

Author of *Shadow of the Thunderbird* and *Wake of the Lake Monster*

DALLAS TANNER



**TRACK OF THE
BIGFOOT**

BOOK 2 OF THE CRYPTIDS TRILOGY

PERIL AT THE RELAY STATION

Between the special cranks and fitted tools in the abandoned leather valise and the otherworldly picks in his own satchel, Nick was able to get the power going to the antenna. He switched on the transmitter, through a massive conduit running from a core in the ground. It connected through a sea foam green piece of equipment that looked as if it belonged in the antiquated laboratory of a mad scientist and housed the rotor of the aerial rod. The copper piping ran to the ceiling and the forty-foot antenna perched outside on the roof. If not for the height of the surrounding trees, he might have noticed it long before he arrived.

The whole contraption sputtered to life with a satisfying lurch of humming electric current and reluctant servomotors. He modulated the megahertz of the carrier frequency to match that of the Foundation equipment to avoid disrupting local television signals, something the Federal Communications Commission would field as complaints, and investigate immediately. The range of one of these repeaters was no more than twenty to thirty miles, only as far as the next strategically positioned transmitters were located. With any luck, the other stations were nonfunctional as well, or obsolete, with everyone around them receiving digital signals through satellite microwave, or fiber optic cable. Either way, he was pleased with his efforts and stepped back to admire his handiwork.

He bumped into something.

No. Not something...some one.

His back hit the midsection of a large, furry object that wasn't there a moment ago. Nick felt down behind him, to rest his hand against lower thigh muscles. Heavy muscles rippled beneath a matted, hairy leg, as thick and immovable as a tree trunk. He turned with his flashlight and ran the concentrated beam into the face of the creature, which bellowed and threw up its arms to shield its light sensitive eyes. Nick leapt away, but it was too late. The giant recovered quickly and snagged him with a massive paw, lifting him from the ground, as the penlight dropped to the concrete floor. It rolled away through the darkness, where it illuminated objects and threw shadows in its path, until it bumped to a stop and created a waning pool of light. Bogard did not scream.

There was no time.

Written by
DALLAS TANNER

NOVELS

THE CRYPTIDS TRILOGY
Shadow of the Thunderbird
Track of the Bigfoot
Wake of the Lake Monster

NOVELLAS

The Chupacabra
(Published in Elementum Bestia)

TRACK OF THE BIGFOOT

BOOK 2 OF THE CRYPTIDS TRILOGY

DALLAS TANNER

www.dallastanner.com



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Track of the Bigfoot
Book 2 of The Cryptids Trilogy

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Published by Trilogus Books

ISBN-10: 1-434-84427-7

ISBN-13: 978-1-434-84427-9

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Trilogus Books Trade Publication / February 2008

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DEDICATION

To Loren Coleman
Friend and Mentor
For Leading the Way

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Every novel begins its life as a diamond in the rough. Someone has to spot its potential amid so many unfinished others, then see that it is cut and polished until its facets are revealed. If you find any imperfection, or remnant of its former state in the novel you hold in your hands, the fault remains with the author. I'd like to express my thanks and appreciation to those who chipped away at anything that didn't shine. First and foremost, my tireless editor Billye McCarty, whose guiding hand told my story better than I ever could. Ideal reader Fred Scheeren, who has waited longest for the trilogy to be completed. David Caldwell, best friend, proofreader and resource on all things military, from minie balls to atom bombs. Rick Spears, museum exhibit designer and artist of all creatures real and imagined. Bob Finley, who slogged through a week in the Altamaha River with me, and saved a pair of subs in the process. Cryptozoologist Loren Coleman, for his books, his early morning advice, and infinite patience. Leslie Williams and her son Connor, who reminded me why I got into cryptozoology, in the first place. James Rollins, who continued to give me encouragement and advice, long after his own literary success. The faculty and students of Greenville Technical College, who adopted my first novel and invited me time and again to talk about it. Kristi and Larry Draper, scuba diving enthusiasts who just might make a fossil diver out of me yet. My cat Samwise, who sleeps atop my monitor until he decides I've written enough for one night. Last and certainly not least, fellow author and brother-in-ink Lee Murphy, for teaching me how to catch as much light with this little gem as I possibly can. I am indebted to you all, and proud to call you my friends.

CHAPTER 1

President and CEO of the Chimaera Foundation LLC, Cyril Pritchard, slept fitfully in his chambers, twenty-seven floors beneath the streets of lower midtown Manhattan. For the past three nights at precisely 11:15 p.m., he slipped into an idyllic setting that was the source of his most profound nightmare thirty years before. It was especially surreal in the fact that the event was a part of his past and his life.

He was, in dreams, a young man again, alone on a hiking path in the foothills of Northern Oregon. By this time, already a millionaire several times over, he sought refuge in the solitude of nature. There were no cellular telephones, no pagers in those days. He breathed in deeply the fresh air and gentle breezes of freedom and independence. Back in Seattle, where his corporation was already at the forefront of developing technologies for super computers, he left his MIS Director, Loretta Michaelson in charge. Edwin Burroughs was there to watch over her, as head of security. They were so young and idealistic, so long ago.

He was that young man again, in his dreams. His hair was thick, dark, and slicked back against the stirring of the wind. Even now, the amber and sepia of the early autumn landscape was growing overcast, storm clouds gathering as they threatened to blot out the sun.

He knew what was about to happen. History was about to repeat itself, and he was powerless not to relive the trauma of it all over again. He looked down at his hands. They were smooth and unblemished, the hands of an artist or a musician, but as large as those of a man who worked in clay or stone. In the reality of his present-day life, the left palm bore a jagged, lightning bolt mark that trailed up to the missing half of his ring finger. He was wearing the ring he almost lost that day, a signet gold band adorned with a large ruby. The stone itself was etched with an encircled hexagram, the Star of David. At each corner, ancient Hebrew symbols, whose meanings he could no longer decipher, shone up at him. It was given to him long ago, a symbol of trust and ultimate authority.

He no longer recalled why, or by whom. Somehow, Cyril Pritchard betrayed the secrets it represented, and went into hiding. It was a dangerous bauble; of that much, he was certain. It was a seal of great significance, and power; and not merely to him alone. He would nearly lose the ring that day, in the attack to follow. A search of the area, following his rescue, turned up nothing to corroborate the nature of his assailant. A local paper carried the story, the article and accompanying photograph now framed in his office. Out of deference to his status, the wire services only mentioned his fall and injuries. The media was so different, in those days. The only exception was the tabloid he successfully sued, later bought and dismantled.

The scene was being replayed in his mind, for the third time in as many nights. The sensation that he was being watched, that he was not alone, began to grow in

him. He could do nothing, but go where he was constrained. It was as if the path, behind and to either side of him, was sealed against his escape. It was futile not to go where his leaden steps were taking him. He was a slave to the memory and whatever omniscient consciousness directed him. He moved against his will and fought it with the last of a fleeting hope to avoid facing the truth about that day all over again.

The clouds moved more quickly than he remembered, as if hastened to set the stage between acts. It was mid-afternoon, but the landscape was a muted color tinged with silver, as if the sun was shrouded from view. It was as if an eclipse reduced the sun to a band about the lunar shadow. "Get it over with," Cyril muttered to himself. Then aloud, he cried to his stalking attacker, "What are you waiting for!" His voiced lifted in echo and rang off the hills, ranging as far as the sea and back again.

In answer, there was a stirring in the trees off to his left. At first, all he saw was the entwining branches that veiled the recesses of the sloping forest. It might have been the furtive movements of a woodland creature in response to his outcry, except that he knew they were alone, he and *it*. No birds flew overhead, or sang in the boughs. The insects were stilled by whatever passed among them, if there were any at all. This was a dead land, a landscape where fatigue and terror collided to form the backdrop of nightmares. Only one thing remained unrevealed, and it moved quietly along with him through the shadows.

Pritchard knew it was there, and that it was only a matter of moments before the creature felt it. It stopped moving slightly ahead of him, a still form silhouetted against the pillars of dust and light. It swayed where it stood, massive with leathery hands that draped nearly to its knees. With no discernible neck, the broad shoulders came to the jaw line that ended in a muzzle of bared, grass-stained teeth. Its eyes, set wide above the apelike nose with flaring nostrils, were also dark and glistened with a feral intelligence. It knew him. It was their third encounter in as many nights, and yet it still insisted on a pretense of camouflage.

Suddenly, the Bigfoot of legend sprang to life and tore at the stumps and rocks that separated it from its quarry. Cyril's feet were frozen in their place along the path, unable to respond to the rush of adrenaline that filled his veins and coursed to every nerve. He could not move, as he took in the unreality of the giant beast that confronted him, crying out in a guttural staccato that was every bit a dialect of its species. It was trying to frighten him, to chase him away.

