

Doppelganger

(not reference to Gerry Anderson's movie by the same name)
by Pamela McCaughey (2007)

based on UFO
created by Gerry & Sylvia Anderson and Reg Hill

Chapter One

Al Leslie poked his head between the sliding doors of General Straker's SHADO HQ office, "Think ya better turn on yer TV - channel..."

Straker picked up his remote and switched on the widescreen plasma TV resting on the wall where Orion's portrait had once been.

Bruce Raine, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation reporter, was saying, "...discovered barely dressed and disoriented on Prince Edward Island's eastern shore this morning. Initial reports say the woman bears an uncanny resemblance to Canadian astronaut Tina Kovac, lost in the Enterprise shuttle explosion 7 years ago. The woman is being held at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Charlottetown, pending physical and mental exams. So far, nobody has stepped forward to give her a correct identification..."

The General was on his feet immediately, "Scramble me a SHADAir flight pronto - pack your bags - we're going to Canada."

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"I hacked into the CBC Charlottetown computer system to see if there were any other details on this business that didn't make it to broadcast," Al informed General Straker on the flight to PEI, "There's an RCMP officer stationed outside 'er door at the hospital."

"Why the need for a police presence?"

Leslie shrugged, "May have somethin' to do with the fact a representative from the Canadian Space Agency is en route to see 'er. I hacked their system too. Marc Garneau is comin' to do an ID to clear up any confusion. Accordin' to both CBC and CSA sources I checked, this Kovac lookalike was found at Poverty Beach in Murray Harbour North."

Straker looked at him sharply, "That's the location the aliens lured Kovac and Orion back to..."

"Yeah, and she had a summer home in the area - some of the locals knew who she was."

"I was at that summer house 2 years ago when the aliens killed her husband and son and took her daughter," Straker's expression was grim as he shook his head, "Damn aliens, they wiped out the entire family. In all likelihood, this is a fool's errand. What are the chances the aliens would ever send her back? And that live alien you captured in Nova Scotia last year supposedly had Kovac's pancreas. We're wasting our time."

"If you really thought that, we wouldn't be on this plane," Leslie observed quietly.

"An old man's weakness," Straker replied, sighing.

"You can bet yer ass that the aliens are behind this, even if its not her," Al reminded him, "Look what they did with Orion's clone last year."

The General nodded, "We have to get her out of that hospital and determine who she really is."

"Marc Garneau is due into Charlottetown tomorrow. I've got Ana Padilla waitin' to meet us at the airport. I think between the three of us we can do a quick extraction."

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The small unmarked SHADAIR Lear jet would wait on the tarmac at the Charlottetown airport. Ana Padilla picked up Leslie and General Straker in a rented SUV.

"It's a 20 minute drive to the hospital," Ana told the two men, "I checked things out this morning when I got in. I was able to pass myself off as an off duty nurse. Security is very minimal. One commissionaire at the front door. Other exits are free and don't even have CCTV. The RCMP officer stationed at the hospital room door spends his time drinking coffee and reading magazines. The woman in question appears to be sedated and quiet. As long as we're careful, we should be able to pull this one off easily."

Al spoke up, "Why don't we park at the exit closest to her room - I'll keep the vehicle warmed up - you two can get 'er outta there."

"What about the RCMP officer?"

"No problem. I have an amnesia drug ring. We can tell him we need his help getting her into a wheelchair - that we're going to take her for x-rays - and leave him in the room after I drug him."

"Is her floor busy?"

"No. There's only 3 nurses at the station for the whole floor. The other patients are mostly recovering from surgery - they keep the nurses pretty distracted."

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It was a simple matter to unlock the exit closest to the hospital room in question. Straker and Ana, now clad in hospital scrubs, climbed two flights of stairs. Nobody noticed their surreptitious entrance onto the floor. Around the corner, a bored RCMP officer sat lounging on a chair leaning up against the wall, a cup of java in one hand, a golf magazine in the other. Ana Padilla actually had to clear her throat to get his attention.

"Excuse me officer, we have to take this patient for x-rays, could you come in and give us a hand?"

"Sure," he got up and followed the two into the room.

Lying on the bed was the woman they'd come halfway around the world for. Straker tried not to react as he looked on the face of someone he'd never believed he'd see again, "Officer, if you'd just help me get her into this wheelchair..."

The two men lifted her carefully out of the bed and settled her into the chair. Ana draped a blanket over her, "That's great," she told him and slapped a hand on his neck. As the amnesia drug took effect immediately, Straker assisted Ana in getting the Mountie onto the bed. Straker heard Ana whisper a line from Shakespeare into the cop's ear and then they quickly headed for the same exit they'd entered by. They ditched the wheelchair at the top of the stairs and carried her down to the waiting SUV.

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It had been agreed to keep the woman well sedated for the trip back to England. Straker sat beside her all the way, wondering how it could be possible that anyone could look so much like her and not be her.

Al Leslie was more prosaic, "She could be a clone. Remember Orion last year. But, even if she is a clone, it makes zero sense to send 'er back here. The aliens must know by now the

Orion clone is not only dead, but didn't manage to assassinate you."

Straker ran a finger lightly down the woman's left cheek. Her hair was much longer than he remembered it, and it was obvious she'd lost a lot of weight.

"General..." Leslie said, aware Straker wasn't even listening, "Yer too close to this...ya gotta hand 'er off - maybe to the folks at the Salisbury facility - have Dr. Davidson take over."

