

AN ACTION-ADVENTURE THRILLER

The Asterisk

First Sojourn



MARK DESMOND

THE ASTERISK

First Sojourn

By

Mark Desmond

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Dedication

Thanks to my wonderful wife and kids for allowing me the time and encouragement to complete this novel! This work would not be here without the three of you.

Acknowledgments

To Tom F, who has been a friend, colleague, and inspiration for over thirty years. He is the real “Franny,” and one hell of a golfer!

To Dave H, a dad like me and my leaning post. A true pillar of focus, friendship, and someone I can vent to.

Hopefully you will enjoy this book. If you do, be on the lookout for the next in the series:

The Asterisk – Daughters Two and Three

The Asterisk – The Fourth of Five

The Asterisk – The Mother

[The Asterisk Quotes, 10/11/17](#)

"An original, hard-hitting thriller!"

--Stephen Mertz, author of *The Moses Deception*

"*The Asterisk* is a compellingly unique page-turner you won't want to miss."

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Prologue

1916 - Egypt

Twelve miles east of The Valley of the Kings

Arianne Dubois followed the man with the torch deeper into the cave. She was beginning to have her doubts.

Jean-Pierre Fontaine was an attractive man. Tall, and heavy through the neck and shoulders, his black hair was disheveled, streaked with distinguished gray. He was intelligent, worldly. He was France's greatest archaeologist. In his pith helmet and khakis, which retained a sharp crease against the intense heat, he presented a striking figure.

Unfortunately, at age fifty-three, he was thirty years Arianne's senior. Now, with the cave winding ever deeper into the earth, she could no longer look over her shoulder and see reassuring daylight at its entrance. With another bend just ahead, she decided that it was most certainly time to express herself.

"Professor," she said, "how much farther must we go?"

"It will not be long now," he replied.

The cave was wide enough along this area for them to be advancing shoulder to shoulder. Jean-Pierre paused, and she did likewise. She was hardly afraid of the rodents and snakes that could be hiding here in the cave. Arianne had been what the

Americans called a “tomboy” since she was old enough to run and play.

Her employer wedged the base of the torch into a crevice in the rock wall, only a few paces from where the cave curved to the right. The musty environs of the cave shimmered in the flickering golden illumination of the torch. He turned toward her after affixing the torch to the wall. He appeared menacing in the eerie light cast by the torch, his handsome features transformed by the half-light into a malevolent mask.

“Now then,” he said in a smooth voice that belonged more in the bedroom than on an archaeological field expedition. He reached out for her with both of his arms. “We are alone at last, *mon Cheri.*”

At first, the relative coolness of the cave had provided welcome relief from the heat of the day. Warm as it was inside the cave, the air outside was like the maw of a blast furnace. The surrounding terrain was utterly desolate, hostile. Beyond the camp, with its tents and carefully sectorized dig areas, its shacks for the storage of tools and artifacts, there was nothing but uninhabitable emptiness—barren, rocky, dry hill country. Outside the cave, a brazen sun in a sky free of clouds pressed unforgivingly down upon a vista without a single spot of green. Arianne, attired similarly to the professor, had been grateful for his invitation to accompany him into the cave. She chastised herself again for not thinking that through.

She had finagled long and hard to join this expedition, a systematic search for the legendary tomb of Tutankhamen. The excavation permit granted by the Egyptian government allowed the professor’s team to conduct a two-month

documented search along one of the seven streambeds the ancients had constructed to divert flash floods, which resulted from the area's infrequent violent thunderstorms. The streambeds—now dusty, rocky, and hot—kept the flood waters from the Valley of Kings on the west bank of the Nile, where, for a period of nearly five hundred years, tombs had been constructed for the pharaohs and powerful nobles of Ancient Egypt.

This may have been a new century, but, especially in France, a woman's place was still very much in the kitchen, barefoot and pregnant. But with France writhing in the blood bath of a World War, with most of its men on the front fighting Germans, a severe shortage of manpower in the archaeological field had contributed to Arianne gaining a post as Professor Fontaine's assistant. Her familiarity with this region west of the Nile, gained from having read about it voraciously since she was a child, had certainly helped. But her schoolgirl daydreams were now a thing of the past. She was living her fondest dream, coming to this exotic land of mystery. She had always been fascinated by the Egyptian legends of queens and kings and intrigue.

Her mother and father had been more concerned about something like this moment happening than anything else the day she left her small village. It was only the fact that she was more in harm's way *in* France that had gained her parents' blessing on this adventure in the first place. War raged this way and that across the countryside; madness raping a bucolic setting of what had been lovely farmland, now ravaged, bomb-cratered, trench-crossed killing fields that at any moment could explode day-to-day civilian life. But her parents' main concern, and perhaps her own if she

allowed herself to be honest about it, was that, in addition to physical danger, her chaste innocence would be at risk. She was an attractive young *maiden*, not yet a *woman*.

“Pray every morning and every night, my child,” her mother had admonished upon saying their farewells. “Come back to us as you are now.”

Papa had been wringing his hands. “Our daughter is too beautiful. *Mon Dieu!* She is too *French!* No good will come of this! Our neighbors. Our customers. Mama, what will they think?”

Then Arianne was gone, off to unite with Professor Fontaine’s team when they shipped out aboard a steamer bound for Egypt. Travel! Adventure! Romance! She was ready for every bit of it.

Until now, that is.