Cyril never truly thought it meant him any harm, but as a Frenchman by the name of the Marquis de Deffand once observed, "Do I believe in ghosts? No, but I fear them." The chains of his panic finally unleashed him, when the hominid was ten paces away. He threw his arms out toward it, hands raised to fend it off, as his legs drove him to the far side of the path. Very little obstructed his view, on that side; it was the reason he chose it. Although the descent was gradual, it was littered with the remains of fallen timber and rocks that had slowly been consumed by the earth. The exposed portions of each were overgrown with moss, lichen, mushrooms and the sickly sweet smell of decay.

As if reaching for Pritchard, just as he fell backwards over the side of the path, the creature could only watch as the young man tumbled head over heels down the embankment. Old wounds and the aftermath of their impacts seared his body as he numbly relived the events of that fateful day. Reaching for the broken edge of a trunk that jutted just beyond his grasp, Cyril wedged the ring finger of his left hand

in its torn fragments, cutting his hand as it caught on his ring. The momentum of all his uncontrolled weight and the resistance of the immovable stump combined to rip the band from his finger. A spiral of red and the pain of sudden loss caused him to grab his hand. Not only did he lose the emblem of his Masonic rank and achievement.

He lost all but the final digit of the finger on which it rode.

He screamed and clasped his ruined hand in the other, trying to stave the flowing blood and shield himself against the continuing fall with his shoulders. Sun, moon, and stars spilled over heaven and earth until he, at last, cut his forehead against the ragged edge of a great flat stone.

In the only deviation from the events as he remembered them, the great creature leapt down the slope in a series of deceptively agile leaps and bounds. It landed with a muffled thump that slapped its great feet into the clay of the muddied ravine at the base of the trail. Pritchard looked up into the face of the Bigfoot, unable to bear the rotten egg smell of the creature and the unbearable stench of its hot breath.

The apelike hominid leaned closer and tilted its gigantic head, the mouth working to formulate sounds less foreign to the wounded young man. Instead of the roar that marked the end of the true experience, it opened its mouth and, with labored effort, gave forth a single statement for the third time in as many consecutive nightmares.

“B-br, bring me ... McQuade.”

Where he lapsed into unconsciousness, thirty years before without the odd request, Cyril Pritchard awoke and bolted upright in his bed, bathed in sweat with the sheets twisted about him. Clutching his chest, he uttered the name at the very moment he resolved to end his nightmares.

“Ian.”

Recent Ph.D. recipient, Dr. Ian McQuade, paced back and forth, along the length of his hotel telephone cord. He shifted nervously from one foot to the other, twisting his fingers in the coils of the line. Despite all they’d been through together in recent months, he was still afraid to ask fellow Foundation agent, Alma Del Nephites, for a favor.

An anthropologist by degree, he was a cryptozoologist by profession, one of a rare breed that searched for unknown animals out of place and time. He and the beautiful cartographer met first in the jungles of South America, where he was lost and hungry while in the company of thieves. She rescued him out of the area of the Rio Negro, the largest tributary of the deforested Western Amazon Basin, and convinced him to meet with Cyril Pritchard, the enigmatic CEO of the Chimaera Foundation. Together, they only recently unraveled the mystery of the origins and fate of Native American thunderbird legends.

Now, he was back in Boston, while she was there in New York, expectantly awaiting his request. It was worse for Ian than asking a girl out on a first date. There was much more than his ego at stake.

Much more.

“What is it, McQuade? Just spit it out.” He liked that about her. She was direct and forthright, only pulling in her words when she was cautious of their impact on him. As they got to know one another better, the South American map collector took

less care about hurting his feelings. Ian gathered his conviction, hoping that leading up to the favor would be worth it to her.

"Alma, do you remember *why* it was I was lost in the Amazon Basin when you found me?" There was silence on the other end for a long moment, first in thought, then in growing apprehension.

"Yes?" she replied, drawing out the response, turning it into both an answer and a question. In its duration, she was also building up to a challenge, something Ian hoped to avoid, at all costs. He knew how she loved Titian, her eighteen-inch blood red spider. She treated the thing like a pet cat, or even a *child*. The thought made Ian shudder, as much by her casual hugs and caresses of the arachnid horror, as his own morbid fascination with it.

In the ensuing silence, Alma took control of the conversation, a tinge of impatience and consternation in her thick, Peruvian accent. "You came looking for Titian, and you found her. What has this got to do with my baby?" Ian only agreed to come to New York with Del Nephites, in the first place, because she already had what he sought. He wanted, or needed, no further proof for the existence of *El Diablo Rojo, The Red Devil*.

"Well," he began, a slight stutter building in his pallet as he contemplated the tirade his request would detonate. Although he overcame most of his childhood speech impediment, it had a habit of showing itself at the most critical and unwanted times. "I-it's just that I am up here in Boston for a meeting with the board of trustees of the Clayton Echols Museum of Natural History."

McQuade hoped to ease into the subject, giving his partner a moment to come to her own conclusion as to the reason for his call.

"The museum that *boxed* you, for getting lost your first time in the jungle? Those imbeciles!"

"*Canned*," Ian corrected, kicking himself for not letting her sudden show of support stand on its own. Alma dismissed the comment, concentrating on the matter at hand. She also knew that her English was much better than his Spanish. To think he hired three porters and a guide who claimed to speak only Portuguese, believing there was no difference in the two languages.

Americans.

Alma shook off the momentary distraction. "What do you want with Titian, Ian?"

Ian swallowed. Hard. He was certain Alma could hear it all the way down in the labyrinthine corridors of the Foundation living quarters. If she did, she paid no attention. "I need you to come up here and be with me in the morning. They found out, somehow, that I was in town and asked to see me. I'm not really sure what they have in mind, but it would mean a lot to me, if I could borrow Titian for the meeting. I just want to show them that I wasn't completely crazy in going to South America; let alone a failure."

Ian took in a deep breath, glad to have gotten out the worst of it. He cringed as he waited for her answer. He was certain, as protective as she was of her 'baby', that he was about to finally become the target of her quick temper.

"Okay," she sighed, giving in without a fight. Ian felt like a boxer who shut his eyes against a final blow, only to open them when his opponent tapped his gloves

and went to his corner. It was almost impossible to believe that she gave in so easily, with so much at stake for both of them.

"Great!" he exclaimed, relief flooding out in a cathartic stream.

"But where am I going to find a flight to Boston on such short notice?" Alma was intent on leaving the details to the anthropologist. Ian, in an unaccustomed knee jerk reaction, thought to tell her to borrow the VTOL Harpy. Alma borrowed it, when she took him home to see his family, in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. Edwin Burroughs, head of security at Chimaera, was monumentally displeased. He was disturbed, not only at the misallocation of the experimental prototype. It was captured on film, as it traversed above the Washington D.C. beltway, at rush hour. Tighter security measures had since been implemented. Any unscheduled use of Foundation vehicles, airborne or otherwise, required additional executive approval and a phalanx of forms.

Ian continued to sift through his options when Alma reluctantly agreed to catch the red eye to Logan Airport. She double-checked an e-ticket transaction at her computer terminal, as she spoke with him. Del Nephites booked the flight, before McQuade could offer any better destination. She smiled. His suggestion was the same that she would have made of him. He was learning. The fact that she was willing to meet him and subject Titian, her eighteen-inch crimson fruit spider, was proof of his growing influence over her, as well.

"I'm all set here. 8:15 tomorrow morning; okay?"

Ian nodded his head vigorously. "8:15 will be fine." Over the course of the next ten minutes, Ian gave her the particulars for the 10:00 a.m. meeting, its location, and attendees. Del Nephites made him agree that she wouldn't have to be present as he unveiled the giant arachnid. She would be angry enough with the board of trustees that fired him in the first place. If they so much as looked as if Titian would make a good exhibit for their dingy little museum, she would get physical. Ian promised to take care of it.

"You have no idea how much this means to me," McQuade said, conveying the thrill of going back to Clayton Echols with his head held high and the object of his search in hand. Now, it was Alma's turn to get nervous. His obsession with the discovery of unclassified animals was his undoing in the past. Ian McQuade was before anything else a cryptozoologist, an honorary title at best. Her Titian was simply a cryptid; one of the creatures he, or one of his colleagues, sought to identify. No academic curriculum in the world recognized the field as a course of study, let alone degree.

"You owe me big for this one, McQuade," she commented half-jokingly. Ian, uncertain around women in the best of times, wasn't sure how to take her meaning. An awkward silence filled the pause of the conversation. Alma broke the verbal impasse by promising to break Ian's skull if any harm came to *El Diablo Rojo* or *The Red Devil*, as the natives along the Rio Negro knew the giant spider. McQuade smiled. She trusted him, after all this time. As a mental note, he didn't completely dismiss the thinly veiled threat.

She meant what she said.

"I'll keep that in mind," he responded, trying not to let the comment dim his enthusiasm. There was so much more he wanted to say to her, to thank her for being part of the greatest adventure of his life. Not even his childhood encounter with a

Bigfoot, while on a camping trip with his parents in the Pacific Northwest, was nearly as exciting. The beautiful Peruvian was there to see that he was not alone, and he had strong feelings for her. As usual, he let the impulse to tell her fade, and simply bid her goodnight.