"You're probably right," Straker sighed and sat back in his seat, "I'll radio ahead and make arrangements to have her transferred as soon as we land."

"Like seein' a ghost, isn't it?" Leslie spoke to Straker's pain.

"None of this makes any sense from the aliens' point of view. If she's in fact a clone, why waste valuable resources on making an extra Kovac? And, if by some minor miracle she is the real deal, it still begs the question - why?"

"Well, the first thing needed is to find out what she is. Everythin' hinges on that."

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"She's coming out of the sedation, General, did you want to talk to her?" Dr. Davidson told Straker. He'd been sitting in the outer room waiting for several hours.

Nodding, Straker walked into the secure room in which they'd placed the mystery woman. Kovac's greenish eyes followed him as he sat down in the seat beside her bed.

"Who are you?" the lookalike asked.

"I think that should be my question," Straker smiled disarmingly.

"Where am I?"

"All in good time," Straker replied, watching her intently, "What is the last thing you remember?"

"A hospital. I remember being in a hospital. This place looks different, though. There are no windows here."

"We brought you to a different place, yes. Can you recall anything else?"

She shrugged.

"The staff here will be doing some tests on you, x-rays, CT scans, bloodwork. They want to be sure you're in good shape. Think you can co-operate?"

"Do I have a choice?"

Straker laughed shortly; her response reminded him of the feisty Kovac he remembered, "Not really!" he got up to leave.

"Hey, you never told me your name!"

"Just call me Ed."

Chapter Two

Dr. Davidson opened her laptop on Straker's desk, "I received some vital research materials from Dr. Raychaudhuri while I was working the test results. It's all a bit confusing..."

"Well, DNA should determine whether she's Kovac or not, right?"

"Not exactly, sir," the doctor punched some keys on her computer, "These are DNA comparisons - the sample on the left was taken from the real Kovac in 2000. The sample on the right was taken from our mystery woman three days ago."

"I'm no expert, but it looks to me as though they match," Straker replied.

"They do match. But, Dr. Raychaudhuri's information about the captured alien with a pancreas matching Kovac's DNA profile would tend to contradict our findings."

Straker sat back in his responsibility seat, quietly ruminating, "Is there any chance the alien had a cloned organ? Would its DNA register as though it were Kovac's own?"

"We debated that. We know the aliens are quite adept at cloning organs. But, the pancreas would have had to have been cloned from actual pancreatic tissue samples - and either way - the samples still had to be removed from Kovac somehow," Dr. Davidson punched up more graphics on her laptop, "As you're aware, it can be very difficult to tell the original tissue materials from those which have been cloned. Usually cloned tissues show some kind of weakness over time, meaning they have to be replaced more often," she pointed out on specific image, "For instance, this DNA extract from the pancreas in question. Its DNA signature is Kovac's exactly. The only difference is that we know the alien suffered pancreatic failure because we couldn't replicate the specific drugs he was using to avoid that. We have no idea how long he'd had the pancreas - Kovac's own - or a clone of hers."

"Does this mean Kovac herself was a diabetic?"

"Not in 2000. But, we've run tests on her which indicate she'd headed that way. If not immediately treated, she could end up on insulin. We think that's why she appears to have lost so much weight since we saw her in 2001."

The General shook his head, "I can see why you used the word 'confusing'. Is there any chance this woman herself is a clone like Orion last year?"

"That's an answer only time will tell. Kovac's advancing signs of diabetes could be why the alien's pancreas failed, if it was a cloned organ, or if it was a genuine transplant. I wish I could be more definitive. DNA says this woman is Kovac. Prior situations say it can't be."

Tapping his fingers absently on the desk, Straker said, "Can I see her again?"

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The mystery woman, as Dr. Davidson called her, still occupied a private room at the Salisbury Institute. General Straker drove out, armed with a file of photos and a thermos of Earl Grey tea. He also brought a gift - a good quality sketch pad and some charcoal pencils.

If science couldn't confirm this was the real Kovac or a reasonable alien facsimile, Straker wondered if he could evoke any proof of personality. Maybe alien science could create clones, but an individual's defining personal characteristics were not easily replicated. Personality was a much nurture as nature, as Dr. Davidson had pointed out to him - every person was not just what genetics made them - who they really were was engineered by the events and challenges of their lives lived.

The other question Straker intended to address was the woman's faulty memory. Could he nudge her, with the items he was bringing to her, invoke some sort of response that would give a clue to her real identity?

He had also toyed with the idea of bringing Cleo out for a visit too, but Cleo hated kitty carriers and the car and so he did not chance it after all. A hissing growling Cleo would not invoke nice memories if this really was Kovac, and Kovac had not seen her since Cleo was a small kitten.

Dressed in a simple pale green gown, her hair combed and loose, the mystery woman looked heartwrenchingly like Kovac. Straker felt his breath catch in his throat when he came in the room. She turned her head and smiled, "I wondered if I'd ever see you again," she said.

"I brought you something to pass your time better," he held out the bag with the art supplies to her.

Peeking inside, the woman pulled out the sketch pad and charcoal pencils. She handled them oddly, as though they were foreign objects.

"You used to know what to do with those," the General told her.

"Everything seems...so strange to me...everything and everyone...except you."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I can tell by the way you look at me - you know who I am...Nobody around here will enlighten me." Her voice was tinged with wistfulness.

