, but you will always be a foreigner—however long you live in the area. You could even marry a nice local girl and have children. But still, it wouldn’t be your country—the one that’s marked on your DNA. You would always feel like an outsider to some degree or other—you’d never fit in one hundred percent. And it’s the same with Universes.”

It made sense. I’d often felt that I didn’t belong in society – whether it be in my family, at work, or in social situations. (Having said that, I still had no recall of who my family was!). At one time in my life, I had the feeling that I’d been born into the wrong age, or the wrong country, or to the wrong parents. I just didn’t fit in. Until now. Since meeting Frank and the others, I’d never felt so much at home as I did then.

“What about Sandi,” I asked. “Is she one of us?”

“It’s possible,” replied Tony. “Over the years there have been many of our own kind that have become lost souls in mankind’s society.”

“Because of the virus?” I asked. Tony nodded. “What happens to them?”

“They live out an ordinary life on Earth. Then, at the point of death, they’re suddenly aware of their true being, their true purpose. For a short time, they can see this Universe as it is in reality, without the distortion caused by the virus. After reviewing their previous life, they can choose another body to enter, and they’re reborn into another life. Or they go home—back to their own planet.”

“You mean they take over the body of a person that’s just died—like Frank did?”

“That can happen—but it’s rare. Usually, the soul needs a complete fresh start and is reborn in the same way as everyone else on Earth.”

“As a baby?” I asked.

“Yes, that’s right.” Just then Kate entered.

“What are you two talking about? Don’t you have work to do?”

“We’re discussing life, the universe and everything. And yes—we’re doing it.” I replied cockily.

I’d grown to like Kate more and more since we moved to Papay. She had matured and was a wonderful young woman, and a great partner. She was much more practical than me, and better with people, in my opinion. But hey, I was a journalist. Which made me think of making more use of my profession. There were hundreds of online newspapers and magazine on the Net. What about writing articles about the virus for publication in those? We could even include a link to our website. I put the idea to Frank at dinner that evening.

“Sounds great Kevin—go for it,” he said, cutting into his meal. “Don’t you think so Tony?”

“Yes, why not?” he replied. “The more people that know about the virus the better.” Gareth had been looking very serious throughout dinner, so I involved him in our chat.”

“What do you think Gareth?” He looked up from his food, thoughtfully.

“Well, yes—I suppose so...” he started.

“I can hear a *but* coming,” I teased.

“Well, it’s just that... I was thinking on the boat today about what’s going to happen—with the virus and that. When is it going to stop? I mean, do we wait until it’s killed off everyone who’s infected before we do anything?”

“We’re already doing things,” Kate interrupted impatiently “that’s what the website’s for.”

“I know that. It’s only... what direct action are we going to take? Okay, we’re telling people about the virus so they can say—*Hey, I’m infected—I’ve got to get rid of this*. But what if they can’t do anything about it—even if they want to?” Frank nodded in understanding.

“It’s a good point Gareth—I’m glad you mentioned it. Perhaps it’s something that needs clarifying for everyone. I know this may sound crazy, but the virus can only affect its host by invitation. Once it’s accepted, it starts to control things in the body. Over time, the host cells become powerless to stop it. It’s a bit like the wooden horse of Troy. Or, to give a more-up-to-date analogy, a virus invading your computer. Once you accept it as benign—or even beneficial to you, as in the case of our virus—then you’re allowing it free reign to do whatever it wants. You’ve assumed its motives are good and honourable and welcomed it as a friend. So much so, that when things start to go wrong within your computer, or your body, you look for other causes—never thinking it could be the enemy within.”

“So the first step is to recognize what it really is—an invading enemy that has breached your defences,” added Gareth.

“That’s right,” continued Frank. Once you do that, you’re on the road to recovery. Your new thought processes will countermand the old orders and instruct your own cells to seek out and destroy—or eject—the invading virus.”

“And it’s possible to do that?” queried Kate.

“Yes,” answered Frank. “That’s how we got rid of the virus from our Universe. We discovered a substance that had the effect of boosting each being’s immune system, you could say, and that combined with the understanding that virus was an invading enemy provided an impenetrable barrier for the virus.”

Kate then recalled something Frank mentioned at the Bothy bar before we came over to Papay.

“That’s the substance you started to talk about when we were in Kirkwall! You said it was being channeled to Earth to help us.”

“That’s correct Kate... but now the virus has taken such a strong hold, I don’t think it’s going to help.” Frank replied solemnly. “Once the body is completely overrun by the virus, it’s too late. The invading army is too large, or too strong, and there’s nothing your defences can do about it—with or without that special substance. That’s how we lost millions of beings on my planet—on *your* planet.”