"I'll have to take Titian out of the Foundation terrain simulators to stay with me tonight, but we'll both see you at the museum in the morning. Goodnight, Ian." She hung up the telephone without another word. Ian held the receiver, reciting the words he longed to tell her over and over in his mind, until the click and dial tone was replaced by the recording of an operator instructing him on making a call. It was the last female voice he heard that night.

Ian, who never seemed to awake more rested than he went to bed, understood his fatigue, but refused to let four hours of sleep interfere with the events of the day. He sprang from the queen size mattress at the Sheraton, ten minutes before the alarm. He was afraid that it wouldn't ring on time, if at all. Still unnerved by the sentence of the digitized woman that seemed to haunt his living quarters at the Foundation, he distrusted any electronic device as somehow plotting against him. Albert Myers, Chimaera's resident conspiracy theorist and paranoid schizophrenic, would be pleased.

McQuade showered, shaved, and blow-dried his coarse, sandy-blond hair. Leaning against the sink with a towel wrapped around his middle, he noticed how the lines beginning at the corners of his hazel eyes were hidden behind the wire-rimmed glasses he'd worn since the age of eleven. He stayed out of the private sector, as long as he could. He left school in his late twenties, after failing to submit an acceptable dissertation for his Ph.D.

His mentor, Dr. John Dreyson, was head chair of the department of anthropology at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. The two were inseparable in Ian's undergraduate days. The older man even became a close friend of the family, after McQuade's parents retired from the military to nearby Earlysville.

It was difficult for Richard and Helen to accept their son's contention that he saw one of the legendary Sasquatch. For Ian, making a scholarly case for the existence of such creatures proved an impossible task, where the school was concerned. He and Dreyson had a falling out over the matter, each feeling that the other somehow betrayed him.

It would be nearly two years before they crossed paths again, as inevitable and consequential as that meeting turned out to be. Ian and Alma located photographic proof of the existence of Thunderbirds in the hidden safe of the Black Forest Gazette in Cross Fork, Pennsylvania. Along with it, they found the journal of a Native American recluse, by the name of Milo Platt. He was a Windtalker who wrote a cryptic journal in the same Navajo language used so effectively during the forties. It proved to be an unbreakable secret code, against the axis powers of Germany and Japan.

Recently declassified, they were able to translate the first of two books, and followed it to Chaco Canyon. There, they met Dreyson at the Sun Dagger, the ancient sun calendar atop Fajada Butte, at the southern end of Chaco. Although their initial discussion was brief, the professor unwittingly told them where to find the

Thunderbird emblem that was the other half of the key to finding and entering the sanctuary of the legendary birds.

Through a combination of fate and circumstance, the expert in Mesa Verde and Colorado Plateau Puebloan cultures ended up helping the Foundation agents in solving the seven-hundred year old mystery of the disappearance of the Anasazi. Confirming his own pet theory, Professor Dreyson reciprocated by supporting Ian's doctoral dissertation, with a few modifications to protect the whereabouts of the Thunderbirds. Ian was certain that it cost the elderly man his position at the university, but the anthropologist shrugged it off as simply 'time to be elsewhere'.

Not one to rest on his laurels, John Dreyson accepted an offer from Cyril Pritchard, CEO and president of the Chimaera Foundation LLC, to return and catalog the remnant Anasazi culture. As far as Ian knew, his old friend and mentor had been there these past four months, since his graduation. McQuade understood without asking, that his own Ph.D. came at the price of Dreyson's retirement and emeritus status at the university. At just under five foot, ten inches in height, *Dr.* Ian McQuade stood a little taller, and carried himself with just a little more confidence than before.

Except where women were concerned.

He was afraid that no amount of study would prepare him for the rejection of the dark-haired South American, who so easily took on any challenge and considered all men a threat. Pritchard's niece, Amelia, on the other hand, was flirtatious, oblivious of the world around her. He was a lot like her, in the latter respect; at least in the beginning. The whole Foundation, from its principals to its security stations, was keeping an overprotective, watchful eye on him. It really didn't matter, he told himself as he checked his chin for stubble, there was no way either girl was going to let down her guard for any man, much less for him.

Ian took the limousine provided by the museum downtown to the unassuming three-story brownstone that housed the Clayton Echols Museum of Natural History. It was named largely for the eccentric who bequeathed half of his considerable wealth and holdings to the dilapidated facility. The alternative, according to the docket in court, was to see it all go to his young trophy wife, forty-one years his junior. His first wife was still a force to be reckoned with on the board of trustees. She hated the museum for the unmitigated gall of wanting his name to live after him, as much as she hated him for divorcing her to marry not once, but twice after their no-holds barred and very public court battle. She was the source of wealth, in her family. He was ahead of his time: a gold-digging male.

Frank Gustman was her nephew, her brother's only son in a second marriage. He was Ian's boss and primary tormentor, as the curator of the ersatz museum. As far as McQuade knew, Gustman lacked any of the abbreviated letters trailing his name that would have normally qualified him for such a position. "Gee," Ian often lamented mockingly, under his breath and out of earshot of Frank, "I wish *my* auntie owned a museum".

He owed Frank about as much gratitude, for the favor he returned professor Dreyson in hiring his protégé, as Cinderella did her wicked stepmother. Although only an acceptable dissertation shy of his Ph.D., Ian was relegated to the most mundane and menial tasks at the museum. These usually involved a mop, a spatula,

and loads of noisy schoolchildren on field trips. Gustman enjoyed every minute of ordering the smart aleck college kid around. Ian hated the treatment, and loathed the nepotistic little cretin. On second thought, the family ties were all that got him his job in the first place. At least he had *that* going for him.

He was forbidden to take part in any activity that would embarrass the museum, as a condition of his employment. Ian's pursuit of the legendary giant red spider, *El Diablo Rojo*, or *The Red Devil*, in the western Amazon Basin of Brazil, resulted in his termination. Somehow, the expedition conducted on his own time and expense became not only public knowledge, but newsworthy.

Marjorie Echols, widow and chairperson of the board of trustees, was furious when she found out from the little beneath-the-fold article in the Boston Globe. Her museum, in her late husband's name, was prominently mentioned as not only condoning, but also sanctioning the hunt by cryptozoologist Ian McQuade. That he was a week overdue back at work was only of secondary consequence, the final nail in the coffin of his otherwise short-lived professional career.

Why they wanted to see him now, after nearly four months of refusing to answer his calls, let alone return them, and sent his final paycheck by private courier, was a complete mystery. His association with the Chimaera Foundation and its secretive, billionaire philanthropist, Cyril Pritchard, should have been a further deterrent to any other contact with the museum. In either event, it was too late to give the matter any more thought. From the back seat of the stretch limo, he lowered the window and gazed at the imposing brass gilded doors leading up the steps to the Clayton Echols Museum of Natural History.

CHAPTER 2

Ian thanked the disinterested driver, who let him out of the back seat of the stretch limousine, without tipping. McQuade stood before the doors he passed through in loathing and trepidation for nearly two years, before his infamous trip to South America. As he ascended the fourteen steps to the upper landing, Ian was greeted at the door by the security guard.

Lamar “Choo-Choo” Smith was a devastating defensive tackle in his day, with the old Baltimore Colts, and Cleveland Browns. Now, his knees often troubled his slightly bowed legs whenever he had to leave his station to make rounds, or handle an emergency. Thankfully, there were few enough of those. Ian handled most of them, which usually involved unruly children. So, the two became friends, often eating lunch together. Choo-Choo removed his hat, exposing a near-shock of gray hair molded by the confines of the undersized cap. He smiled broadly at McQuade, wincing and shifting as he leaned to open the door for the anthropologist.

“Welcome back, son,” he said in the deep, rich bass of his voice. He winked and allowed Ian to enter. As he passed through the threshold for the first time in six months, the smaller man patted the massive shoulder of the security guard in greeting.

“Except for you, I doubt anyone’s going to be glad to see me,” McQuade admitted half-heartedly. Lamar shook his head.

“Nonsense. There’s been bigwigs and brass all over the place, plannin’ and talkin’ about your visit. You know there ain’t much that goes on around here without old Choo-Choo catchin’ wind of it.” Ian nodded and had to admit that the former NFL great was probably right, although he still didn’t understand why his return would create such a stir. After all, Ian left under a cloud, and was all but banned from the premises.

“I almost forgot, Lamar. Did a woman come in yet, a South American carrying a pet travel cage?” Ian tried to demonstrate the dimensions of the hinged aluminum and plastic carrying case with the wired grate. Smith’s sometimes suspect memory needed no prodding.

“Sure did, not five minutes ago. Pretty thing, with legs up to here, and a real attitude.”

Ian smiled. Lamar winked and gave a quick nod, a great-grandfather himself. He meant the last comment for McQuade, trying to gauge his reaction to see what their relationship might be. McQuade always remained non-committal on the subject, unwilling to lie, but hoped others would make a misinformed assumption that the two were an item. The deception went a long way to boost his fragile ego, as well as his confidence around other women.