Straker removed the thermos from his bag and poured out two cups of Earl Grey, "Try this...," he held out one for her to take.

"You're just full of surprises...," she replied and sipped at the tea, "What is this?"

"Twinings Earl Grey tea. You once told me it was the best brand of all."

"So I was right, you do know me somehow!"

Straker shrugged, there was no point in lying at this point, "Yes, I do know you."

Gazing down into her cup of tea, the woman said quietly, "Were we lovers?"

"I wouldn't go that far," Straker's voice was barely audible. He covered his response by taking another deep draught of tea.

"But, you do know me from somewhere, in some way..."

"Before we get into all that, I have some questions for you...Can you tell me where you've been for the last five years?"

Shaking her head, the woman replied, "The last five years? I...don't remember much beyond coming here...I don't know who I am...the people here are treating me well, but they've put me through a battery of medical tests without telling me why. I don't know if they think I'm sick or what...And nobody gives me a direct answer when I ask them if they can tell me my name or where I come from. Now you're telling me I've been away for five years and I cannot remember anything about where I was or who I am?"

"I'd like to show you some photos...," Straker sat down on the couch beside her and opened his file folder. He helped her look through a grouping of pictures that included her own family, some of the people she worked with during her short stint in SHADO, and the astronauts she flew with for NASA. He had even inserted a photo of Cleo for good measure.

The green eyes were cloudy with some emotion, as she closed the photo folder, "I don't know who any of these people are...should I?"

Saving the most important for the last, Straker produced a photo of the infant Orion from his coat pocket, "Do you recognize this baby?"

"No...I don't..."

"This child is your son. He was born in 2001."

Holding the photo up close, she began to shake, "I had another child? Then who are those other people? The Siamese cat? Who am I?" she looked up at him and he could see her lips

quivering, tears forming in the corners of her eyes, and yet, just like the Kovac Straker remembered, she was also struggling not to lose control of herself," I should know them, shouldn't I?"

"It may take some time for things to come back to you...maybe some things never will. We don't know how much damage the aliens did to you..." Straker realized as soon as he said the word 'aliens' he'd made a mistake.

"Aliens! What are you talking about?" she pulled away from him and got up to pace the floor in a fashion eerily like the real Kovac would have done, "Who am I? What is this place? Who are you? How did I get here? Where have I been?"

Getting up, Straker went to her and put a hand on her shoulder, "We've been asking the same questions all this time...we thought you might be able to help us...so then we could in turn help you..."

Throwing off the General's hand, she moved further away, "Did you and your people kidnap me? Do I have a family somewhere who's freaking out because I've disappeared? You said...you said I'd been somewhere for five years - where?"

"We don't really know where you've been - we have theories - but we were hoping your re-appearance might give us some much needed answers."

The woman circled back and sat down on the couch again with a thump, "I can't help you. I can't even help myself..." the tears which had threatened her a few moments earlier finally broke through and coursed down her cheeks. Straker pulled out a hankie and sat down with her. The very touch of her hand taking the fabric from his hand caused an electric spark to run down his spine. Who was she really? And why did she evoke such an emotional response from him? Only the real Kovac could have that effect...

"I'm a fool...a stupid emotional woman..." she dabbed furiously at her eyes with the hankie.

"It's pretty normal, I think, under the circumstances, to feel overwhelmed. You've been traumatized...it's going to take time to recover..."

"But, I feel like I should be in control of myself, of the situation...I can't shake this feeling of knowing I should know all these things...know those people in the photos..."

"I guess you're just going to have to cut yourself some slack until you remember more."

"What if I never do recover my memories? What if I can't tell you where I've been? Or with whom? Or why I was away for five years, as you said?"

"We don't know that's how it's going to be, yet."

"I don't even know how old I am!"

"I think you've been through enough for today. Why don't you get some rest now and I'll see you later and we can talk again."

"Who can rest with all these questions in my head?"

Straker got her up off the couch and guided her over to the bed, "I'll send the nurse in with something to help you relax..." he helped her lie down and pulled the blanket up over her. She looked so bewildered and confused that he leaned over and planted a kiss on her forehead.

"Could you stay with me for awhile?" her voice was small, "This is all so incredible...unbelievable...I have no memories of any of this...and yet I once had a family...children...a job...a life..."

"We all thought it would be easier if I told you," Straker explained softly. "I can't imagine how you must be...feeling..."

The woman who looked like Kovac replied, "I don't remember my own parents...my own kids...it's like I never existed..."

"The aliens are...greedy parasites. They feed off whatever they can take. We don't even know why they chose to return you to Earth."

"I wish I could tell you something about my captivity, or about my son...but I don't know where I've been for the last five years or what's been happening to me..."

"It would make sense for the aliens to erase your memory completely. There's no way they'd want you to be able to give us any details. We know they used your DNA to keep trying to create human-alien hybrids long after they took you away. I don't know how many breeding sites our people destroyed worldwide. There was a breeding facility found on Mars, not far from our own base there. It was destroyed, of course."

"Madness...utter madness...why would they want to do this?"

The General sighed, "It's a long story, but the Reader's Digest version is that the hybrids appear to embody the best of both races, along with unlimited psychic and telekinetic abilities. If the aliens could mass produce them, they'd have gained a dangerous and possibly very successful edge over us."

"But why me?"

"The only solution our theorists have agreed on is that your DNA must be the most compatible they could find. All the fetuses found on Mars matched your DNA profile."