Gareth was now much more alive. “I get it now—thanks Frank. To be honest, I hadn’t realized the value of the website until now. I thought we had to go out and do something—give out leaflets or something.”

“Well, thanks for bringing up the question Gareth. It’s clarified everything for me too,” I said.

“And me!” said Kate.

Liz brought us a treat for dessert—home made ice-cream and strawberries she kept in the freezer from the last harvest.

“Not as good as fresh—but I hope you like them.” We certainly did.

* * * * *

As we were clearing up after the meal, someone mentioned Eday. It was now safe to go back to the island, but we’d become so settled on Papay that we didn’t want to move. Liz and Hamish were like part of the family and were enjoying our company as much as we enjoyed theirs. However, memories of Eday brought with them thoughts of Harry and Jo.

“I do hope they’re all right,” said Audrey as she brought in some freshly brewed tea. “Is there any way we can contact them?”

“I’ve tried phoning Harry’s mobile many times,” replied Tony, “but he never answers. He could have left it on Eday. I don’t have Jo’s number. At the time, we all thought they’d be coming straight back from London. Then the virus hit the capital.”

“If I know Jo and Harry, they’ll be all right,” Kate said to comfort Audrey. “They’re very independent and resourceful. Look at the way they dealt with the Police on Eday. They’re probably helping folks down South.” Audrey smiled and kissed Kate on the cheek.

“Thank you hen,” she said. We chatted about Harry and Jo for a while before turning on the television for the latest news. Things were getting worse.

Chapter 28

Two months had passed since the flu virus had hit London, and the capital had all but ground to a halt. Public transport was almost totally abandoned, people preferring to travel in the relative safety of their own cars where possible. Those who did brave the underground trains and buses, wore mask specially made to keep out the virus by some enterprising company. They did little good, but everyone agreed they were better than nothing. Those who could still hold down a job, were disinfected and screened for flu symptoms as they arrived at work. But almost everyone had the virus and it seemed just a matter of time before London society collapsed altogether.

With Council services running at emergency level only, rubbish had accumulated in the streets and was an additional health risk. Rats, seemingly immune to the virus, were carriers of it. But then, so was just about every animal in London—including Man. The news services that were still running, drew comparisons with the flu epidemic of 1918, and the Black Death of the sixteen

hundreds. But this was not just any ordinary flu virus... it was an alien parasite that was feeding off humans, affecting their minds. *'Eat more meat and stay away from salt—it's poisonous'*, people were repeatedly told—doing exactly what the virus wanted. Newspapers and magazines had virtually stopped running because it was thought that the virus could be transmitted by paper. Most people got their information from the Internet, which was still in operation, though sites were not being updated as much as usual. The worst place was Central London, which was rapidly becoming a no-go area. It wouldn't be long before it was closed down altogether.

After leaving Sandi in Finchley eight weeks ago, Harry and Jo had hardly left Carshalton where Jo's mother Valerie lived. They'd phoned Sandi a few times to make sure she was all right, but they'd not looked up any of their old friends. Val was not well at all. She lived alone, with her husband dying of heart disease some five years previously. Val's neighbour Mary had been looking after her since Val became ill. Now Mary was sick with the flu, and was struggling to look after Val and herself. Mary was therefore greatly relieved to see Harry and Jo.

"You know, I don't know what I would have done if the pair of you hadn't come down from heaven," she said in her Londonised Irish accent.

"Actually, we came down from Orkney Mary," Harry jested. "Heaven's a bit further north." Harry always liked to have a bit of fun with Val's neighbour.

"Now, you go and get yourself to bed with a stiff brandy and a good book. We'll look after Val from now on," said Jo.

"Ah, you're so good to me Jo, so you are. Just like your old ma. And I won't say no to the brandy." Val left, coughing into her paper tissues. Harry involuntarily moved back to avoid any bacteria, or whatever it was coming out of Mary. But it was no different to that which had come out of Val during the past week. Only now Val was struggling to get rid of anything. The virus was sinking its teeth into her weakened body. Jo went to the bedroom and smiled at Val.

"Mary's gone home..." the startled look on Val's face made Jo realize straightaway what this meant to Val. "I mean, back to her own house. There's nothing wrong with you mum – this was just a ploy to get us to visit you, right?" Jo knew that was far from the case, but lightening the situation seemed to be the best thing. Val might not have many days left.

"You're right, of course it was dear," she replied weakly. "But it worked, didn't it?"

Jo got Val some hot soup whilst Harry began to tell her about their latest adventure on Eday. When he mentioned salt, she interrupted him.