“Just friends, Choo-Choo. No big deal. Which way did she go?” Ian looked around the main gallery at the twin staircases on either side of the foyer. Between them, beneath the mezzanine that housed the offices and staged exhibits not yet prepared for display, Ian looked off into the glass-paned curator’s conference room. There was no sign of Frank Gustman, anywhere.

Good.

"She wasn't expected like you were, but the girl dropped your name, and I was told by Mrs. Echols to take her upstairs to the board waiting room." He stopped in mid-explanation, hoping for some background on the beautiful Peruvian awaiting Ian, but was disappointed. After a few expectant moments, he gave up and relented. "Here, I'll take you to her." Lamar started to guide Dr. McQuade up the flight of stairs, but didn't make it to the casement before his knee locked up on him.

"You okay?" Ian asked, the empathy registering on his face for his only friend at the museum.

"Damn trick knee. Been this way since college." Ian helped him limp back to his desk beside the front doors, doing his best to help settle the guard into the padded high back chair of his station. He folded his hands around the arthritic patella and massaged it. "Sorry, Ian. You remember the way, don't you?" He whispered the question conspiratorially, as if the older man was specifically instructed to escort the former assistant curator, to prevent any retribution for McQuade's abrupt termination. Ian smiled and nodded.

"Like the back of my hand," he replied. "You've got to get that knee looked at, Choo-Choo."

Lamar Smith nodded painfully in agreement. "Already gone. Nothing but medication I can't afford and bed rest. My last child will be through with college next year and then I'll retire." He forced another smile through the discomfort, prepared a visitor's pass and asked another security guard to usher the anthropologist upstairs.

"By the way," Choo-Choo called after McQuade and his escort, an uncharacteristically large Asian woman, as they reached the bottom steps. "What did the girl have in that cage, anyway?" Ian stopped long enough to look back over his shoulder with a broad smile.

"Proof," he said with a wink to match the best of Smith's.

When the oriental woman, who was new to Ian, led him through the door of the waiting room, Alma immediately ceased fidgeting and rose to greet him. Rather than hug her partner, she extended her hand professionally. Ian, arms raised to embrace her, dropped them and returned the cordial greeting. Her palms were wet and she appeared to be shaking slightly. For all her self-assured bravado, Del Nephites didn't place the same trust in others that she did herself. In fact, she still questioned what she was doing there. The doubt was in every taut muscle of her frame.

"Thank you for showing up," he blurted out, unsure of how much enthusiasm to put into his gratitude. It almost came out sarcastically, or so it seemed to Ian. Alma waved off the blunder and stepped closer to speak to him. Behind her, Ian could see Titian's cage. Mrs. Echols' administrative assistant, a prim little man with very few hairs combed over the vast expanse of his bare scalp, eyed the travel container nervously.

"Look, McQuade. I'm still not sure exactly what you have in mind, but if any harm comes to my baby, I repeat that *I will* personally turn you into a crippled soprano. Got me?" Del Nephites glared at him over the tops of a pair of flip up glacier glasses, pulling them down for effect. Ian was startled at the mixed beauty and anger in her vivid blue eyes.

"Trust me," he replied anxiously, forgetting that those were the very worst words he could have uttered. The threat was just her way of saying that she trusted him. She flicked the bridge of the rounded, tinted shades and pushed them back into place with the raise of a neatly plucked eyebrow, just as the assistant's phone rang. Startled, he rounded the desk with an effeminate, nervous energy and settled into his chair behind it. On the third ring, he had adequately composed himself and lifted the receiver. His eyes rounded, he nodded, and agreed contritely to all the unheard demands, listening as if to overlook one syllable from the caller would result in immediate dismissal.

He thanked the caller and gently lowered the receiver back into its cradle at the end of the call, reaching into his breast pocket for a handkerchief. As he wiped his sweating brow and his ruddy complexion slowly returned to normal, he informed Ian and his companion that they were free to enter the boardroom behind him. Mrs. Echols and the trustees, Frank Gustman probably in tow, were ready for them.

Despite his better judgment, Ian made a decision that went against the grain of the inexperienced cryptozoologist he was in their pursuit of the thunderbirds. "I've got to go it alone, first," he explained, laying a hand on Alma's shoulder as she reached for the handle atop Titian's cage. At first, Alma tensed, and then slowly relaxed with the reassurance of his steady gaze. She had asked during their conversation of the night before that she not go in with him, as much for his confidence, as her show of trust in him. Her resolve was weakened at the thought of what awaited Ian and her pet beyond those doors.

"You sure about this, McQuade?"

In response, Ian nodded with a certainty that his Foundation partner had never seen.

"This is my battle, not yours. Besides, I want to know how and why they reacted as they did to my trip to Brazil. It only became their business when I was overdue back scraping gum off the exhibits. They shouldn't have fired me for what I did on my own time with my own money." Alma thought to mention the discovery of Titian as the reason he had gone to South America, but the impatient assistant rudely interrupted her.

"Mrs. Echols and the board of trustees are *waiting!*" The small man almost hissed the words, as if they were meant to intimidate the pair in his office. He held one hand on the long, tapering knob, composing himself before opening the heavy oaken door. His face was frozen in the sardonic death mask of a smile, his eyes not making contact with the seated occupants beyond.

"Wish me luck," Ian whispered, squeezing Alma's arm. She nodded tersely, every bit as concerned as when he had gone, accidentally, first into the second kiva at Chetro Ketl. At least that pit had not been filled with vipers. Her partner stepped around the secretary, who all but pushed McQuade into the boardroom and pulled the door closed behind him. Relieved, the smaller man closed his eyes and leaned heavily against it to catch his breath.

When he again opened them and stood upright, he found himself nose to nose with one very unhappy Alma Del Nephites, who crossed her arms and glared at him. The sudden discomfort he felt in her presence was nothing, compared to the horrifying distraction of Titian extending a bristled foreleg toward him through the grill of its cage.

Although Ian was employed by the museum for nearly two years, he had never before seen, or been summoned to the chambers of the board of trustees that doubled as the office of socialite Marjorie Echols. Like the rest of the restored building, it was overdone in an almost medieval decor of heavy woods, wrought iron, and studded leather. Another of her late husband's ghastly legacies, the immaculately attired widow preferred to hold fundraisers for the 'atrocities', as she referred to the museum, in posh hotels and convention centers. Why she held onto it, rather than to sell it off, or donate it to the city, was a matter of rumor and speculation in and around the Boston area.

Ian had an idea there might be another reason for her tenaciousness where the museum was concerned. *Spite*. She wanted to show that it wouldn't get the better of her and lapse into bankruptcy and failure. Clayton Echols had willed that any money, coming out of the disposal, or liquidation of the building and its assets, was to go to his trophy wife of just eleven months. It was widely conjectured that this arrangement was a condition of both their prenuptial agreement, and settling his estate.

Marjorie Echols held court and audience in her suite of offices with her Yorkshire terrier, Mr. Brittles. Her desk was a massive turn-of-the-century affair that abutted the conference room table at the far end of the chamber. A collection of withered faces turned expectantly toward Ian, who stood alone near the door. "Come in, Mr. McQuade," Mrs. Echols invited between pets of her ever-present Yorkshire terrier. It had a red ribbon atop its head to pull the black and brown fur out of its beady eyes. It growled at him even as its owner gestured toward the only empty seat in the room, directly opposite from her at the far end of the table.

Ian hesitated, stepping forward only to grasp the high wooden back of the chair. "Do sit down, Ian. I promise we won't bite." As if in reply, Mr. Brittles bore his small, even white teeth and growled, snapping once toward him. "Not all of us, anyway." The board erupted in a tittering of nervous laughter at the quip. Mrs. Echols looked about at the aged trustees, pleased at her jest, but sick of their patronization for her benefit. McQuade could read her displeasure and decided not to add to it. He rounded the high-backed chair and sat down, folding his hands before him on the polished tabletop.

"What's this all about?" he asked pointedly, deciding that the sooner he pressed the issue, the sooner he would be out of there, once and for all. Why had he agreed to come back in the first place? This was not the Foundation, and he had choices unavailable six months earlier. He had the upper hand this time.

"Direct, right to the point," the matriarch noted. "That was certainly not your reputation while you were with us, Mr. McQuade. What's changed about you, I wonder?" Ian shook his head at the attempt to place him back in the role of assistant curator.

"For one thing, I am now *Dr.* McQuade, Mrs. Echols. May I call you Marjorie?" The response to Ian's retort was immediate and harsh. The older woman struggled with the veneer of congeniality as she fought to gain control over her sudden indignity. She swept her color-treated hair away from the corded neck laced with oversized black pearls.

"Touché, Ian." The smile, as much as possible, was nearly genuine now. Marjorie Echols stroked Mr. Brittles, ruffling back the two-toned fur to the terrier's

delight. It hung its little tongue out in a rapid pant. "I just wanted to test your mettle, and it seems that somewhere in the jungles of South America, you developed some intestinal fortitude, became a vertebrate, so to speak." It was her backhanded way of complimenting him on growing a spine. He was not impressed, and conveyed as much with a narrowing of his eyes. Try as he might, McQuade was suspicious of the ulterior motives that dismissed him as suddenly as he was asked to return.