Respected and credentialed as Professor Fontaine was in academe and the upper social register, primal lust glittered in his eyes now.

Unfortunately, no one would think to come looking for them here. This cave had been located during the first days of exploration, but a cursory examination several yards into it had determined that any historical artifacts that might have once been found here had long ago (perhaps centuries) fallen into the hands of looters. Jean-Pierre had redirected the search elsewhere along the dry streambed.

Arianne took a step backwards, pressing against the wall. There was nowhere to go. She decided to see how far she could get by playing naive in the face of this unwarranted advance.

“But, Professor, I don’t understand . . .”

He was close enough now that his body was pressing against her. He raised a hand, and his

fingers gently caressed her cheek. He leaned in, drawing his lips toward hers. He whispered in a breathy voice.

“Of course you understand, little one. I have not been blind to the look in your eyes when you gaze upon me. Come, it is time to consummate this serendipitous mutual attraction of ours. Here. *Now!*”

She whipped her head to the side. Instead of receiving a kiss, his lips bumped clumsily into the side of her head.

“Stop!” she gasped in a breathy voice. The attempted naivety ploy evaporated. She struggled to stem the rising panic she felt. “Professor, you are a married man with three children. This is not right!”

He attempted to slide his arms around her waist. “How can sweet desire be wrong? Come, Arianne.”

With her back pressed to the wall, he was unable to encircle her with his arms. But he was pressing close enough to her that she could feel the heat of his pulsating loin as it pressed against her thigh through the fabric of their clothing. She tried to put an edge into her next words, keeping her voice low and determined.

“Professor, you are wrong about me. If you don’t stop at once, I shall scream, and it will be the ruin of you.”

After the briefest pause, he stepped way, running his palms back to smooth out his hair, straightening his shoulders.

“Of course, of course, my dear. How very ungallant of me. Do you find me unworthy of your affections?”

She thought of them leaving the cave after this encounter, whereupon this lech could well immediately dismiss her, and she would more than

likely never again work in her beloved field of archaeology. She steadied herself.

“Professor, I admire and respect you. Can that not be enough?”

He seemed not to hear her. He reclaimed the torch from where it jutted from the crevice in the wall. “I have something that I wish to show you just around this next bend,” he said abruptly.

Apprehension tightened Arianne’s throat.

“Really, Professor, I believe it would be better if I returned to the dig and—”

“Nonsense. You’ve made your feelings quite apparent, *mademoiselle*. But it’s true, I *have* found an item of enormous interest that I wish to show you before I show anyone else.” He chuckled. “Who knows, it may yet impress you enough to let this old lover have at least a peck on the cheek.”

“Professor—”

“Very well, Arianne. I shall desist. But truly, you must see this incredible discovery I’ve made.” He gestured to the nearby bend, invitingly, like an usher.

Arianne gulped hard. She gained control of the flight response that surged through her. She reminded herself that working for this man was the first step in gaining prominence in the archaeological field as a woman. She thought, *And once I have done that, I will never abuse anyone as this man tried to abuse me*. At the same time, she could not deny her curiosity. Though she wished he hadn’t behaved as he had toward her, Jean-Pierre’s enthusiasm for what he wanted to show her appeared wholly genuine. “I would like to see what you’ve found,” she finally said.

He murmured his delight, and then led the way around the bend. She followed warily.

And there it was . . .

She gasped at what she saw, hardly realizing that Jean-Pierre stood beside her, smiling with a supreme male arrogance and confidence in response to the awe that must surely have frozen upon her features.

The cave ended beyond a cul de sac, in which sat what at first appeared to be an ancient tomb, although its unique construction was of some iridescent material she had never seen before. The dedicated enclosure emanated weird, subtly pulsating warmth. The general appearance of the tomb-like structure could have been ancient, perhaps tens of thousands of years old. But upon further inspection, it became apparent that the enclosure had been built specifically for the strange object floating in midair, a meter above a perfectly polished parabolic dish fashioned into a rough stone base that was over three meters across and almost two meters thick. The unidentifiable object was softly glowing gold in color, solid in appearance, and very oddly shaped, angled sharply back on each side of one end, creating a sort of obtuse flat point on the narrow end, while on the other end it was much wider, vaguely resembling what could be one corner of a square pyramid with the top third chopped off.

Arianne found her voice.

“What . . . what is it?”

The professor cleared his throat. “I, uh, haven’t quite determined that yet, I’m afraid.”

She wasn’t fooled. He was trying to appear authoritative but was really in as much awe of this sight as she was. “Has anyone else seen this?”

“Not yet. As you know, this cave was first thought empty. By mistake, I recalled the search

team prematurely before they made it this far back. But ever since they moved on, I've had second thoughts. Yesterday, I decided to investigate on my own, and this is what I found. Incredible, isn't it?"

"Yes, Professor, but what is it?"

He handed her the torch. "I cannot answer that, cheri, other than to say I suspect it is something mankind has never gazed upon before."

Arianne's present predicament—this man's repulsive manner; her concerns about her career future—all of that faded away. The strange sight of that obelisk-like entity hovering over the base sent her intellect reeling. *What in the world could this be? What is causing it to float in the air?* She caught herself, startled at her next thought. *And what if this strange oddity was not of this world?*

She took the torch from him. She watched.