She shook her head, "All those lives...lost before they could even begin..."

"The aliens are desperate - they'll do whatever they deem necessary to survive. Your re-appearance raises as many questions as any of their other actions," Straker took her hand in his, "To be honest, I thought you had to be dead - that I'd never see you again."

Her hand tightened on his, "You've told me so much, it's all been so hard to grasp...I don't remember my family...I must have loved them...", the green eyes scanned Straker's blue ones intently, "But, I think out of all this...you've held something back...something about you and me..."

Swallowing, Straker tried to find words and found himself fresh out. How could he tell her he hadn't even realized he loved her until after she'd disappeared? Or explain he'd kept his distance from her when she was still around because he didn't want to get emotionally involved, to protect himself?

Words were not going to get him out of this now. He tipped her chin up and kissed her. It was a long breathless kiss, the kind neither one of them wanted to break. But, this kiss wasn't going to be enough to satisfy the longings he'd suppressed all these years. He realized then words were unnecessary, as she pulled him up from the seat beside her bed - the kisses became feverish, hungry, desperate...

He no longer cared about his own emotional health. All that mattered at this point was the unspoken passion that gripped them both. He pulled down the bedcovers. Her simple green gown came off over her head. Straker could see her body was a mass of surgical scars and intrusions - injuries inflicted on her by the aliens. He felt compelled to kiss each scar, to linger with his lips on her flesh, as if he could kiss away her trauma - erase the cruelties she couldn't even remember now. She sat up and helped him remove his shirt; his pants fell to the floor. The bed sank a little with their combined weight on the mattress.

It was her turn to worship his body with her mouth. As an older man, Straker had kept himself in fine shape, but there was no denying the silver hair in various places! She seemed not to notice such things. And when she mounted him, her long hair brushing his face, he lay

back, exulting in every sensation - his whole life distilled down to the exquisite nerve endings that screamed for release...

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She was asleep, her bosom gently rising and falling with each breath. Her reddish hair lay fanned out around her head on the pillow. Straker was far from sleep. The ramifications of what had just happened between them was on his mind. Part of him knew it had been crazy, perhaps wrong, but part of him had wanted this so fervently, he'd actually been shocked at the depth of his own desire. He'd cruelly stamped down his own humanity, all these years, so he could more fully devote himself to his work for SHADO. It seemed to him he'd been making compromises and sad sacrifices all his life. And in these moments of making love, he'd recovered a forgotten piece of himself. Kovac had originally awakened that part when he had first met her - and he'd mentally and emotionally pushed her away because it was too painful to re-animate his heart.

But, what would happen now? Was she really Kovac? Could he be sure of that yet? She was like a broken bird struggling to regain the sky. What could possibly come from all this?

The General pulled her sleeping form into his arms and settled down to try and rest quietly even as his mind raced in dozens of different directions. What would Alec, now dead from cancer, have said of all this? Would he have cautioned Straker that he was making a colossal mistake, or would he have accepted his actions as the most human he'd evidenced in decades?

The warmth of her body aroused him again and he kissed her awake. She smiled up at him, her green eyes alive with his own reflected passion. His physical desire swept aside his mental misgivings - having her was all that mattered at this moment. He gave himself over to her softness, the scent of her, the tenderness of her kisses...

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Dr. Davidson was angry. She'd seen enough of the CCTV recordings to know General Straker had involved himself very dangerously with the mystery Kovac-lookalike. It had been one thing to show her photos to try to jog her memory. Having sex with her had definitely not been on the menu! Dr. Davidson felt Straker's actions had compromised the entire investigation. The other thing on the doctor's mind was the fact she had to tread carefully - General Straker was her CO and short of going to the people at the Astrophysical Commission - there was no higher authority to complain to. Had Alec Freeman still been living, she might have asked his advice. Dr. Davidson picked up her secure phone and placed a call to the Omega Corporation in New York City...

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Paul Foster was acquainted with the real Tina Kovac. He'd worked with her on that final ill fated mission to Prince Edward Island. Dr. Davidson's call had shocked him enough that he hopped a SHADAir flight to Britain. Alec's death had left a vacuum - there was no longer anyone who could talk to General Straker on his own level, but Paul was going to try.

He arrived at the Salisbury Institute and had a long conference with Dr. Davidson. She showed him footage obtained from the mystery woman's room, but nothing with General Straker.

"She really does look like Kovac," Paul observed.

"DNA says she's the real thing, too. But, I have other information that questions her identity, and the biggest question is: why would the aliens send her back? They're not known for exhibiting any compassion. Whoever this woman is, she's here to fit some alien agenda."

"I'm inclined to take your point of view, Bonnie. The aliens have made the hybrid breeding program a very high priority in recent years. Kovac was central to that work. Why would they give her up now?"

"Exactly. And the other major consideration here is whether we're dealing with an ipso facto Kovac or a clone."

Paul blinked, "You think they were able to clone her?"

"It's not out of the realm of possibility when you consider the aliens have been cloning body parts, and then last year, an adult version of Orion."

"Cloned or real, why send Kovac back at all? The aliens had to have meant for us to get her. There'd be no other intelligent purpose. So if she'd here as part of some alien scheme, what is it?"

Dr. Davidson looked relieved to have Paul on her side of the matter, "These are the theoretical problems we've been dealing with since her arrival. There's also been major personal complication. I didn't want to discuss it even on a secure phone line. It's General Straker..."

"Straker?"