"Never mind what I'm doing here. Why was I fired?" Ian gulped noticeably, the tremor of a stutter threatening to creep into his voice. Strength of conviction was still a new part of his personality, but the twenty-nine-year-old cryptozoologist was not about to lose his advantage.

The chairperson of the board of trustees thought a moment, searching the room for support, if not answers. She finally brought her watery gray eyes back to rest on the youngest person in the room. "You were forbidden under the auspices of this museum to hunt for your strange animals, and yet you went in spite of that restriction. When your antics became an article of little interest in the local papers, we had no choice but to terminate your services." She shrugged her narrow, padded shoulders. "It was as simple as that."

Ian rose and rested splayed fingers on the edge of the table, as he leaned as far as he could over it toward her. "I used *my own* time and *my own* money, and never told *anyone* where I was going, or *why!*" Uneasy with the impudence in the volume and tone of her former employee's voice, Mrs. Echols sat the little dog aside in a padded basket, shifted forward, and rose up on her elbows, hands folded as if in prayer.

"Be that as it may, your escapade was an embarrassment to this institution, and it was necessary to distance ourselves from your wild goose chase." Her measured response was met with nods and murmured assents from the collected body of men and women. They had no mind of their own, and gave in to her will and opinion.

"A wild goose chase? Is that what you think I went to Brazil to conduct, an expedition to find and bring back nothing?" The woman across from him raised her penciled brows, as her cronies leaned back in their chairs, or shared knowing glances. Ian pushed back the chair as he rose, pounded the table once and pointed a derisive finger at the condescending woman seated at the far end of the table.

"Be right back," he said, and left the room without permission. At this point, he scarcely gave a damn. Closing the door behind him, Ian almost collided with a pacing Alma in the foyer. Ms. Echols' administrative assistant began to rise in protest, not having received word from the boardroom that he should excuse the young man. McQuade shoved him back in his chair, without so much as a sideways glance, as he approached his partner and her pet.

"It's time for show and tell. May I borrow Titian?" Alma's full mouth rounded in surprise and attempted to form both a question and a reply, but was silenced for the first time in his presence.

"Sure," she replied and moved out of Ian's way, motioning plaintively toward her precious crimson spider. As if sensing what was coming, the large arachnid scrambled across the molded plastic base of the cage into the dark recesses away from the grill.

McQuade picked up the carrying case and held it as far away from his body as possible while the unbalanced contents wobbled, settling to the rear. "Remember

what I said," Alma called after him, squeezing her hands into fists. Ian nodded tersely, throwing his hand back over his shoulder in a gesture that told her he had not forgotten, but had no time to debate it.

When the apologetic secretary admitted him back into the boardroom, travel cage in hand, Ian approached the table and sat the container on the table before him. Not knowing what was coming, but intuitively repelled by the hidden contents, they leaned away from the table or moved their chairs back altogether. Without a word of warning, McQuade opened the wire front of the cage and stood behind it, crossing his arms.

Ten seconds went by, then twenty. Nothing happened. By this time, not only was Ian reddening with embarrassment, the board of trustees was growing restless. Led by Mrs. Echols, they all but lost their initial fear. She smiled, parting to flash white dentures through bright red lips.

Then, Mr. Brittles, brought to fidget again in her lap, began to growl nervously toward the far end of the table. Something heavy in the recesses of the travel cage suddenly scrambled from side to side in response to the small creature. Tentatively, the boldest, or most curious of the gathered stockholders tried unsuccessfully to peer into the darkened interior. That is, until Titian chose the opportune moment to make an appearance. First, she was nothing more than the symmetrical arrangement of her glistening compound eyes. Then, a bristling foreleg nearly eight inches long unfolded itself from inside the lip of the cage to the top of the table.

Unable to gain purchase on the shining surface, the giant red spider ranged its remaining three front legs around the edge of the cage and pulled itself out. Mr. Brittles growled and bared his tiny teeth, clawed frantically and leapt from Marjorie Echols grasping arms. She folded long painted fingernails over the myriad of small scratches, looking on in horror at the monstrosity that dragged itself slowly towards her. For old men and women, the board of trustees showed remarkable energy and lung capacity as they screamed and leaped back over toppled and vacated chairs. They now gaped around the high backs of the executive seats or huddled together in terror around the corners of the close room.

"Dr. McQuade, where did you get this horrible little creature?"

Before he had the chance to answer, Alma burst through the doors and strode to his side. She had been listening out in the foyer, to every word. "*I found here in Brazil, you horrible old woman!*" Glaring at Ian, who was equally angry with her for stealing his thunder, she rounded the side of the table, picked up Titian and clutched the squeaking spider to nestle it in her shoulder. She spoke to it in comforting tones as she walked to an empty chair and sat down. The museum patrons stared at one another in utter disbelief.

So much for waiting to make a proper entrance, let alone introduction.

Ian sighed heavily, shaking his head at his Foundation partner's untimely and unnoticed entrance. "South America," he added slowly in the direction of the disheveled Mrs. Marjorie Echols. Unable to chase after her terrified dog, she buzzed for her secretary to let Mr. Brittles out. The tiny Yorkshire, pawing at the door, skirted through the sudden gap and between the assistant's ankles. The heavy door was closed as quickly and quietly, as it was opened.

Mrs. Echols denounced the cowardice of her board of trustees and restored order, asking the young Peruvian woman to collect her pet, its cage, and to wait

outside in the foyer. Alma complied, giving Ian a quick wink and a thumb's up as she passed by him on her way out. Ian rolled his eyes, a sick feeling settling in the pit of his stomach. *That could have gone better*, he mused silently as he mentally kicked himself for having Del Nephites come to his rescue, yet again.

He was doing well enough on his own, but she still didn't trust him completely. Not yet, anyway. His confidence and spirits flagging, McQuade suddenly felt every bit the assistant curator again, his reputation in question, and his false bravado all but forgotten. He was suddenly ashamed, and afraid to meet the gaze of the stern woman at the other end of the room.

"You found that hideous *thing* on your trip to South America?" Marjorie Echols motioned toward the departed woman and her pet, now reseated in the small reception area beyond the conference room doors.

"It's a *she*," Ian replied defensively, amazed that he would be so protective of the spider that was the source of all his troubles with the museum. "Her name is Titian and yes, I went looking for her in the Brazilian rainforest. The Amazon Basin, near Manaus along the Rio Negro, to be exact."

"Classified?" Mrs. Echols' question took him back. McQuade had gone in search of an undiscovered creature, something that could unintentionally serve to put the museum on the map. It was hardly an unselfish act to benefit the struggling repository. As far as museums of natural history went in Boston or any other metropolitan area, this was hardly a prestigious institution. It lived and died on public opinion, as well as the open checkbooks and closed fundraisers that were an expression of it.

The media was, as ever, a double-edged sword.

Ian snapped back to reality. "No," he replied warily, "it hasn't been identified as far as I've been able to tell." Suddenly, the sensation that he was trapped in Alma's greatest fear was overwhelming. He had an idea where this line of conversation was heading, and panic began to seize him in a vise grip. His breath was coming in short gasps. Sensing his discomfort and the extent of control that she had regained over him, as well as the rest of the gathered trustees, Ms. Echols asked that Ian be seated. Then, she called for his female companion, requesting that her skittish secretary look after the caged beast. Ian managed a little smile when he heard the scuffle behind him. Alma would not be separated from her beloved spider.

She sat Titian in her cage between them on the table, nodding once with a look of fierce defiance and triumph at Ian. After a calming exchange in which they joined hands briefly beneath the table, the pair of Foundation agents turned their gaze back to Marjorie Echols. They'd been through far worse than this together.

"What is it you want exactly, Mrs. Echols?" Ian struggled to return to the more confident individual that his first mission with Alma in pursuit of the thunderbirds had made him, the subsequent doctorate aside. Marjorie, checking her make-up and smoothing her hair and clothing, unnerved them both in a withering glance.

"We will discuss that creature in a moment. You work for the Chimaera Foundation and a Mr. Cyril Pritchard, do you not?" Ian looked at Alma, and then nodded dumbly. How she knew is a matter of conjecture. It was not the kind of position listed in the business section of the papers.

"Yes, but how did you know?" Ian was genuinely interested in her deflected response and was disappointed again.

"The same way that we discovered what you were doing down in South America, Dr. McQuade. We are not without resources, small as our humble museum may seem in comparison to your current employment." Mrs. Echols was not one to be convincing in any semblance of humility. There was pride and ego to the contrived, regal aura she carried with her. She was a scorned socialite that used her position as a way of getting back at her late husband. She kept the museum afloat simply to deprive his third, much younger wife of profiting from its sale or liquidation.