"You know, I always used to think salt was good for you—that you needed it. They used to tell us it was essential for life. But you see how wrong people can be—it's not good for you at all, it can kill. It's probably what's killing me now..."

"No," said Harry firmly. "That's not true Val, it's the complete opposite. Salt is good for you, it's essential for life. They've got it all wrong today." But nothing he said to try to convince her had any effect. Jo brought in the steaming hot soup for Val as Harry was shaking his head. Seeing her face light up at Jo, he smiled at the old lady. "Enjoy your soup mum."

* * * * *

Sandi didn't know what to do with all her things. In one way, she wanted a completely fresh start, throwing out everything she didn't use. But when it came to sorting the *in* from the *out*, she just couldn't do it: the 'in' pile got bigger and bigger. 'Oh this is useless, fucking useless', she thought.

As regards her job, Trevor had fallen seriously ill with the virus; and with no editor—and no-one to take his place—no magazine. Not that she would have wanted to go back to Central London—now the virus was overrunning the City—but the money would have been nice.

Life retained some semblance of normality in Finchley, though few people walked the streets. When they did, they were mostly alone, and nearly always wearing masks of some kind, either the commercial variety or home-made protection. She'd been to ATMs a couple of times to check her balance and withdraw cash; but apart from that, she didn't go out. Except to one particular place.

Just past the golf range on the High Road was now the busiest place in East Finchley: the local cemetery. It was somewhere Sandi had visited every week for the past five years, rain or shine, whenever she was at home. It was where her mother was buried. And now with the virus ravaging Londoners, business was brisk for the undertakers. Only the bodies were not being buried—cremation was thought to be the safest means of disposal.

Sandi walked through the entrance, with opened wrought-iron gates at either side and headed for the place she could locate with her eyes closed. She leant over the well-tended grave and replaced the dead roses with bright red and yellow tulips. She smiled down at the headstone and whispered a few words. About ten metres away, a dark-haired woman was standing over a gravestone, her head in one hand. She was crying. Her sobbing attracted Sandi's attention. At first she tried to ignore the woman, respecting her privacy. But as the crying became louder, she walked over to the woman.

"I'm sorry to intrude—but I couldn't help..." The woman's all-consuming grief had made her oblivious to Sandi's presence.

"Oh, I'm sorry—I didn't realize..." she quickly dried her eyes.

"It's okay, I think I know how you feel. Sandi looked back to her mother's grave, and the woman followed her gaze. She nodded in understanding. "Look," said Sandi, turning back to face the woman, "I'm just going for a coffee—or something stronger..."

"Something stronger sounds good," the woman replied with a brave smile. Sandi returned the smile, and they walked out of the cemetery back to the High Road.

"I'm Sandi, by the way."

"Sara." They stopped momentarily and shook hands.

"Aren't you worried about the virus?" Sandi asked, referring to Sara's willingness to shake hands.

"No—not from you. I can usually tell. And if I do get it and die, it won't be so bad." Sandi said nothing. They walked in silence to the first pub and looked in. The atmosphere was not good and a couple of people were coughing. They closed the door and left quickly.

"I tell you what," said Sandi, "I've got a bottle of something back at my place—and I live just down the road." Sara hesitated, so Sandi added, "Okay, okay – the

truth is I'm a serial killer and I need just one more victim to make the Guinness Book of World Records." Sara's frown quickly turned into a laugh.

"Well, all right then—wouldn't want to deprive you of a world record."

Sandi's rented flat was above a dress shop. She used to share the apartment with a friend from College, until she left London to work for some Government agency in Cardiff. And after that there was me, of course.

"Here—let me take your coat."

"Thanks."

"Red or white?" Sandi asked.

"Whichever's the strongest," replied Sara.

"Red then."

Whilst Sandi got the wine and glasses, Sara perused the lounge. Sandi had photographs of Marti and me, and one of her mother.

"Thanks," said Sara as Sandi handed her a glass of Chilean Cabernet-Merlot. She sipped the deep red wine. "Mmm, nice." She paused for a moment whilst Sandi settled down. Then, indicating the photograph of me, she started, "You said you understood... at the cemetery...was he the reason?"

"Kevin? Oh god no. I wanted him dead a few times, but he kept bouncing back. Not enough rat poison I guess. No, it was my mum," Sandi picked up the framed picture and showed it to Sara, who looked at it carefully.

"She's got kind eyes."

"Thanks," nodded Sandi. "A pity they didn't rub off on me." Sara smiled. She liked Sandi from the moment they met—she felt relaxed in her company; and with both women experiencing the death of somebody close to them, there were no pretensions, no political correctness and no false sympathy.