"Yes, Paul," she paused, "This isn't easy to explain...we've been constantly recording this mystery woman in her suite. We wanted to observe her at all times. The General asked if he could take in some photos and talk to her. See if he could get her to remember anything about her life before the aliens took her. You see...I never bothered to tell him about the CCTV...I didn't think it could become an issue...last night I was reviewing the tapes after he went back to town...", Dr. Davidson clicked the remote control on her office television. The large plasma screen lit up with several seconds of obvious lovemaking in progress before she switched it off again, "That's why I called you."

Foster was stunned into silence. Never had it crossed his mind that SHADO's commanding officer would take such a personal or professional risk. Finally, Paul said, "Where is the General now?"

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His morning workout would have to wait. Cleo and her family wanted breakfast. Winding around his ankles, the four kittens were looking forward to their cat chow and Fancy Feast. They were basically adults now, but they still acted like playful youngsters - gambolling, wrestling each other and using their telekinetic abilities to throw their toys into the air so they could play their own version of 'catch'.

Straker never tired of watching their antics. Mama Cleo, generally serene and maternal, continued to cuddle with them and give them all kinds of loving attention, even though she seemed to realize the fact that her brood was somewhat unusual.

Once the cats were busy munching, Straker poured himself a bracing cup of java. He'd discovered the potency of Tim Horton's coffee on his visits to Canada and had several cases of it shipped over for his personal consumption. Powerful stuff, he mused, especially since he generally drank coffee black.

He hadn't slept much since he'd come home. Like MacBeth in Shakespeare's "Scottish play", his actions had "murdered sleep." His mind was still with Kovac, and he was convinced this woman was the real one he'd fallen in love with years ago.

Intellectually, Straker knew he'd committed a major error. There were way too many questions about the woman - her sudden and unexpected appearance, whether she was part of yet another alien conspiracy - the list went on. Becoming intimate with this woman may well

have scuppered the whole investigation into the matter. He also considered that if one of his officers had behaved similarly, he'd have broken him to a buck private and sent him to Mars for a year to cool off.

Even as he castigated himself for his foolhardiness, Straker couldn't put the memory of that night they shared out of his mind. Part of him screamed for her; to see her, hold her, make love to her again. She was like a drug. She'd had a deathgrip on his heart for too long. Had it just been lust? Had he been alone too long and had that made him vulnerable?

As a putative film studio executive, he could have played fast and loose with a lot of pretty girls if sex had been his only interest. He knew Alec and Paul had used their Harlington-Straker status more than once to secure the favours of some attractive young wannabes. For Straker, sex was only part of the package. A woman had to appeal to him on many different levels and not even his ex-wife, Mary, had fit that profile. Once his sexual interest in her had flagged, the divorce was a relief.

Thirty odd years later, he'd not expected to meet anyone who so remotely could fit his image of THE woman. Kovac's initial anger and frustration reminded him of how own so long ago, and her insistence on taking the mission to Prince Edward Island, her desire to prove herself equal to the task and her new life, again echoed his own experience within SHADO.

What began as a form of narcissism had extended to real respect and admiration as Kovac learned of her alien pregnancy and tried to live through it. Whatever fears she'd carried in her heart were dealt with on a personal and private level. There were no complaints, no tears. She even managed some characteristic sarcasm over Straker's presence at Orion's birthing, such was her emotional control.

It was postpartum that the problems started. Straker kept his distance from Kovac, fearing she would see through his facade of disinterested interest. He'd assigned Dr. Jackson to her case. In hindsight, a mistake, but at the time Straker believed Jackson's talents made him the right officer to handle the matter.

Kovac and Jackson had struck the wrong kind of sparks off each other from the beginning. His natural paranoia didn't mesh well with Kovac's growing unease about the safety of her child. Unbeknownst to them all, her extreme protectiveness, viewed with a jaundiced eye by Jackson, was actually being fed by the alien baby's psychic messages. Nobody foresaw she would try to escape with Orion, and while they floundered about, trying to relocate her, she'd ingeniously managed to get herself back to PEI in time to be taken by the aliens. It was a mistake SHADO couldn't have afforded to make. And, even regarding all the lost research opportunities, Straker suffered Kovac's loss personally. Had he spent more time with her, rather than avoiding her for his own protection, he might have seen what was coming. He'd never forgiven himself...

The intercom buzzer went off and he answered it, "General Foster here to see you, sir," said the on duty security man at the front desk.

"Send him up," Straker ordered, wondering why Omega's top brass was in England.

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Straker offered Paul some Tim Horton's coffee, which was gratefully accepted. General Foster was also acquainted with Timmy's powerful brew. After a few perfunctory pleasantries, Straker asked the obvious, "What brings you to the UK, Paul? You normally let me know when you're coming over."

Paul put down his empty cup and gently pushed Cleo off his lap, so he could lean forward in his chair, "Ed, I don't know whether to discuss this with you as your friend or as your fellow

officer. But, it's serious and I'm at a loss to understand why you, of all people, would jeopardize such a vital investigation."

The General's expression turned sardonic, "Have you been talking to a certain doctor at the Salisbury Institute? I simply went over there to show the mystery woman some photographs."

"The photos are not at issue. It's the film footage of you and Kovac being...intimate."

There was a stunned silence, "I didn't realize..."