Ian shot back accusingly, "that still doesn't explain how my private affairs seem to end up as common knowledge and a concern to this museum." He met the widow's gaze steadily. Alma sought to comfort the giant red spider that finally settled again in a dark corner of the travel cage. Marjorie Echols, still nursing the welted scratches from the frightened Yorkshire on her forearms, made a concerted effort to ignore Del Nephites and her pet.

"We were willing to overlook your rash actions in spite of the leak to the press, let bygones be bygones, and offer you your old job back. But now," Mrs. Echols began and chuckled as she looked about the table at the reseated trustees for support. "Your doctorate, hopefully completed in anthropology and not vulgarized into cryptozoology, qualifies you, along with your discovery, for the curator's position."

Frank Gustman, who had not been invited to the proceedings, but listened intently at the only other door to the boardroom, burst into the chambers. He was the museum's curator, long before doing John Dreyson the favor of hiring his fallen star pupil as his assistant. He never let McQuade forget the circumstances surrounding his hiring, and made sure that his menial chores reflected his lower status.

"You can't give this hack my job, Aunt Marjorie. I won't stand for it!" Taking a less defensive stance, the flabby, middle-aged academic washout flung himself at the side of the museum chairperson. "Mrs. Echols, please, I was hired by Uncle Clayton himself. You can't seriously consider this as a good move." He was beginning to plead and shake noticeably, whether with rage or fear for his job. Ian was enjoying the display, whatever the reason. He and Gustman had never gotten along, but McQuade was never in a position before to do anything about it.

Until now.

Undoubtedly, the prospect of the grants and sizable donations made by the philanthropic Chimaera Foundation LLC to the employers of their agents was the initial motivation for his return to the museum. The fact that he had actually succeeded as a cryptozoologist in discovering an unknown species of arachnid was icing on the cake. They could both be vindicated in the press by his appointment as curator now that he had the credentials.

The offer was there on the table. He scarcely heard the details above his own thoughts, Alma's anxious, disbelieving glances, and Gustman's alternating rants and begging. All his life, he was kept back and put down for his belief in cryptids, animals that were out of place or time. These ranged from rumors and folktales of prehistoric beasts, in modern times, to commonplace animals found where they weren't at all expected. It was the blessing and the curse of the cryptozoologist to seek after these undiscovered and largely unsubstantiated creatures. They were seldom acknowledged, and never supported by a curriculum, or a degree in any

college or university, anywhere in the world. This was his chance to be publicly acknowledged as a direct result of his beliefs.

As a child, he had also seen a great, apelike creature while on a camping trip with his parents in the Pacific Northwest. It was part of his bond with Cyril Pritchard and ultimately what convinced him to accept the CEO's offer to join his organization in search of such creatures. Ever since, he had pursued whatever media exposure existed, regarding the bestiary of the strange to an obsession. Not until he met Alma, and she revealed Titian, did he see another cryptid in the flesh.

So much had changed and transpired even since then.

Together, Ian McQuade and Alma Del Nephites had followed a legendary photograph of a thunderbird taken in the late nineteenth century to the Black Forest region of Northern Pennsylvania. From there, a journal found along with the picture of six cowboys standing behind the upended carcass of a giant bird lashed to the pulley of a barn loft led them to Chaco Canyon in New Mexico.

The author, Milo Platt, had found sanctuary as a self-appointed keeper of the giant *Argentavis magnificens* in the underground city of the remnant Anasazi culture. How ironic it was, Ian mused, that the modern technology of the subterranean Chimaera Foundation sought to reveal what an equally hidden society steeped in magic kept hidden. He shook his head at the discovery that motivated John Dreyson to accept his dissertation on the reality of such creatures. Ian's undergraduate mentor and postgraduate advisor retired his department chair in anthropology to go and live among the ancient people. His final act was to present Ian with his Ph.D.

His life had come full circle, and he could accept this position on his own terms. In one fell swoop, he could rid himself of Gustman and be accepted as a contributing cryptozoologist in his own right. He was reluctant before now to claim the title as amateur, let alone professional. It was one earned by association and accomplishment, as so deservedly by documentary film professor Loren Coleman, of the University of Maine, in Bangor. Few had done as much in following the footsteps of deceased Bernard Heuvelmans, the widely acknowledged father and master of modern cryptozoology.

"Well, Dr. McQuade, do we have a deal?" The assembled trustees looked from Marjorie Echols to Ian McQuade, but none so anxiously as Alma Del Nephites. With the possible exception of Frank Gustman, who had gone pale and shaky at the side of the woman who was about to replace him with his former assistant, Alma feared losing the most. Ian could feel the mistrust and sense of betrayal building in the beautiful Peruvian, potentially undoing all he had shared with her since she had found him, lost and hungry, in the jungles near her home.

If he walked away from this offer, there would probably never be another like it. Nothing, at least, that would gain him the respectability sufficient to validate his years of obsessing over the experience of his childhood. The classification of a giant spider was no proof of the existence of Bigfoot, but it was a start. All he had to do was to agree to sell out and it could all belong to him. Even his father would be proud of him, at last. The only one that would be hurt, besides Frank, was Alma. She would get over it in time, but never that he took Titian away from her, or even tried. At some point, at some level, he had promised her that he wouldn't. Whatever their relationship, she saved his soul in that jungle, not just his life.

"I can't," he said simply, as full of disbelief at his response as anyone there. Gustman gritted his teeth into a smile that etched his ruddy complexion with lines of exultation. He shot a fist into the air in front of him, relief bursting out in a cold sweat on his vast forehead. Alma's jaw dropped. She was prepared to accept his alternative decision as another in a long line of misplaced trust. Of them all, only Mrs. Echols seemed to take the answer in stride, showing little surprise. More than anything, Ian reasoned, she probably missed the opportunity to get her hands on some of the Foundation's money in return for his services as an employee of the museum. He was not foolish enough to think that there was any emotional investment.

"Well, I suppose that's it, then," the older woman said. Mrs. Echols ended the meeting abruptly. "Thank you for your time, Dr. McQuade." The chairperson arose, followed in short order by the trustees who had so reluctantly seated themselves back around the table, and only then at her insistence. She rounded the table to shake hands with her visitors. She thought better, by the South American's possessive grip on the cage handle, of asking if Alma would be willing to part with the creature, as a consolation to her bruised ego.

The secretary opened the door, escorted the two Foundation agents out of the office and ushered them by security to the doors of the museum. Ian stopped long enough to say goodbye to his old friend, Lamar, at the security desk. Frank Gustman couldn't wipe the smile off his face as he stood behind Marjorie Echols at the office door. He sighed heavily, and shook his head as the young man and woman descended the stairs and departed through the leaded glass, bronze-gilded doors.

"By the way," the old woman said as she retrieved her dog from the cushions of the sofa in the foyer within. "I know that it was you who told the press about Mr. McQuade's extra-curricular activities. By trying to ruin him, you cast us as a local laughing stock." Frank went pale again and stumbled over his denial of any wrongdoing. Marjorie Echols turned her thick, spider-like lashes on her nephew. "You see, Frank Junior, you were bound to lose your position at the museum either way. I would have preferred to have Mr. McQuade and the corporate backing of Cyril Pritchard, but finding a replacement for you will afford me some much needed silence around here."

"Am I still in the will, Auntie Marjorie?" Gustman was whimpering, and his knees shook.

The malicious joy left her face. "Unfortunately," Ms. Echols admitted. "Your Uncle Clayton made sure, by the terms of his will, that you follow me as head of this museum. Another reason to stay alive and financially solvent as long as I can." Frank nearly danced in the grip of Lamar Smith and the Asian female guard as they were called to see that the former curator cleared out his office, left his keys, and vacated the premises.

As he was thrown by security through the propped doors nearly clear of the steps to land in a heap of his belongings and stolen office supplies on the sidewalk, Frank Gustman smiled up in spite of his short-term prospects. "You'll be seeing me again very soon, Aunt Marjorie. You can count on it."

CHAPTER 3

The pair of Foundation agents shared a cab back to the airport. The limousine was unavailable to them after Ian refused the offer of a lifetime. He chewed at the side of his thumb and stared sullenly out the window, not wishing to face Alma after nearly giving in to his fragile ego. Unexpectedly, her arm draped on the other side of the travel cage between them, the Peruvian reached over and squeezed Ian's arm affectionately. He looked at his partner with a puzzled expression. "What was that for? I nearly sold you out and took Titian to clear my name."

"Yes," Alma admitted, "but it never would have happened." Without waiting for a reply, she explained. "First, you are too selfless to hurt a fly to get ahead. Secondly, I am selfish enough for both of us. I never would have let you throw away your only chance in there to be true to yourself, and continue to chase your monsters for Chimaera."

Ian nodded in agreement. "Anything else?"

She thought a moment before finishing her mental list. "Yes. I would have killed you on the spot." Suddenly, Ian didn't feel so badly about not getting his due from the people who had mistreated him. His mood lifted considerably, his countenance lifting with a hint of satisfaction playing at the corners of his open features. "Never one for a poker face, were you, McQuade?" He chuckled and shrugged. "Guess not," he reluctantly agreed.