Jean-Pierre paused, glaring at the strange sight. Then he stepped toward it. "Professor, perhaps it would be best if you did not get too close or touch it. We should leave here and summon assistance, don't you think? The way that strange artifact just hovers over that bowl—"

He nodded. "Yes, it is uncanny. But . . . I am a man of science. There is an explanation for everything."

He was doing his best to convince himself. Apparently, he succeeded. He stepped up to the thing. He stood beside the edge of the base and studied the small obelisk at eye level.

Arianne suddenly felt a pressure in her chest, making it hard to breathe. "Professor, be careful."

"There is nothing to worry about," he said in that brittle tone of uncertainty. "Please, my dear, bring the light closer so I can get a better look."

She hesitantly stepped over to him. She reached

out, holding the torch as close as she dared, holding it far enough away from him for safety but close enough above and behind his shoulder to provide a more detailed examination, revealing a crystal-clear view of otherworldly design around the weird-looking entity floating above the dish and beneath the mysterious dome.

Jean-Pierre cautiously extended his right hand with his index finger pointed out. Arianne had noticed the object had turned ever so slightly and started to point its narrow end at the professor. She started to voice her concern, to urge him again to stop. But the professor had already gently nudged the thing with his finger.

And then it was too late!

For the remainder of her seventy-three years, Arianne Dubois would vividly remember what happened next. It almost seemed to occur in slow motion, so smoothly and with barely a sound, and yet from start to finish the unspeakable horror transpired in less than a few seconds.

The hovering form gave a slight shudder. It slid to the right, away from the center of the dish and the dome. Jean-Pierre, as startled as was Arianne, stepped back, straightening to look upward, while the artifact soundlessly ascended into the air, rising in an arc that peaked three feet directly above the professor's upraised, stunned countenance. The thing then descended faster than the eye could see and sliced Jean-Pierre in half from head to crotch with a subtle *snick-slurp* sound. With no trace of blood anywhere, it returned straight to its former position, resuming a holding pattern over the parabolic dish, even before the opposing halves of Jean-Pierre's corpse flopped to either side and spread onto the dirt floor.

Arianne had just enough wherewithal to retain hold of the torch.

She whirled about and ran from the domed temple.

Her hysterical, rising, frightened screams echoed out from the mouth of the cave with the terror of incipient madness.

Chapter 1

The Present

Cambridge, Massachusetts

The one thing that Jack Drago always took pride in was his ability to think outside the box.

But right now, he was feeling as if he was locked *in* the box. He sat hunched forward, stiff-necked, in his office, as he had been for what seemed an eternity, endlessly pounding keys on his not so ergonomically positioned keyboard.

Having to wait eons for the super computers to do their thing was just another part of the frustrating puzzle. Most MIT graduate students learn quickly that engaging in postgraduate research, especially federally funded research, is anything but glamorous. Regardless of locale, most find themselves subjugated to threadbare, gloomy, and mostly windowless environs, locked into a lonely world, relegated to backwater offices sans fanfare, well off the beaten path.

For Jack, this was challenging and discouraging. He was by nature an outgoing guy. In his late twenties, he had an IQ in the certified genius range. He stayed in prime physical shape and had never found his communication skills to be lacking either socially or professionally. Born and raised in a quaint oceanside community north of Boston, his was a seriously upscale family that

traced its blue-blood lineage back to Boston's original Gold Coast heritage. He'd mastered elite-level mathematics, mechanical and electrical engineering, biochemical sciences, and martial arts with black belts in three disciplines. He had no difficulty in appealing to the feminine eye. More than one woman had told Jack, after a roll in the hay, that he was the best they'd ever had. His manly pleasure, however, was working on and speeding around in muscle cars.

This latest challenge he had taken on was in aid of his intention to acquire an acute understanding of the heavens. His current involvement in a program following this endeavor had him trapped in a nondescript third-floor office in Cambridge, Massachusetts, located smack in the middle of MIT's world-renowned Earth Atmospheric and Planetary Sciences Department.

Still trying to break the possibly insurmountable logjam that he had been wrestling with for over two years, Jack completed entering his latest software changes into his computer and tried to relax in his antiquated high-backed leather chair, exhaling a long, frustration-driven sigh.

He reached over to the top of his dilapidated mini fridge to grab his freshly made libation. The most popular, still-unnamed concoction on the planet, ice-packed Absolut Citron, soda water, and a splash of cranberry juice, stirred not shaken, was his go-to favorite. Jack consciously allowed his six-foot-two, two-hundred-twenty-five-pound frame to relax. He drew his feet up on his desk, crossing them at the ankles.

He was beginning to wonder if it was all worth it. Was he simply barking up the wrong tree, only to be frustrated once again?

He indulged in his first aggressively long pull from his only friend at hand, his twenty-four-ounce mason jar.

To pass time, he once again fooled with trying to count the astronomically fast microprocessor cycles in his head, estimating the time it took the MIT Cray mainframe to respond as it crunched away at his latest instructions. *This time may be different*, he thought. Habitually taking the positive outlook was one of his stronger traits.

This was his first time using the new, fresh-off-the-flash-drive software debugging algorithm he had acquired somewhat illegally. He had heard about the revolutionary new program a month ago, while enjoying a wild, invite-only Ramones concert at the legendary Paradise Nightclub on Commonwealth Ave.

A blast it was too! He downed his second long pull from the mason jar. Acquiring the tip had cost him a one-night stand with a kinky female undergrad. Regardless of how well this new debug worked, she had been awesome, and the Ramones rocked!