"It was my husband—John. One year to the day. But it seems like just last week. I don't know where the months have gone." Tears began to well in her eyes again with the recollection. Sandi moved over to sit next to Sara on the sofa and put an arm around her.

"It's okay, you'll see him again—one day." If Sandi wanted to get Sara's full attention, she had it now.

"What do you mean?"

"I... I don't know exactly. But I do believe it."

"Do you think we're reborn?" asked Sara. For a moment Sandi didn't know what she believed. Did she believe that Steve Saunders was Frank? No, definitely not. Did she believe that aliens were inhabiting the Earth? No, not really. Did she believe a deadly, alien virus was rife throughout the Earth—and would destroy Man? Well, possibly. But what about after death? What happens to you, to your Soul, when you die? Where is her mother now? Certainly not in the soil she had just visited. "Sandi?"

"Oh, sorry—I was miles away. I was thinking about Orkney..."

"You've been to Orkney?" Sara asked suddenly excited.

"Yes... have you been there?"

"No, but I've always wanted to. John and I planned a trip to the islands, and then... well, you know... Tell me what it's like." Sandi described everything she could remember about her trip to Orkney. The treeless green landscape, the grey stone buildings, the beautiful sunsets over the islands, the old worldly Stromness,

and the capital city Kirkwall. Then the short trip to Papay, and finally the island of Eday. “I’d love to go,” said Sara with a heartfelt sigh.

“Then come with me...”

“What? You’re going back?” Sara couldn’t believe her luck. Sandi nodded.

“Yep—as soon as I’ve sorted my things out. I know a couple of people who are driving back next week—they’re giving me a lift in their Landrover. There’s plenty of room for one more.”

“Are you sure they won’t mind?”

“No, it’ll be fine. Here...” Sandi filled both their glasses. “To Orkney and us.” They chinked glasses.

“Orkney and us,” repeated Sara, “and a new found serial killer.”

“I’ll drink to that!” Sandi laughed.

Chapter 29

Jo stared out of the window as men in white uniforms and matching facemasks lifted the stretcher into the ambulance. Val had gone home. Harry hugged Jo warmly.

“She’s gone to a better place now love.” Jo nodded between the tears. She felt guilt, terrible guilt, for moving away up to Orkney and leaving Val. It wasn’t rational, but still she felt it. Her mind was full of *if onlys*. “There’s nothing more we could have done,” Harry added. Again Jo nodded. Her rational half knew this was correct; but her emotional side just felt remorse. “Come and sit down,” said Harry softly. She did as he directed, and he poured her a large brandy and a mug of coffee. Her mind was spinning, stomach churning. She didn’t want the drinks—she wanted to be sick. But Harry lifted the glass to her lips and she sipped the fiery liquid. In a few seconds, it began to numb the mental pain. Harry sipped his own drink, then looked at her squarely. She was still looking out of the window.

“Jo, look at me. I know this has only just happened—but it’s been coming for weeks. She wasn’t getting any better, you know that. I think that now she’s gone, we should go back to Orkney—as soon as possible. Jo looked away from the window and stared at Harry. Her expression said *it was too soon*. “I know what you’re thinking,” he continued, “But it’s for the best. We need to get back to Orkney—it’s where we belong, and where we’re needed now. I’m not saying we shouldn’t have come down to London—we had to do that. Wherever Val is now, she’ll never forget what you did you her. But now it’s time to return home.” Jo knew Harry was right: he was always right. She nodded and dabbed her eyes with a tissue, then took a deep breath.

“Okay,” she said, grabbing his hand and squeezing it firmly. “Thanks Harry—thanks for coming down with me. I know it wasn’t easy for you—I know you wanted to stay with the others; but I really appreciated it.”

“I’ll do anything for you, Jo,” he said. And she knew he meant it.

* * * * *

The next morning, Harry phoned Sandi to see if she was ready to return to Orkney.

"I've pretty much done everything here, Harry so anytime soon is good for me."

"How about Sunday? Or tomorrow if you could manage that."

"Sunday should be okay... Oh, can you take one more?"

"I don't see why not...what's his name?"

"Why does everyone always assume I'm picking up men!" She's called Sara, and she's very nice. We met in a cemetery."

"You met where?"

"A cem... I'll tell you all about it on Sunday."

Harry looked to see if Jo could hear him on the phone, but she'd gone into the kitchen. He spoke close to the telephone receiver.

"Look, I was going to wait until I saw you Sandi, but I'd better tell you now: Jo's mum died yesterday."