"Then cheer up. Besides, that wicked woman saw you coming from a long way off. She already knew you would probably refuse to go back to work for them. I'll bet dollars to cupcakes that she just wanted to flush out whoever turned you in and spilled the story to the papers." Ian knew she was probably right, and smiled thinking of how close she was getting to a command of outdated American slang. Then his mind kicked in, putting together the pieces of a skewed jigsaw puzzle. Who in that room wanted him out of the way, as much the second time as the first?

"Frank?"

"Frank." Alma nodded once briskly in recognition of Ian's chagrin. Frank. He might have known. He should have known. "Why, I'll bet she boxed *him* just as soon as we hit the pavement."

Ian shook his head vigorously in disagreement. "But Alma, she's his aunt. Marjorie Echols would only give up that museum to her weasel nephew over her dead body!"

"Exactly!" She said with a dazzling smile, her dark eyes flashing with a passionate glee. Ian, for his part, was satisfied that they would probably hear no more out of Frank Gustman, until they read about the passing of socialite heiress Marjorie Echols.

By this time, they were nearing Logan Airport at the outskirts of Boston, judging from the concentration and low altitude of various regional and jumbo jets. They had ridden the rest of the way in silence, not wishing to indulge the Pakistani

cab driver that tried to make idle conversation with them. He had seven wonderful children, and a wife who was crabby most of the time. That was more than either passenger wanted to know about his mundane life.

As the foreign national unloaded their bags out of the trunk and received a five-dollar tip for his trouble curbside, Alma took Titian's cage as the spider slid about within. Traveling light, they refused skycap checking for their luggage and passed through rigorous security at the terminal gate. Alma produced the papers to allow her to carry the cage and its strange contents. The x-ray scanner gave out a small cry when she saw through the empty exoskeleton of the giant spider in the belt viewer. Never having been confronted with such a situation before, she conferred with her confused fellow security agents. It took a call upstairs to allow the man and woman to pass through to their gates, in spite of the authorized clearance papers.

Ian checked the Continental flight back to La Guardia against his itinerary, while Alma turned toward the entrance to international travel. Realization struck him, at last, and he suddenly felt abandoned all over again. "You're not coming back to the Foundation with me, are you?" It was almost an accusation, as if Alma had somehow betrayed him, just when he had thought she would forgive him for what he almost did to her and Titian that morning.

"I should have told you, Ian. I'm sorry. I meant to so many times in the last five months since I found you out wandering with those thieves in Brazil. You looked so ... vulnerable. I just didn't want to leave until I knew you would be all right on your own."

The explanation was too rehearsed and contrived for Ian to believe a word of it in his building anger. "Still think of me as a bumbling kid, is that it, Alma? I did pretty well for us up in the Black Forest at deciphering Platt's journal, not to mention literally falling into the second kiva to find the thunderbird medallion at Chetro Keti in Chaco Canyon. What more do I have to do to prove to you that I can stand on my own two feet?"

Ian stood inches away from her with his arms crossed and his legs braced in defiance, a look that he punctuated with an icy stare. Alma smiled in undaunted satisfaction. "Not a thing, Ian." She laughed softly and shook her head, as she looked him up and down. Ian felt suddenly self-conscious. "As much as I hope you think I've done for you, not to mention your reputation at home, you made me realize what I've been missing. You, of all people, should understand and wish me the best, even if you are the last to know." She reached out for his hand, thought better of it, and suddenly embraced him in what McQuade took, unfortunately, for a sisterly hug. She reached up and placed the cool of her palm on his flushed cheek. So many different emotions were struggling within him that he couldn't decide how to express himself.

Not waiting for a response, Del Nephites winked, took up the cage, her weathered backpack and turned on her heel toward the international terminal. Ian finally found his voice amid the ruminations of a childhood stutter. "That's it then? After all we've been through together, you're just going back to Brazil without saying goodbye?"

"No!" She called back over her shoulder. Damn. Against her better judgment, Alma caught him in an unintended glance and saw that he was inconsolable, possibly heartbroken. She stopped and turned in place, taking a single furtive step toward him. "Not Brazil. I'm going *home*, Ian. Back to Peru, back to my family. It's time to

stop running. I have to face my past, just like you're doing now. You haven't seen the last of me, McQuade, I promise. I'm like a bad penguin."

"Penny," Ian offered with a relieved chuckle.

"I know," Alma admitted. "You just never get the last word in, otherwise." It amazed him as to how much her defensive, intense demeanor had slowly melted over their time together. She was so alive in the wild, sure of herself and in control of any situation, except when it came to relationships. She had left the overbearing son of a rich landowner at the altar in her village in Peru at the foot of the Andes over a decade before. No one since had gotten close enough to know that much about her, until Ian.

They shared a dysfunction of the opposite sex that made them uniquely, platonically compatible. There was something more that she wanted to tell him, something comforting, and closer to the truth. Stubborn with her emotions, she was gratefully rescued by the first announcement of her flight. "Got to go, McQuade. We can talk about this when I get back." She shook back the full, dark curls from her shoulders and gave him a dazzling smile. Ian sighed heavily, unsure of his feelings for the beautiful South American. Infatuation aside, she had become his closest friend.

Alma spent most of her time and affections on the giant spider that had bitten the cartographer on their initial encounter. Some first impression. Although it had brought them together, the monstrous arachnid always seemed to come between the unlikely Foundation partners.

This time, she backed away, refusing to say goodbye with anything, but her eyes. There was already a tinge of longing and sadness in their vibrant blue. Whether it was for him, or the prospect of returning home to a family she had abandoned in a muddled wedding dress, he couldn't tell. He hoped that at least some of her reluctance was in leaving him.

"Take care of yourself, McQuade. Get lost again and I just might not be there to save you." It was meant playfully, and she laughed heartily. She shook the loose curls at the memory now burned into the shared past of their first meeting. Ian smiled and hurriedly brushed away an angry tear. He watched her walk away until she blended into the crowd of travelers, turned a corner, and was gone.

Despite his childhood of too many new schools and not enough old friends, he felt suddenly and completely alone. The faces around him were unaware and uncaring, except where he blocked their access to the walkway. Rousing himself out of a growing lethargy, he stepped onto the moving path and stood to the right, allowing the strangers to pass.

The story of his life.

He hardly noticed when he arrived at his own gate. A sympathetic ticket agent, a rarity in the business of loading and unloading anxious passengers, asked him if he was all right. "Fine," he responded, taking on an attitude he was finally beginning to feel. He showed his ID, responded absently to the obligatory questions about his luggage and received his boarding pass. Forty minutes later, Ian was seated back in Coach. Marjorie Echols had thought of everything. He had flown up in First Class, a guest of the museum. Correct in assuming a decision to return the same day was a refusal of her offer of employment, the socialite had arranged less than luxurious accommodations.

It really didn't matter. To Ian, the cramped quarters, the sweaty, overweight salesman beside him, and the child kicking his seat matched his sullen mood perfectly. Neither dared to speak, and both soon left him to his own dark thoughts. He opened a handbook on cryptozoology, the science of hidden animals, but took no pleasure in it. His mind strayed to Alma, to the Black Forest, and Chaco. It wandered the halls of the Chimaera Foundation, empty and yet full of watchful eyes. He thought about the disembodied voice of the artificially intelligent computer that taunted him there. Why was he going back?

"Because there's nowhere else to go," McQuade muttered more loudly than he intended. The salesman, thinking it an opportunity to engage in conversation, was rudely corrected. More of Alma had rubbed off on Ian than could possibly have been reciprocated. Yet, she had shown a softer side in her departure than he expected. Ian smiled and apologized. The salesman accepted and handed Ian his card.

He sold romantic cruises for seniors.

With a lopsided grin, Ian started to laugh at the irony of his situation. "I'll look you up, in thirty or forty years." After that, the short flight went smoothly, aside from the fact that the precocious five-year old behind him started in on the seat again.

They touched down in La Guardia after less than an hour in the air. If not for the number of people who made the commute between the two large cities, they might have been relegated to a regional jet. It took fifteen minutes from the time the jet ramp was moved into position and the door opened before he was able to disembark. There was no one waiting for him in the gate area. He would have been glad even to see Edwin Burroughs, the shave-headed security chief, who had all but broken McQuade's hand in testing his mettle the first time he met him at the airport.

Alma was with him, then. They were fresh from their awkward introduction in her garden near the Rio Negro, outside of the Brazilian resort city of Manaus. Ian was duped into eating bitter roots and drinking questionable rainwater, while his guide and porters sneaked into town for McDonald's fast food.

He was getting hungry. The honey roasted nuts and half can of soda the stewardess served during the flight, did little to abate his appetite. McQuade only had carry on, but made his way to baggage claim in the hopes that someone from the Foundation may have been dispatched with a placard to retrieve him. Again, he was disappointed. He had told no one why he was going to Boston, and had returned much sooner than anticipated.