"I'm going to strike right at the heart of this matter, Ed," Paul told him, "You have to absent yourself from this investigation. As your friend, I'm going to remind you that your actions are personally damning. As a fellow officer, I have to tell you that you could face a court martial for this if the wrong people got wind of it. Hell, both Bonnie and I could face charges for not reporting this incident to the Astrophysical Commission! We're out on a very shaky limb for you on this, Ed. I honestly don't understand you. The Ed Straker I know would never let his personal feelings interfere with the performance of his duties, much less compromise an investigation of this magnitude. My God, man, the Orion clone tried to kill you last year!"

Straker held up a hand as if to stop Paul's barrage of words, "Don't you think I know what I've done? The chances I've taken? The mistake I've made? I knew there'd be hell to pay...", the blue eyes were moist, "I just couldn't...walk away from her..."

Paul decided to change tack, "Look, I know you've carried the torch for Kovac for a long time. I saw your pain every time those alien breeding nests were proven to be utilizing her DNA. Maybe Alec could have handled this situation better, but Alec's gone and I'm the only one left who can talk to you man to man. Dr. Davidson knows that - she appealed to me for that reason. We're both trying to protect you, and protect the investigation as well. As much as you want this woman to be the real Kovac, there's evidence too that says she could be a clone - or some sort of alien plant. You know the aliens didn't just send her back to earth out of the goodness of their hearts. She's here for a reason. She could be here as a distraction - or an assassin. God knows what. And, until we know for certain what she is and why she's here, you could be in danger from her," Paul sighed and continued, "The investigation is now restricted. I'm taking it over personally. As of now, the Salisbury Institute is off limits to you and everyone else. If all this sounds high-handed, well, something needs to be done. I'm sorry, Ed, but this is for your own good now. And the safety of the investigation."

Chapter Three

General Foster opened the door. The Kovac lookalike raised her head, eyes alight - until she realized Paul was her visitor.

"Expecting someone else, were you?" Foster asked her.

"I thought it might be..."

"Ed Straker, right?"

"Yes...who are you?"

Paul watched her intently as she closed the sketchbook she'd been working on and indicated a chair Foster could sit down in.

"Doing some artwork?"

The woman made a dismissive gesture, "I seem to have had some aptitude for this kind of thing but I'm...rusty..."

"I see...I suppose five years in alien custody would tend to erode a lot of human abilities - maybe even destroy normal human instincts as well."

"I've already told your people I have no memories of where I've been."

"I'm aware of that."

"You don't believe me?"

"Let's just say we take nothing at face value concerning you."

"Ed believed me," her voice sounded peevish.

"He's just one person."

"Who are you anyway?"

"You don't remember me at all?"

"Should I?"

"Perhaps, perhaps not."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, for one thing, you won't be seeing Ed Straker again."

She came right up out of her chair, "Why not?"

"Just how important to you is he?"

"That's...personal..."

"Nothing is personal where you're concerned. We know what happened between you in this room two days ago. Be assured we won't allow it to happen again. For whatever reason you're here, whoever you really are, we intend to get to the bottom of it."

"Your people have put me through a battery of tests already - I don't know why or what they're looking for!"

"And the tests will continue until we either figure you out ourselves, or you finally tell us what we want to know," Paul informed her tersely.

"I don't know anything!"

"I suppose the aliens erased five years of your memory."

"Your guess is as good as mine!"

"How do you explain all the markings on your own body - surgical incursions everywhere - somebody somewhere was having a field day abusing you."

"Yes, my body is covered in marks - for all I know your people did it to me!"

"They're all old marks - nothing fresh. Somebody did a number on you - who did it?"

"I can't tell you!"

"Can't or won't?" Paul accused.

"I don't know !"

"You're not leaving me much choice. If you won't talk, we're going to have to make you."

"Don't you understand - I can't tell you anything because the memories are not here!" she slapped her own forehead for emphasis.

"Convenient excuse. You've been working this ploy for almost two weeks now. We've been patient with you. But you've stretched our goodwill too far. We want answers - now."

"Well, unless you can get inside my head and get those answers for yourself - I can't help you! Don't you think I'd like to know who I really am? And where I've been? Five years have been taken out of my life by somebody!"

"Then, we finally agree on something," Paul got up and opened the door. Dr. Davidson and two orderlies came in. The orderlies got her up off her chair. The sketchbook slipped to the floor.

"What now?" the Kovac lookalike demanded, shaking the orderlies' hands off her arms.

"You're going to co-operate," Paul replied, ominously, "Take her to room 24. I'll be with you shortly."

Dr. Davidson and the orderlies ushered the woman out of the room. Paul bent down to retrieve the sketchbook. He flipped open the cover. She'd been working on a graphite pencil portrait of Ed Straker...

* * *

Foster had done his share of interrogations over his lengthy career with both SHADO and Omega. In the quest to get a leg up on the aliens, he'd been prepared to utilize any means, some of them dangerous. Omega had recently developed some more powerful drugs to get at information prisoners refused to speak voluntarily. It was time to put those drugs to work on this woman who had convinced General Straker she was the real Kovac.

There was something of a risk associated with the new drugs. Paul knew that unlocking the human brain was a dicey business. But, he'd weighed the situation carefully in his mind and came to the conclusion that only the drugs might get them some insight into this woman and her purpose. Dr. Davidson cautioned Foster, reminding him that the drugs could reduce a human brain to just so much grey mush if used imprudently.