"Oh god, I'm sorry. How's she taking it?"

"She's fine now; but cemeteries might not be such a good topic of conversation."

"Definitely not—I'm glad you told me. Don't worry—I'll warn Sara." Jo came back into the room. Harry talked normally.

"Fine, well we'll pick you up on Sunday then... nine o'clock okay? Good, I'll see you then." Harry put down the receiver and smiled at Jo.

"Sandi wants to bring a friend—a woman she met in Finchley. I said it was okay."

"No problem," Jo replied, her mind preoccupied with other thoughts. "I did a lot of thinking last night Harry—about life and death. I want to talk to Frank when we get back. I've always said that I believed in life after death—we both have. But what happened yesterday showed that I didn't really believe it—I didn't believe that Val's soul would be reborn in the future..."

"She may have already been reborn..." Harry added.

"Yes. Well, I couldn't sleep last night. I just lay there for ages, thinking, going over things. And then it came to me: it's nothing to do with me now. Val has left her body, and whatever happens next is between Val and her higher self, or whatever we call it. We'll never know where, when or how she arranges her next life. It could be here, in the same street. Or it could be on the other side of the World."

"Or in Orkney?" offered Harry.

"Well, you never know. But the point is that it doesn't matter—it's nothing to do with us now. But I do know one thing. I should give as much love to everyone I meet as I would give to Val if she walked in here tomorrow. Because you just never know who you could be talking to. The nurse who looked after mum could have been my sister in a previous life; the man who was begging for money in the street last week could have been my father. We just don't know who we're connected to. But in the end, aren't we all connected to the same source?" Harry kissed Jo and warmly embraced her.

"This is why I love you Jo."

* * * * *

That Sunday, Harry and Jo drove up to North London to pick up Sandi and Sara from Sandi's flat in Finchley. Jo waited the car whilst Harry went to get the girls.

"Come in, Harry—Sara shouldn't be long," said Sandi. "She coming over from Highgate."

"No worries Sandi—we are a bit early anyway. Actually, I'm glad you're alone—there was something on my mind this morning."

"Take a seat," said Jo.

"Thanks." Harry didn't quite know how to put this. "It was about you leaving Orkney last time... do any of the others know you're coming back?" Sandi smiled.

"No—am I going to be in big trouble?" It was Harry's turn to smile.

"Not with me... it's just that... I thought it might be a good idea to warn them. I could phone Frank if you like?"

"Orkney's a big place Harry. What makes you think I'm going back to Eday anyway?"

"I just assumed..."

"Dangerous thing to do, assuming. But having said that, you're probably right. Good idea to test the water. I was planning on taking Sara round some of the other islands first anyway. So if we keep in touch, you can let me know the temperature of the Eday water before we venture over... I don't want to be burned at the stake." Harry was going to tell Sandi about the others leaving Eday, but he was interrupted by the door-bell. "That'll be Sara."

After quick introductions, they got on the road with Harry taking the first stint at driving, and Sandi and Sara relaxing in the back. The virus had continued to spread through Greater London, and they were quite relieved to get away. Many streets were completely deserted, and Harry felt it might not be long before some areas became ghost towns. The first topic of conversation was naturally the rapid spread of the virus, though Sandi, Harry and Jo were careful not to use the word 'alien'.

"I think you're right," agreed Sara. "I've lost count of the number of my friends that have gone down with this flu thing... and two have died already." Sara's comment reminded Sandi that she hadn't warned Sara about Jo's bereavement. She looked at Harry, whose expression indicated that everything was all right. Death was a difficult subject to avoid now that the virus was so rife.

The conversation soon turned to Orkney. Harry and Jo told them all about giving up their jobs for the good life and settling down on Eday, where they met Sandi, me and the others.

"Is Kevin still up there then?" asked Sara. "Now I've seen his picture, I feel I know him already."

"Yes, he'll be there—and his friends."

"What are they like?"

"To be honest, I thought them a bit strange at first. But since the virus outbreak in London, I've changed my mind."

"In what way?" Sara asked.

Sandi didn't want to tell Sara too much, but she also didn't want to hide anything. "They predicted the virus—and now they say they know how to eradicate it."

“Does the government know?” asked Sara. Sandi felt herself going deeper into this than she could explain, but she was saved by Harry.

“What, *this* government? Have you ever heard them listen to *anything* anyone else says?” Sara smiled and nodded.

“Tell me about it.”

Despite the depressing news bulletins that Harry put on from time to time, they had a very pleasant journey up to Edinburgh. It seemed a good place to break their journey, and Jo booked them into a guest house she and Harry had used before. It was good to get away from London, and they all had an early night ready for the drive up to Orkney the next day.