Then, after about a full month of pulling every string possible, even going way up several inappropriate inter-departmental ladders, he had finally called a friend of a friend of a friend as a last resort. After being discreetly directed to one of the head research scientists working exclusively on the development of the algorithm next door at Harvard, Jack was not to be denied. He was eventually able, with incessant persistence, to covertly “procure” the multimillion-dollar algorithm free of charge, finally acquiring it by meeting up with some lackey Harvard PhD wannabe from their Human DNA Research Group.

It was crazy Russian spy stuff out of a Tom Clancy novel. The kid had set him up and dodged him on their first two arranged meets.

“Just testing you,” the kid had said over the phone. “Can’t be too careful. This is big stuff, man.”

Maybe to a pencil-necked nerd, thought Jack. He, however, was a man on a mission, and for Jack, the spy-versus-spy monkey business was just another means—as in shortcut—to what he hoped would be a worthy goal.

In return for the debugging program, he agreed to release his sworn top-secret source code and security access information for the Kepler deep space telescope. He had been entrusted with this ultra-top-secret information by the Central Intelligence Agency for his research, and there he was, leaking it to a head guy over at Harvard. Oh, well, he’d rationalized, nothing risked nothing gained. And morally, he felt no hair off his butt. What was Uncle Sam’s belonged to all of us, after all. We paid for it!

Who knows what the wannabe got from his boss for the effort, probably a gold star for his forehead. It was all part of the game.

After his third good pull from his cocktail, now half-consumed, he reached over and set the mason jar down on the bare wood corner of his soiled, L-shaped oaken desk. Waiting out the unusually long processing time, he issued another quite intentional sigh. “This is getting old,” he said aloud to no one but himself. The last thing on his mind was the addition of more moisture ring stains on the antique wood. The jar was now literally dripping with condensation from the mid-July East Coast humidity wafting off the Charles River into the

ancient ornate fieldstone building and down the hall into his meager office.

He clasped his hands behind his head and gazed up to his two wall-mounted forty-inch ultra-high-definition computer monitors. He frowned, then slowly uncrossed his well-worn Reeboks and pulled his feet down from the desk. He uncrossed his hands from behind his head and leaned forward, his brows raised. His eyes almost popped out of his skull.

“Holy shit!”

His eyes started darting from the left monitor back to the right. He was stunned by what he was seeing. After twenty-six months of nothing but angst, frustration bordering on bewilderment, and disappointment, it was beginning to look like the algorithm from Harvard may have worked.

He felt his face starting to flush as beads of sweat began forming on his forehead. His fingers were trembling as he started hammering away at the keyboard at one hundred ten words per minute, trying to sort and decipher the seemingly endless torrent of incoming data.

The information was streaming directly into Jack’s office through the United States government’s top-secret, ultra-secure Fiber End-to-End Net, or ‘FETENET,’ at an astounding rate of twenty terabits per second. This exclusive, ten-billion-dollar network used dedicated fiber optic cabling only from signal origin to endpoint. Custom proprietary servers, modems, and software all along the way completed the system. Intended to ensure ultimate inter-governmental communications security and to virtually eliminate any possible chance of intrusion or hacking, FETENET was installed by the feds for their exclusive use

anywhere within the governments' domain.

The data currently under review by Jack was originating one hundred thousand miles from Earth, from the Kepler space observatory, launched by NASA in 2009. The Kepler Deep Space Telescope was designed to survey our region of the Milky Way galaxy and hopefully discover planets orbiting other stars. Specifically, planets that had atmospheres and potential to support life. The Kepler was part of NASA's Discovery Program of relatively low-cost, focused, primary science missions overseen by our government's Laboratory for Atmospheric and Space Physics.

The planet-hunting spacecraft's mission was to watch an area that contained about one hundred fifty thousand stars like the sun. Using special instruments like those used in radiation and metal detectors, The Kepler scanned for that slight change in a star as orbiting planets passed between the star and the Kepler. The observatory's place in space allowed it to watch the same stars constantly throughout its mission, something observatories such as NASA's Hubble Space Telescope and ground-based telescopes were unable to do.

From the Kepler direct laser downlink, to central control processing at Langley, the unfettered data stream flowed unobstructed along to Jack's office. The data was now building and compiling at an unimaginable speed, but now the observatory was imaging back a relatively small area of approximately twenty-five hundred square kilometers of Earth's surface, not stars and planets in space!

With full understanding of the futuristic capabilities of the instrumentation aboard, two years ago the spacecraft had been covertly re-purposed

for short periods of time to enable Jack's research. Reoriented by NASA as directed by the CIA during allocated time to face Earth, the Kepler was currently randomly centered over Lake Titicaca, Bolivia. This newly created information was being saved in the custom four-foot-high FETENET server, installed by the CIA, three feet away from Jack's left knee.

The quality of the information now revealing itself, even given the very short duration of initial processing time, was beyond belief. It would take months of work by teams of specialists to sort out every subtle detail locked within the data to get the full picture of everything represented.

Jack needed to capture two concurrent still shots from the live video stream in a two-dimensional format to prove out the validity of the data. He needed to overlay the two snapshots one on top of the other and compare them. If the program from Harvard did solve the problems in Jack's software and subsequently break the logjam, the two snapshots should appear identical.