The question of whether this woman really was Kovac, or perhaps an alien-manufactured clone, was almost secondary to divining the reason for her appearance and what her mission might be. If she was a clone, there was every chance she could be an assassin, as the cloned Orion had been, or she might have some other purpose, useful to the aliens. If she was the real Kovac, it made zero sense for the aliens to give her back. That wasn't the modus operandi they worked. The aliens were total scavengers - they lived off anything and anyone they could get their evil hands on. To suddenly hand back the one woman who had provided so much to their breeding program was totally inconceivable. They would never waste such a valuable resource. Long after her personal fertility was done, the aliens were still able to use her DNA, mixed with their own, to create more clones. She was more valuable to them alive and in their hands than given back to the humans.

She was lying on a reclining chair. An IV had been inserted in her left arm, so Dr. Davidson could maintain a rigid control over the administration of the special drug.

General Foster watched as Dr. Davidson started the IV drip and then injected a minute amount of the interrogation drug into the line.

"How soon will it take effect?" Paul asked quietly.

"She's already been sedated. The drug should filter through very shortly," Dr. Davidson

consulted her watch, "Perhaps three minutes."

"I thought the drug was instantaneous."

"Because of the drug's strength, it's better to have it work a little slower. If I give her too much, it'll hit her so hard we could cause brain damage. I don't think you want that."

"This whole case needs to be solved, Bonnie, we have to know why the aliens sent her here and who she really is."

Dr. Davidson replied, "Even if she's a clone, the aliens may have programmed her to believe she's the real Kovac."

"It just doesn't make sense - why send either one - clone or the real Kovac - back to earth? They knew we'd find her - they wanted us to find her. But to what end?"

"I honestly don't know if she can tell you," Dr. Davidson looked at her watch again, "You can start your questions now, if you'd like."

Using a modulated speaking voice, Paul commenced the interrogation, "What is your name?"

The lookalike opened her mouth but hesitated. Her green eyes were glazed over even though she appeared to be staring straight ahead.

"What is your name?" Paul repeated.

"Tina...Tina Kovac...", her voice was barely a whisper.

"Where were you born?"

"Prince Edward Island, Canada..." Paul looked up at Dr. Davidson and raised an eyebrow. He had opted to start the session asking questions he already knew the answers to.

"Where did you obtain your post-graduate degree?"

"University of Toronto, Ontario...in gerontology..."

"When did you join the Canadian Space Agency?"

"1994."

"And, when did you join NASA?"

"1997."

"What happened to the Enterprise?"

There was silence for a moment, "...Enterprise?"

"The NASA space shuttle flight you were on in 2000."

Tears formed in the green eyes, "...destroyed..."

"Destroyed how?" Paul pressed her.

"...enemy fire..."

"And, who is the enemy?"

More tears, and a breathlessness, a difficulty in drawing in air, a gasping...

Bonnie held up a hand to Paul, "She's about to hyperventilate - I have to stop this interrogation for a few minutes," she pulled over a special air tank and mask and put it on the lookalike's face. Slowly, the woman started to breathe normally again.

Paul chafed at the delay but he knew Bonnie was just exercising medical caution. He watched as the lookalike gulped air and broke into a light sweat.

"Why is this happening to her?" Paul asked.

"It's not the drug...I'm wondering if she's responding to some sort of psychic suggestion..."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we know from our work here with victims of alien abduction that they're often given a mental block against discussing their capture or the events of their alien custody. The mental block is so powerful it evokes a physical response, most often in the form of breathing

difficulties."

"So how do we get beyond that?"

"It's a longer process. We may have to use hypnosis to try to countermand the alien thought suggestion. I have to be honest with you, sometimes we're not successful..."

Paul's fist pounded the air in frustration, "Damn it!"

"I'll shut down this drug session now and let her recover - get the drug out of her system. It takes about seven hours for that. Once she's clean, we'll try hypnosis to clear out the alien mental block."

"Call me on my cell when you're ready."

* * *

"I don't think that's a good idea," Paul said. He was on his secure Omega-issue cell phone talking to General Straker.

"She trusts me. She might be more accommodating if I'm there," Straker replied.

"It's not a matter of accommodation, Ed, it's the alien mental block we need to get past."

"I can get there in an hour or so. By then Bonnie will be ready to start the hypnosis."

"What about you? We have to be ruthless in this matter. Are you going to be able to sit through whatever we have to do to her - and not interfere?"

"I'm as professional as you are."

"It's not your professionalism I'm worried about, my friend."

"Look, I screwed up. I admit that. But, I still want to find out as much as you do what this whole thing is about."

"You can't protect her. We have to consider her as the enemy - at least until we know different. And I don't hold out any hope that her appearance here is anything but some sort of alien ploy."

Straker sighed, "I'll see you in an hour, Paul."

* * *

SHADO's master hypnotist had once been the wily Dr. Doug Jackson. He seemed able to tease out information others in his business could not. Dr. Bonnie Davidson's long stint at the Salisbury Institute had included hypnotherapy in several different veins - everything from gleaning vital data from victims to reprogramming alien abductees to forget the trauma they'd suffered during those cruel incursions. She was well acquainted with all the drugs developed and utilized by SHADO and Omega and knew their effectiveness levels and the risks involved in applying them.

Hypnotherapy sessions didn't require an IV or drugs, just a willing subject. Since the first drug application, the Kovac lookalike had been quiet, sleeping off the residual effects. Now they were ready to try the next stage of interrogation using a gentler, safer means. The Doctor knew the drugs were a powerful tool in the search for information, but this particular subject was special and required specialized handling.