Chapter 30

Sara had planned to pay for the accommodation—the least she could do, considering she was getting a free ride all the way up to Orkney. But, as it often happened in these situations, Jo beat her to it—telling Sara that the custom was to pay the next morning, but actually giving the money to the landlady before turning in for the night.

The next morning was a glorious, crisp autumn day. A clear blue sky and a bright sunny day. It took them no time at all to reach Inverness, where they stopped off for fuel. Sara had no doubts about the system for payment this time and virtually raced to the cash desk, with Sandi behind her.

“My turn! yelled Sandi.” But Sara was already at the desk, clutching her credit card. “Little sod,” said Sandi breathlessly, with a smile. “Sara grinned back in reply and handed her card to the attendant. After punching in her PIN, Sara received her card back—and Sandi caught a glimpse of her family name.

“Philby—interesting name,” Sandi observed, but thought nothing more of it.

“You probably read it in Who’s Who,” Jested Sara.

As they drove out of Inverness and headed North, Sandi and Sara chatted about their pasts. They felt very comfortable with each other now, and talking about their loved ones was something of a release.

“I feel like I’m doing this for John now... going to Orkney I mean. His great grandfather was born on one of the islands... he had a fishing company and travelled all over the North Sea before moving to Edinburgh.”

“Oh, where was he born exactly?”

“On Hoy. John and I said we should go and take a look at where he used to live. He said there are still Philbys living there, people related to his great grandfather.” Harry’s ears suddenly pricked up.

“Did you say your husband’s name is John Philby, Sara?”

“It was, yes. He died one year ago.”

A shiver ran down Harry’s spine.

“What did he do, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Oh, he was a property developer.”

Harry could not believe what he was hearing. John Philby was the name Frank uttered when he was talking about Kevin's previous life! And he had been a property developer.

* * * * *

On Papay, everything was going well. The website had received over a hundred thousand hits since it was set up, and we had a mailing list of nearly five thousand. The increased activity meant more and more of our time spent updating the site and responding to feedback and queries. As I read over the latest emails forwarded to us from Sweden one morning, a thought came to me.

"Frank," I asked, "How will the virus react to our site? I mean, will it try to shut us down?"

"Without a doubt," he replied, not looking up from his laptop screen.

"But how will it know about the site—and how will it try to shut us down?"

Frank removed his reading glasses and looked at me squarely.

"You know Kevin, the best way to get understanding about anything is not by asking questions." I was going to ask him what he meant by that, but thought better of it. "You've got to make some effort yourself first and look at the possibilities. Knowledge can be given, but understanding has to be earned." I thought about this, and realized the sense in it. If I want to understand how to ride a bike, it wouldn't be any good just reading a book about it. I'd actually have to get up on the saddle and start peddling. I think I knew what he meant. But just then, my mobile rang. It was Harry—he'd got my number from Sandi.

"Hello—it that Kevin?"

"Harry?"

"Yes—it's nice to be back."

"Where are you?"

"On Eday—with Jo." I whispered to Frank that it was Harry. He asked me if they were alone.

"Anyone else with you?" I asked. Was this man psychic, Harry wondered.

"Yeah—someone you know."

"Sandi?" It was the only name that came to mind.

"Spot on. I think the months back in London helped clarify some things for her – she seems fine. She wants to see you all again."

"I'll have to talk to the others," I replied, looking at Frank.

"Of course. She's not alone, by the way. She's with a friend she met in London – Sara. She seems nice. Anyway, Sandi said she'd give you a call soon. Where are you all now by the way? If you can't say on the phone, it's okay." I whispered Harry's question to Frank, who nodded, which I took to mean it was okay to tell him.

"Papa Westray... but we might be back on Eday soon."

"Great—give us a call when you come over... there's something I need to talk to you about." I said goodbye, put the phone down and told Frank about Sandi.

"She's strong—I'll say that much. You have to have guts to come back here after being tied to a chair by our Gareth."

"Been there, done that," I replied, recalling my first visit to Edinburgh.

* * * * *

With Harry and Jo back on Eday, Sandi and Sara decided to explore Orkney, starting on Mainland, the largest of all the islands. Here they covered all the main tourist sites—Scara Brae, Maes Hough, and the Old Palace in Kirkwall—then the Highland Park Distillery. Returning to Kirkwall’s Tourist Information Office, they looked at the brochures of the other Orkney islands. It was all new to Sara, so she left the choice of where to go next to Sandi. They could visit Hoy anytime.