With instantaneous keyboard commands, Jack captured two sequential video frames from a virtually random, literal moment in time. The images were grabbed from the video stream downloading at a blazing half a million frames per second. He fed the raw image files into the computer. All he was after now was to validate the data from the telescope. Once this was achieved, all else could be optimized at will.

Never having gotten this far before, his racing mind struggled to control his actions. His fingers were slipping from one keystroke to another, creating so many unforced errors he had to reenter commands time and time again. One minute later,

which seemed like an hour, he was confident his instructions were finally correct. He was a single keystroke away from sending the snapshots down the hallway to a state-of-the-art machine that printed on clear plastic sheets.

He froze abruptly.

His right index finger was somehow involuntarily shackled, muscle-locked midair above the Enter key. His brain told his finger multiple times to push down on that Enter key, but his finger would not move!

Something had seized his existence.

Jack was dumbfounded. Within milliseconds his mind had become mysteriously crystal clear, crisp and instantaneously void of any thoughts even vaguely related to his current world. This project that had so totally engulfed him for the last two years of his life was gone from his mind.

It seemed as if he were thrust by an unknown force into pause mode, a warm, peaceful, serene mental euphoria coursed through his body. *Was this a transcendental out-of-body thing?* He struggled to regain his muscle control. *Was this mental reset subconsciously triggered? Or was this interruption an intrusion from unknown outside forces?* Whatever the hell it was, it was real, not imagined, and it was powerful!

He started to gradually return to reality. He shook his head vigorously from side to side, then wiped his face on his T-shirt sleeve slowly from forehead to chin. He could feel his heartbeat hammering against his ribs. He noticed his right hand resting on the oaken desk, shaking uncontrollably. His outstretched index finger was trembling violently in mid keystroke, still hovering over the Enter key as if it had developed a mind of

its own. He'd never felt or experienced anything like this before, and yet he did not feel threatened.

He thought, *What in the world was that? Divine intervention or what?*

He removed his right hand from the keyboard and rubbed it together with his left to quell the trembling and get the circulation going again. He grabbed the mason jar and three chugged the balance, then slammed it back down with *clinks* and a *clunk*.

It was nothing, he assured himself.

Reconnoitering the situation, he said to the empty office, "Or . . . this could be *huge!*"

Throwing his head back, he gave in to the impulse to emit a hearty laugh aloud, a glowing gleam in his heart. With a conscious exhalation and an honest prayer for the best uttered in his mind, he carefully lowered his finger to the Enter key. He closed his eyes, and this time, uneventfully depressed the key. He felt the tactile feedback through the keycap into his finger, confirming the finality of key switch closure.

The modest *click* of the keyboard represented an irreversible command portraying what could be a major life-changing action. If this data was the real deal, this development could well represent one of the most astounding discoveries ever seen in science, right up there with the decoding of human DNA.

The appropriate icon flashed onto the right-hand monitor, indicating that the printing process was initiated. Hopefully irrefutable data verification was but minutes away.

Instinctively, he brought the two digital versions of the soon-to-be printed representations up on his monitors. Right clicking his cursor, he

slowly dragged his mouse to the left. The right-hand monitor image followed, through the twelve-inch gap between the wall-mounted monitors and over to display itself over the image on the left-hand monitor. Having manually overlaid the right-hand image directly over the similar left-hand image, he released the mouse, and the images auto centered on each other.

He stood up and leaned over his desk to gaze closely at the renderings. His eyes darted down to the bottom right-hand corner of the screen, where the times the images captured from the satellite were displayed.

There they were in full glory.

Two separate timestamps, two nanoseconds apart, verified that both overlays were displayed. Although they were totally separate images, it was impossible to tell the two apart. Additionally, the sheer amount of raw information contained on the monitor screen was astounding. There were hundreds of various colored dots located throughout the field of view.

Jack did the math in his head: *Each colored dot indicates a dense concentration of a specific heavy metal. Located across a random twenty-five-hundred-square kilometer sampling of the Andes Mountains in Bolivia, the amount of gold, silver, and platinum, let alone uranium and everything else, is staggering!*

Jack moved to instantly link into the highly classified military GPS telemetry system within the MIT research network. This allowed him to acquire exact GPS locations of each point on the display to within one meter. Along with the GPS locations of the colored dots, an inclusion for all major geophysical topography features, such as major

roads, rivers, lakes, and elevations, were automatically added.

Jack couldn't help but marvel again at the sheer quantity of data on the monitor. Jack knew that every one of the bright red dots he was looking at had been programmed to indicate the presence of an element with an atomic mass of 196.9655.

Concentrated pure gold!

Then he noticed something strange.

A very peculiar black symbol was off to the top left corner of the monitor. This asterisk symbol had no other colored dots around it and was located on a plateau high in the mountains. It was seemingly out in the middle of nowhere.

Jack knew of no reason for an asterisk symbol to be in the data. *I never programmed an asterisk symbol into the software; it must be a glitch. That's very weird.*

Slightly repositioning the top image back and forth over the bottom image with the mouse, he confirmed that the asterisk was in fact on both slides, in the exact same location.

He mentally pigeonholed this in his head as a major "to do." He hoped it was not an indication of future problems in the software and that it was simply a maverick event; a singular, one-time, mixed-byte aberration buried somewhere within the millions of lines of code.

Jack knew the next thing he absolutely had to do was to get all this information over to Franny.