For this session, Dr. Davidson had opted to use a more informal approach. They took the lookalike to Room #1, which contained several comfy couches and a two way mirror for others to observe through. Like the first session with the drug, this one would also be recorded.

When General Straker arrived, both Paul and Bonnie told him he was restricted to watching the proceedings, out of sight, through the two-way mirror.

"If she's in any distress, you'll cut it short, right?" Straker asked.

Paul spoke up before Bonnie could, "No, Ed. We have to press her beyond the aliens' mental tampering. You can watch, but you can't come into the room. That's that."

Chastened, Straker nodded and went to stand at the two-way mirror. He watched as the lookalike was brought into the room, accompanied by Foster and Dr. Davidson. She seemed strangely quiescent, and Straker realized how powerful the new drug must be to affect someone so drastically.

And, once again, looking at her, Straker felt the emotional pull she exerted on him. He wished he could at least sit with her, hold her hand, lend her some of his own strength for the ordeal to come.

Dr. Davidson got her comfortable on the couch and instructed her to lean back and close her eyes and to begin relaxing all her body parts, starting with her head. As Bonnie verbally 'travelled' down the woman's body, Straker could see her shaking, the effort needed to resist the aliens' mind block was considerable.

Once Dr. Davidson was certain the lookalike was well under, she nodded to Paul to begin his questioning, "What's your name?"

"Tina Kovac."

"In what country were you born?"

"Canada."

"What happened to the Enterprise?"

"Destroyed."

"By whom?"

The woman seemed to be thinking before giving an answer, tears forming in her eyes. Dr. Davidson held up a hand to Paul and said, "It's alright, Tina. You're safe here with us. You can answer our questions with no fear."

"I...can't...they'll kill...my family..."

Foster's eyes locked with Bonnie's. Obviously the aliens had pulled out the cruelest threat of all - Kovac's family had been murdered by the aliens several years earlier. Her husband and son had been killed outright, her daughter had been abducted - Straker had given the order himself for that UFO to be shot down with no survivors.

There was a knocking from outside the two way mirror and then the door opened, "Just let me talk to her for a moment...I might be able to help..." Straker pleaded with Paul and Bonnie.

Paul threw up his hands and gestured for him to come in. Straker made his way to the woman on the couch and sat down beside her. He took her hands in his own and spoke very softly, "Tina...it's Ed...I'm here for you...you're safe here with us..."

"They'll kill my family!" she moaned, tears flowing.

It seemed that the only way to shake the alien block was to be just as cruelly direct as they had been, "Tina, I have to tell you something important..." Straker's voice was barely audible, "Your family...it's already too late...the aliens killed them 2 years ago...they're gone, Tina...nobody can hurt them anymore...you don't have to be held prisoner by the threats the aliens made to you..."

The terrible wail emitted by the woman in Straker's arms sent shivers down the spines of all present. The woman started to rock back and forth, screaming shrilly, her eyes open and staring. Straker was immediately reminded of the dying alien he'd tried to interrogate back in the 1980's - the screams then had also been horrendous as the alien, exposed too long to earth's atmosphere, began to age. In just moments, he had passed from looking like a young man to the appearance of a wizened up cadaver. It had all happened so fast!

Dr. Davidson pushed Straker off and injected a sedative into the woman's shoulder. She

keeled over into Straker's arms, limp and unresponsive. Bonnie checked her eyes, her pulse, and pushed her comm badge, "This is Dr. Davidson, get me a crash cart in here asap!"

Epilogue

Paul Foster knocked gently on the door. He barely recognized the weakened voice that told him to come in. The room was in almost total darkness, save for a tiny night light plugged into the wall socket.

"I just wanted you to know that Dr. Raychaudhuri will be coming in tomorrow to do the autopsy," Paul said quietly.

The silver head nodded slowly, but Straker didn't speak.

Foster opted to sit down across from his commanding officer, "Ed, there was nothing any of us could do...the aliens programmed her to...self-destruct..."

"You were right, Paul. I should never have gotten involved. I...did this to her..."

"No, you didn't...whoever she was...the aliens did this to her..."

"I didn't have to tell her the truth..."

"You thought the truth would save her."

"...and the truth shall set you free...that's a crock...the truth killed her..."

"The aliens had this planned from the outset, you must be aware of that. They must have gotten information out of the real Kovac somehow that intimated your shared emotional bond. When their assassination attempt was foiled last year, they must have set all this business in motion to find another way to get to you."

"Whatever the autopsy shows, I'll always believe that woman was the real Kovac...she had to be..."

Foster didn't know what to say to that - it seemed anything else he could have said would be a waste of breath at this point. Not for the first time had he wished Alec Freeman was there to stand by Ed. Alec had a bond with Straker that lasted many decades, he always seemed to know just what to say. Maybe it was that 'Freeman charm' all the girls used to refer to. Or perhaps Alec was just a good judge of people. However it worked, Paul knew he wasn't up to the challenge of trying to console a man who was, at least at this moment, inconsolable. He stood up and patted Straker on the shoulder, "Ed, if there's anything you need..."

Straker waved him off, "No, Paul, thank you, but no. I just need...to be alone for a few hours. Call me if anything desperate happens. But, for now, can you sit in the 'responsibility seat' for me a little longer?"

"Consider it done." Paul showed himself out.

THE END