“Okay, let’s go to the island Kevin and I really enjoyed visiting when we were together.”

“Great! What’s it called?”

“Papa Westray.”

Chapter 31

The next day was a huge shock. First of all, Sandi was back, and consequently everyone, except Frank, was rather edgy. This was the woman who had betrayed us (as they saw it) and at first they didn’t feel safe with her around. But Frank had a second sense in this respect, and told us not to worry: Sandi was one of us, and she would never do anything serious to hurt the group. Her return to Orkney, knowing that we would be non-too-pleased with her actions (and might do more than simply tie her up next time), indicated this. After Frank had talked us, the relief was palpable—particularly as far as Gareth was concerned; he was still very much in love with her, but didn’t want to compromise his dedication to the group by his affection for ‘the enemy’.

“Sandi, welcome back!” Frank exclaimed with open arms. “And who is this?” he added seeing Sara.

“Hi, I’m Sara,” she said.

I froze. Shivers went down my spine.

“Yes, I believe we’ve met,” Frank replied shaking her hand, “though my appearance has changed somewhat,” he smiled broadly.

Sara looked confused. My heart was now beating fast. I knew this woman—beyond any doubt.

“I, I think... I think I’ve met you too,” I stammered. “But I’ve no idea where or when.” I stared into her eyes, searching for some understanding of how I knew her.

“This is Audrey, Kate, Tony and Gareth,” Frank continued, introducing the others to Sara. “Make yourself comfortable... would you like a cup of tea, or coffee perhaps?”

Sara accepted a cup of coffee, and sat between Kate and Sandi, who was next to Gareth. I was still in a daze. I was connected to this woman, but I’d no idea how. And then Frank said, “It’s Sara Philby, isn’t it?” She was taken aback.

“Oh, how did you know that? Did Sandi tell you?”

“No... I knew your husband—John Philby. He was a property developer, but had an unfortunate accident... involving a roof, I recall. I was very sad when that happened... we were very good friends.”

Then I understood.

Sara stared quizzically at Frank. "I'm sorry, I don't remember you..."

"Yes, this is going to be a little difficult to understand... my name is Frank Peters."

Sara was dumbfounded. "But that's impossible... Frank was an older man... and shorter."

"I did say it was going to be difficult!"

Frank turned to Tony and asked him if he would tell Sara everything he understood about past lives and reincarnation.

"My pleasure Frank. Well, the first thing you need to do is let go of all your preconceived ideas about life and death..."

Whilst Tony was talking to Sara and the others, Frank ushered me outside so we could talk privately. We sat on a long wooden bench overlooking a nearby pond.

"Kevin, I understand that was difficult for you, and I know you'll be very confused just now. But I can tell you beyond any doubt that you were Sara's husband before you became Kevin Lee, and you and I were close friends, very close. In fact, you and I have worked closely together ever since coming to this planet. When I volunteered for this project, I asked you to work with me—I knew you had the qualities that could help us fight the virus. We have shared many lives together in dozens of countries over a period of ten thousand years. I know this will sound like science fiction, but every word I tell you is true.

"Because of our closeness, I feel I can trust you with sensitive information. If you remember, I told you about a substance we had perfected that will destroy the virus forever. That substance will be activated very soon."

"How soon?"

"In the next few days. The good news is that the antidote will completely destroy the virus. Endless tests have been done on samples of the virus which were safely retained on our planet. It has a 100% success rate."

"So what's the bad news?" I asked.

"The downside is that it will kill *anything* physically connected to the virus." Frank paused, waiting for my reaction.

"You mean that anyone who is infected by the virus will die?"

Frank nodded. "Yes, that is exactly what I'm saying. This is why we cannot tell the others—not yet."

"But they'll be safe, surely? They've all been tested, and they're negative."

"Tony, Kate, Gareth and Audrey—yes, they'll be safe. But we don't know about Sandi, Sara, Harry and Jo. They've just returned from London, a highly virulent area, and the likelihood is that they're infected—even if to a small degree. And then there's Liz and Hamish of course.

"Shit!" My mind was racing, trying to think of ways we could save them.

"I understand that you want to save people's lives, Kevin, particularly those you have a relationship with now. But just imagine if you could recall all your past lives, and the thousands of people you were close to then. Imagine if you could remember that Sara was your wife, or that..." Frank stopped himself and paused. "Well, you get the idea."

"How will it happen?" I asked. "I mean, what's the method of distribution of this, er, substance... and where will it come from?"

“It will be seeded into the Earth’s atmosphere, and penetrate the air we breathe, the water we drink and the food we eat. It will be impossible to avoid.”