Chapter 2

Still standing in his office, pressing two sequential soft keys on his Samsung smartphone, Jack auto-dialed Franny's apartment over in Harvard Square. Hearing Franny's home phone immediately jump to voicemail meant only one thing.

Franny was home. He always switched off his land line when he was there, so, no rings. He never answered his cell regardless of where he was.

Jack was so anxious to get the new results over to Franny that he started scrambling haphazardly about his office, gathering everything he thought he may need to review the breakthrough with his partner. *He'll never believe this!* he thought, stuffing CDs full of software code, programming summaries, and secure flash drives with satellite access code information into his soft black leather Jourdan shoulder bag. *Here it is a little over one year after Franny quit and bang, logjam broken, tremendous success and a who-knows-where-this-is-even-going type of event!*

And none of it could have been done without Franny.

Francis "Franny" Avalon had been Jack's best friend ever since he entered MIT. Franny had been born and bred in northern Vermont, where his father was a legendary ballistics engineer for the Armament Systems Division of General Electric, in

Burlington. Franny, a typical propeller head, had followed loosely in his father's footsteps, excelling in mathematics, aeronautical engineering, and then on to electrical and mechanical engineering and biochemistry.

Just like Jack.

Franny's true forte was his innate ability in getting high-level software to function seamlessly with state-of-the-art complex hardware. At age twenty-seven, he was regarded by many in the field to be a global prodigy. He'd already become reasonably well known in his late teens for this facet of his multiple skill sets, and soon he was coveted by many elite institutions and corporations throughout America. Undaunted in pursuit of his PhD in Astrophysics, Franny eventually selected MIT to take full advantage of their superior research and development program resources and funding.

This is where Jack and Franny met, in MIT's Earth's Atmospheric and Planetary Department. They were both pursuing PhDs in the same field of expertise. Jack and Franny hit it off right away, and they had, as undergrads, worked on a Kepler telescope instrumentation development program. They eventually co-conspired on their Doctoral thesis submissions to MIT since they were both pursuing nearly identical objectives. A professor seated on the PhD review panel at the University had taken specific interest in the possibilities of Franny and Jack's theses. With their approval, he sent excerpts from their theses proposals to associates over at NASA.

NASA recognized that there were significant possibilities to their proposals and advised that they were interested in furthering the research of the two MIT scientists. NASA forwarded along their

recommendation to the CIA for further review. For reasons still unknown to most, the CIA had decided to underwrite the propagation of this proposal. Typically, the CIA was known as the consummate naysayer. If anything, the Agency was famous for hijacking ideas with potential national security implications from the public domain and running with it themselves.

Shortly thereafter, the CIA sent two special agents to Cambridge, unannounced, to confront Franny and Jack directly, to formally, though only verbally, advise them of NASA's and the CIA's intentions.

They barged into Franny's office, and with zero explanation, they gathered him almost forcefully, and two minutes later had moved him down the hall into Jack's office in a similar manner. The CIA stood there with their backs against Jack's closed door and their arms crossed over their chests.

At first, Jack and Franny traded those meaningful looks that only good friends can share. Jack knew Franny's sense of humor well enough to know that his pal was doing his best to restrain a chuckle and some smart-ass remark about how the two agents looked like that matched set of guys from the *Men in Black* movies. They had the whole ensemble from stern expressions to short-cropped hair, black government-issue suits with matching pressed white shirts and skinny black ties, and, of course, the wrap-around Ray-Ban shades even when they were indoors.

But it was no laughing matter.

That was made brusquely apparent when one of the agents, whose name was Jones (and yes, Jack could see in his buddy's eyes that Franny wanted to ask why the other one wasn't named Smith)

dispensed with any semblance of social niceties once the agents had pocketed their ID packs.

Jones succinctly and concisely, in a flat monotone, outlined the specific details of the arrangement between the scientists and the Agency. He concluded with, “And so, for our Agency to fund and facilitate your research and allocate what is, I assure you, highly coveted time on the Kepler telescope, your government requires your complete and unequivocal agreement to each one of these terms.”

Franny had listened to all of this with a growing frown. Although like Jack in many ways, physically, he was Jack’s opposite: skinny, shorter, and much less imposing. He had a dry sense of humor but also possessed innate insight and intelligence. Franny was particularly good at seeing the point and all its pros and cons way before anyone else. In his highly scientific world, he possessed an uncanny knack for cutting through the chatter and reaching correct conclusions fast. Whether he would disclose his findings or not was questionable.

He asked Jones, “Is our agreeing to these stipulated terms mandatory?” “It is.”

“And if we refuse your offer?”

Jones gave Franny an acrid look.

“Then I suspect the MIT review board will turn down your theses proposals, which means no PhDs, forever. You won’t even be able to get a job or a car loan unless we let you, for the rest of your lives. It gets worse from there, need I paint a clearer picture?”

Franny’s eyes narrowed. “Mister, you’re coming dangerously close to pissing me off.”

The second agent, standing off to the side,

snickered under his breath. “Better you than me, trust me,” Jones said. “I don’t give a rats ass who the two of you are or how many brain cells you have. We are having a highly classified, off-the-record conversation here, which may or may not affect national security. We do not take national security lightly. I need your answer *now*. Are you gentlemen in or out?”

Jack said the only thing he could say, and Franny nodded slightly to indicate his agreement.

Jack’s steely, defiant stare mimicked Franny’s, and he focused directly into Jones’s eyes when he said, “We’re in. I don’t see where we have a choice.”