“Does anyone else know about this?”

“Only Tony. No-one else must know this Kevin, no-one.”

Frank went back inside to join the others. I reflected on what I had just heard from Frank. Although there was so much I didn’t understand, I couldn’t turn away from this now. I had witnessed so much in the last few months, and had no doubt that at least some of what I had learned from Frank and Tony was true. I desperately hoped that Sandi and the others would be okay, that they would be sufficiently free of the virus to survive the antidote, but at the back of my mind, I feared the worst.

Chapter 32

Three days later, on Thursday the 29th September, it all started. I could almost taste the substance in the air. Frank said it would take five days for the full effects to be felt and instructed everyone to stay inside due to some ‘very bad weather’ that was heading our way. He also got me to secretly disconnect the internet and phone lines, and tell everyone that the lines were down due to thunderstorms on the Orkney Mainland. He didn’t want them to hear things from anywhere else. Everyone had a great respect for Frank, and never questioned his judgement. In fact, the only two people who might have queried his instructions were Tony and me... which could be one reason he confided in the two of us.

On Saturday evening, Sandi and Sara said they were not feeling well, and went to bed early. It was heartbreaking to hear this, knowing what Frank had told me. Frank suggested I have a look around the island the next day—he didn’t want me to witness what was happening to Sandi.

I had an early breakfast on Sunday morning, and took one of our ebikes on a trip around Papay, heading west. It was deadly quiet... quiet even for Papay. It wasn’t long before I came across some bodies. An old lady outside her house near an area called Holland, and a child nearby. Further along the road, another three. I checked each one for a pulse, and there was no question they were dead. Not many people kept livestock on the island, but the cows I did see all appeared to be lifeless. The population of Papay was less than one hundred before we arrived; by Monday, I could see it being less than ten. To the south, in an area known as Backaskaill, I saw two more bodies outside their homes. Looking through the window of a couple of houses, I saw more people, and no signs of life.

I returned to the Cooperative where we were staying, and stopped at Liz and Hamish’s house. My face broke into a wide smile when I saw Hamish outside cleaning his fishing gear.

“Hi Kevin... do ye notice, there’s something awful funny about the air t’day?”

“Yeah, strange smell to it. Could be coming over from Westray. Is your mum about?”

“Aye, she’s in the kitchen... shall I get her for you?”

“No need, thanks—just checking up on her. Well, you take care now Hamish—I’ll see you later.”

“See you Kevin.”

I was relieved to know that Hamish and Liz had survived. Back at home, things were less hopeful. Frank had gathered everyone together to tell them about the virus, the antidote and the side effects. Sandi and Sara were dead. It was a very sombre mood and Audrey could not hold back her tears and had to leave the room. Kate and Gareth were glassy-eyed.

“So as I said, eliminating the virus from this planet, has come at a cost—we always knew it would. Millions of people around the planet are now dead, including, regretfully, Sandi and Sara. This is a time to be strong; this is a time to really believe what Tony and I have been telling you about life. The death of a body is just that, nothing more. The person, the soul never dies... it goes home to its natural place, waiting to be reborn. That will continue to happen on this planet, as it happens on every planet of every universe where life exists. Now the Earth’s population is a very small fraction of what it was before last Thursday. It will grow again—people will live and learn and grow again on this planet, and build a new future—one free of the alien virus we have destroyed. And in so doing, we have saved other races in other parts of the universe from the virus.

“On this amazing planet, I have had so many lives—and so have you all. But this is the last one. At the end of your natural life times, we will all return home to the planet we came from. Our mission is almost over... right Tony?”

“Yes, indeed. I would like to echo what Frank said, and add that we still have a great deal of work to do. A huge clean-up operation will soon be underway in the aftermath of the virus. Our main role, though, will be in education: helping people to get back to natural ways, showing how desert can be transformed into fertile land and food can easily be grown without chemical fertilizers; pushing renewable energy as the one and only way to go forward; harnessing the powers of the wind, waves and sun. A new era of mankind can begin, and it starts with us.”

“So, the virus is really dead... there’s nothing left of it alive anywhere on Earth?” Kate asked.

“Correct Kate,” Frank replied. “There is no possibility that any life-form on Earth could avoid the antidote; and once subjected to the antidote the virus will die. We have achieved what we set out to achieve, though not in the way we had hoped. There is nowhere on Earth, not a micron of space, where the virus can escape the antidote. The virus is no more.”

* * * * *

At precisely 14.27 GMT on Wednesday 26th October, a Russian Soyuz spacecraft undocked from the International Space Station, returning three cosmonauts to Earth after six months in space.