Conjuring a mock happy face, Jones replied, “You don’t.”

The morning after Jack and Franny’s verbal-only agreement with the CIA, the CIA had mysteriously installed a Langley FETENET link directly into Jack’s and Franny’s offices. No one on the entire campus saw anything being done. It was as though the connections and equipment stacks simply materialized into their offices overnight. It was spooky.

Jack, apparently being chosen as the default leader of the two by the CIA, entered his secure, keycard-access only office the day after the meeting and discovered an astonishing array of hardware. Four-foot-high racks of equipment, humming and blinking away, lined the entire left-hand wall. There was a singular flash drive positioned on the center of his desk blotter pad.

As he was reaching for the memory stick, his cell phone rang, number restricted. The imperious guy on the other end of the phone briefly instructed Jack on where to insert the drive and how to access

and follow the instructional files. The jerk demanded, “Within ten minutes, and before you insert the jump drive, you shall have Mr. Avalon locked in your office with you. He is in his office now. Once inserted, the data on the flash drive will self-erase in eighteen minutes. Read fast, and don’t fuck it up.” The line went dead. *WTF*, thought Jack as he peered around his office for hidden cameras.

After about a year of working on the program closely with Jack, Franny had become increasingly wary of the viability of the program and, more so, had simply had enough of the abhorrent, annoying, and secretly in-your-life approach of the CIA. Franny finally, without specifically telling the CIA, stepped back from the day-to-day involvement in the program. He did agree, at the behest of Jack’s urging, to at least keep a finger in it.

Shortly thereafter Franny walked into another, more autonomous, opportunity still within the MIT domain but over at Lincoln Labs. This facility was a burgeoning government-funded think tank operation housing, among many others, the US Geodetical Survey Department. It was close by, located eight miles away on Hartwell Avenue in Lexington. They were making breakthrough after breakthrough regarding ultra-high-sensitivity imaging from satellites. This department’s charter of identifying, tracking, recording, and analyzing geophysical and man-made interests, and most everything else that moved or not, from space interested Franny. The progress was futuristic. Watching anything that existed on the planet, to a resolution of a square millimeter from twenty-two miles up, sometimes through cloud cover, also dove tailed nicely into Franny’s continuing PhD efforts.

The feds had somehow gotten wind of Franny’s

change of commitment. By the day after Franny's and Jack's conversation when Franny told Jack he was stepping back, Franny's office hardware had simply vanished. Weird again. It seemed his PhD ambitions did remain safe, at least for the time being.

Jack now took a last look around his office. Having gathered everything he needed, lastly, simply by instinct, he grabbed the jump drive containing the Harvard debugging algorithm, snagging it out of the MIT mainframe gateway. Then he turned to leave.

He had subconsciously decided to run the Harvard algorithm directly off the flash drive it came on, therefore it was never download into the CIA servers or MIT mainframe. He held in his hand the only copy of the debugging algorithm outside of the hallowed halls of Harvard—an impenetrable technology fortress. This debugging program was the virtual key to unlock Jack's entire satellite experiment. He alone knew it had to be used to solve the Kepler logjam. The entire software program he and Franny had created over the last two years was worthless without it.

He headed for his office door.

Then a remarkable thing happened right before Jack's eyes.

All the data that was currently displayed on the two monitors froze, and the displays instantaneously turned solid blue. He watched helplessly as the hundreds of normally blinking LED lights on the front panels of the CIA-installed equipment turned dark. Then the government equipment physically powered down.

The main power indicator lights turned themselves off.

Chapter 3

Jack couldn't believe what he was seeing.

Apparently, the entire CIA link to his office had been terminated.

How could this happen? he thought momentarily.

Then the light bulb in his mind came on. He was no dummy when it came to stuff like this. Far from it. The feds had pulled the plug. Something was going on beyond his pay grade. He did not like things in his domain being controlled by an outside entity, especially to the point of him feeling belittled and insulted. He was certainly unsure about what had just happened—that is, relating specifically to the shutdown—but he knew he would find out about this contemptuous event one way or another. All in good time. But he was now totally exasperated from the discovery and really pissed off. Not fully understanding the total scope of this situation, he smelled trouble and knew in the back of his mind the success of his experiment and the equipment being shut down were somehow related.

Stuffing the debug jump drive into his shoulder bag, he turned and opened his door and half-blindly bolted through on the way to the printing room.

He slammed face-first into one of his closest friends on the planet, Hanna Thorsen.

She of the ready smile. The sympathetic ear. The bodacious physique. She grew up in a North Shore community near Jack, though her family was not as wealthy as Jack's. She was a strong, simple girl. They'd met at MIT six years ago. Outgoing, respected, and confident, she loved life.

She was also in love with Jack Drago.

Hanna had spent the two years following her graduation, as a PhD in Geology, working as head of security for the east campus at MIT. Jack and Hanna had been involved in more than one intimate affair over the last three or four years of their stay on campus and were therefore very close friends. Friends with benefits, as the saying went. That was Jack and this braniac hottie to a T. Hanna, as beautiful and sought after as she was with her long blonde hair, green eyes, and perfect weight of one fifteen, her five-foot-seven statuesque figure, was in a role-reversal relationship with Jack when it came to romance.

Jack was considered handsome, certainly fun and highly sought after throughout MIT, despite his reputation as an elusive presence. He was particularly sought after by Hanna. She was convinced he was that special guy she could be very happy with forever. Jack figured that he may have been one of the reasons Hanna had elected to stick around MIT for a bit after her graduation.

She'd been carrying a ringed notebook that went flying when he bumped into her. He scrambled to retrieve it and handed it back to her.

"Jeez, I am so sorry, Hanna," he muttered, fighting down the embarrassment that he could feel coursing through him. "Are you okay? I didn't hurt you, did I? What in the world are you doing here in my doorway?"

She sighed as she gathered her binder from Jack and scrutinized him with her intelligent eyes.

“What am *I* doing here? What in the world are *you* doing here? Oh, Jack, what have you gotten yourself into this time? In the last few minutes, my two-way radio has been buzzing off my belt.” Her expression grew harried. “The director of campus security, the Cambridge Police Department, and even some guy from the CIA have all contacted me on my handheld. I was instructed to immediately go to your office, physically remove and detain you, and lock your door, by the *CIA!* Additionally,”—she paused as if having trouble believing what she herself was saying—“the guy from the Central Intelligence Agency instructed me to immediately post a campus guard in front of your office door and not allow anyone to enter until further notice!”

This information, coming as it did right after the computer shutdown in his office, was enough to momentarily daze Jack. He glowered at her with mock severity.

“Sweetheart, this is hardly the time to be making jokes at my expense.”

“Who’s joking? Oh, Jack, really, what have you done here?” There was genuine compassion and concern in her voice, and her crystal-green eyes were shining with feelings she tried to conceal. “The entire world seems to be in an uproar, with you right smack dab in the middle of it. What kind of trouble are you in?”

Jack paused a moment. He was not quite sure what to say. He only knew for sure that he could not divulge to her or anyone else anything about the developments of the past ten minutes. He would only confide in Franny.

He said, choosing his words carefully, “Hanna,

you kind of know what I have been doing here over the last two years. I have been working under a fed grant with the Kepler telescope, and that's about it."

Looking him directly in the eyes, knowing him much better than most people did, Hanna said, "Well, there has to be much more to it than that, or all of this would not be happening."

To Jack, the only thing on his mind at this point was making it to the print room and then to Franny's. He needed to find a way out of this conversation, and fast.

Hanna was saying, "Regardless of what you claim, the fact remains that I have every law enforcement agency in the city of Cambridge, along with the CIA, converging on your office as we speak, and I have a job to do! I need to at least take a quick look around inside and lock the door, then stand here like a rent-a-cop and wait until a real badge shows up." Her tone of voice suggested that this was Jack's fault. Then, now sounding small and uncertain, she added, "Also, I'm supposed to detain you."

"Now you *are* joking."

"I'm not joking."

"And what are you supposed to do if I simply turn around and walk away? Are you going to shoot me?"

Her eyes told him she wasn't sure what to make of that. Was he joking? Jack saw the confusion swimming in her intelligent eyes. "I can hardly shoot you. I don't have a gun."

"Are you supposed to wrestle me to the ground until they get here?" He let his eyes coast approvingly over her buxom figure. Trying to deceptively lighten the moment, he wagged his eyebrows in a lame Groucho Marx imitation and

twiddled his fingers with an imaginary cigar. “I can remember us having some mighty good times, wrestling on the ground. There was that time behind the dunes on Cape Cod at that wedding—”

When Hanna realized that he was teasing her, a momentary flash of anger darkened her eyes. Then she let that fade, and she grew serious in voice and demeanor.

“Jack, please don’t make this difficult for me. I’m sure everything will be resolved if you’ll just do the right thing for a change and cooperate.”

Jack sighed. “I wish it was that simple.”

“It is that simple,” she told him, and he could tell that Hanna thought she was swaying him. She added, “I hate to say it, but something like this is very serious.”

Jack considered for a moment. “Well, I hate to say this but, well, you have your job to do, and I have mine.”

He turned and did his best to ignore his inner urge to run like hell. Instead, he casually ambled away from her. “Jack, please don’t do this,” she called after him.

He swung his bag strap over his shoulder as if in no real rush, continuing down the hall toward the print room and the exit. Not looking back, he offered up a silent prayer that Hanna would not start barking backup demands into her two-way. He knew she wouldn’t.

Four doors down the hallway, he nonchalantly turned right into the printing center. His pulse increased noticeably as he looked over at the state-of-the-art printing system. It was the size of a Sub Zero refrigerator.

Four clear plastic sheets were positioned harmlessly in the output tray: two of the initial

capture and the two with the GPS coordinates superimposed.

He snapped up the four slides and flipped the stack over faceup. He quickly studied them to verify that they were exact copies of what he had previously seen on his monitors. They were identical. Again, he could not help but notice the puzzling asterisk in the upper corner of all four, glaring at him.

After rolling the printouts up tightly, he stuffed them in his shoulder bag and started for the door, hustling on his way to Franny's Harvard Square apartment. As he approached the open stairwell, which was two doors farther down the hall from the print room, he froze mid-step, slightly stumbling forward. He heard echoes of multiple heavy footsteps running up the stairs, accompanied by not so friendly, excited male voices. *Holy crap! Hanna wasn't exaggerating. Sounds like a whole bunch of badges are on the way to my office. What in the world is going on?*

[Chapter 4](#)

[Please click here to finish reading chapters 4 through 48.](#)