He thought to call for a car, but didn't want to wait, let alone explain his untimely arrival. Despite the overwhelming midweek crowds in the terminal, he felt lonelier and more wretchedly miserable by the moment. He missed Alma. He was somehow incomplete without her, like a husband that had bickered with his wife through a half-century of marriage, before finding himself alone at the end of his life.

It was late autumn, early November to be exact, ushered on the winds that blasted cold and wet through the automatic doors that led to the curb and a waiting taxi. The prospects were less than promising. Not only were there people arguing with one another over who had called, or climbed into a cab first, but those that they were afraid to approach because of the unsavory appearance of the driver. Ian was discouraged at the selection and turned to board a Hertz shuttle, figuring that a rental car would be cleaner and quieter.

The double doors retracted with an intake of compressed air, allowing Ian to step up on the wide berth of the bus. He tossed his bag onto the luggage rack and slumped into a seat. He was surrounded by business people prattling on cellular telephones in the clichéd babble of corporate deals. The museum was bad enough. After his time in the jungles of South America, and the canyon districts of the American Southwest, Ian would never be content in an office.

The winding corridors of the Chimaera Foundation could hardly be considered a typical place of business. Ian still understood little of what the principals of the LLC did with the discoveries their agents made in the fringe sciences of the paranormal. A Ph.D. in anthropology, Dr. McQuade was also educated to a Master's degree in paleontology and zoology. The degrees complemented one another in his ultimate pursuit of cryptozoology, for which there was no curriculum anywhere.

If for no other reason, the pursuit of the origins of the Native American thunderbird legends had all but driven the trauma of his childhood encounter with Bigfoot out of his mind. Now, it seemed that it would return through the forests of his disorientation and loneliness.

There was little he could do to avoid it.

Ian was caught up in the unpleasantness of his thoughts when the doors closed, and the yellow and black bus bearing the Hertz logo began to pull away from the curb. A digital voice announced, too late, to sit down, or hang on during the departure. A bearded man hardly missed a beat in his conversation on his cellular as he all but fell in the lap of a young mother. Her husband, a huge man, took the fellow's digital telephone and crushed it with one hand. In a domino effect, the other business travelers abruptly ended their conversations and put their telephones away. It would be a quiet ride.

Suddenly, the bus applied its brakes as a young woman stepped out in front of it and yelled for the driver to stop. As the other passengers looked on through the low windows, she ran down the sidewalk toward the back doors, beating on them to open. Thinking she needed a place to sit, Ian arose as the doors opened.

A platinum blonde with short flaxen hair and green eyes, out of breath but smiling broadly, rested one foot on the bottom step. It was Amelia Pritchard, niece of Cyril Pritchard, President and CEO of the Foundation. "I've come to pick you up, Ian. Uncle needs you."

Ian had never been so happy to see a familiar face since the night his parents had pulled his tousled head out of his Batman sleeping bag when he was nine. Then, he had seen Sasquatch silhouetted by the dying embers of a campfire against the canvas of his pup tent. Amelia, slender and petite in contrast to the dark and imposing beauty of Alma, smiled up at him. Ian was dumbfounded. He was so surprised, so shocked to see her, that he stood unmoving until she repeated her urgent request.

"What? Oh, right!" He reached back and took his bag from the raised luggage rack. Excusing himself as he wound through the other passengers and apologizing to the driver, he followed Amelia off the shuttle. The doors closed immediately after him and the bus pulled away. Several of the occupants watched him until they turned at the first light toward the rental area. The big man who crushed the telephone gave Ian a thumb's up on the way out. His wife slapped his arm and he fell into a submissive posture, turning away from the window.

She turned and caught him in a hug that he gratefully returned. “Amelia? What the hell are you doing here?” He honestly had no idea how she knew where to find him, let alone when. She brushed off the surprise. “Uncle Cyril asked Mrs. Michaelson to summon you. She thought you might be in Boston, but knew that Alma took Titian and planned an unexpected trip to your old employer at the museum. Loretta assumed, strangely enough, that it was to meet you. She had me call, and a gloating jerk named Gustman told me you just left. Burroughs saw that I was having a tough time getting any information out of him and convinced him to tell us how to get in touch with you.”

Ian was skeptical. “Convinced?”

“Okay, threatened. Ian, you know how persistent we Pritchards can be when we want something badly enough.” She stepped out of his embrace and laid a delicate hand on his upper arm. “We weren’t spying, or following up on you. Uncle Cyril needs to speak with you right away.”

“Me?” McQuade suddenly began to feel as much anticipation, as apprehension. “Why?”

“I don’t really know,” Pritchard’s niece replied honestly. “All I can say for sure is that I found out this morning he was placed in the infirmary for observation, some time late last night.” Amelia’s voice trembled and her eyes glistened with tears. “He’s been asking for you, Ian. That’s enough, isn’t it?”

It was. No more questions or answers passed between them, as he followed her to short-term parking, and they got in on either side of a late model SUV. He thought to ask her why she was not chaperoned by adoptive guardians Loretta Michaelson, or Edwin Burroughs. McQuade was just grateful for the distraction of the emergency that gave him a few minutes alone with the young woman. Besides, they were probably both at Pritchard’s bedside. The three were in their early sixties, or so he believed, and virtually inseparable for over three decades. Coming together to raise Amelia after the death of her mother, Cyril’s beloved sister, Eleanor, had solidified their professional and personal lives.

The Foundation was Amelia’s home, and she knew its passages and short cuts as well as anyone, except possibly Albert Myers, the resident conspiracy theorist. The 1960’s relic of the Cold War always wanted to know the quickest way in or out of the recesses of the underground facility. It literally extended over thirty floors beneath the Chimaera Building, in lower midtown, Manhattan.

At the center of the plaza, fronting the sixty-story corporate office high rise stood a jumbled cathedral of mauve stone, over which tumbled down an endless cascade of rushing waters. Atop the fountain, reflecting the wan sunlight through a muted sheen of thinly veiled rain and ice, there poised a statue of banded bronze.

Alma first brought Ian to meet with Cyril by way of the abstract rendering of the Piasa Bird, which doubled as the fabled creature of Greek mythology and gave the building its name. He recognized it as the effigy placed near the original location of a winged beast, carved and painted high on a bluff at the bend of the Missouri River, near Alton Falls, Illinois.

Marquette and Joliette had discovered the pictograph of the calf-sized horror in 1673, on their return trip from mapping the Mississippi. Braves of the Illini averted their eyes from it. The explorers and mapmakers were told that a tribal chief led a handpicked band of warriors, armed with poison-tipped arrows. Using himself as

bait, they succeeded in ambushing the Piasa Bird, when it attacked him. That event occurred only thirty years earlier.

After the bluff was destroyed in the 1950's to make room for an industrial park, the statue was commissioned, and placed elsewhere to appease the curious. Forty years later, Ian was involved in the restoration effort that resulted in the Piasa Bird residing on a new bluff overlooking a park that now bears its name. Contributing to the cause by anonymously paying an exorbitant amount for the bronze statue, the Chimaera Foundation became aware of the undergraduate, would-be cryptozoologist McQuade.

When his doctoral pursuits failed in his efforts to prove the reality of such creatures, Ian took the assistant curator's position at the Clayton Echols Museum of Natural History in Boston. He hated it, of course. He was forbidden to indulge his obsession for chasing after strange animals. By taking his own money and vacation time to mount an expedition to find a giant red spider called *El Diablo Rojo*, or *The Red Devil*, The Foundation knew they had him. After all, the principals of the Foundation had planted the rumor by simply revealing the whereabouts of Alma's pet. It was an unfair ruse, bordering on cruelty, to bring the agents together in such a fashion. As a perennial contributor of exhibits, and sometime financial backer of the museum, Cyril, in particular, had access to Frank Gustman.

Pritchard seeded the inevitable rivalry and natural animosity between the erstwhile curator, and his reluctant assistant. By doing so, the stage was set for Ian's dismissal from the museum, and subsequent availability to the Foundation. Someday, Pritchard reasoned, he would make good on his trickery. Confession, although good for the soul, was terrible for business. There was too much manipulation and secrecy in the Foundation, most of it traceable directly to its president and CEO. Only he knew the pervasive force that drove him and powered the subterranean facilities beneath the streets of New York City.

Perhaps it was karma, maybe even the price of repressed doubts and fears. Either way, Cyril's control over the creation that became his prison was slipping. Reality, as he faded in and out of it, only had a tenuous hold on his mind. Waking dreams filled the sterile room with tatters of nightmares bent at the corners. Try as he might, fitful sleep gave him no refuge from the guttural cry that ended with a beckoning call for Ian McQuade. Where was that boy?

Why wasn't he here by now?

"Alma's gone, you know," the cryptozoologist commented with a strained nonchalance, as he gazed out the passenger window at the sliding sidewalk. Its oblivious pedestrians avoided eye contact with one another, trying so hard to act as if they were the only ones in the world.

Amelia nodded sympathetically. "Yeah. I know, Ian. She asked us not to say anything. When did she finally get around to telling you?"

McQuade looked sidewise at the blonde, as she forced her eyes to remain focused on the suddenly grid locked traffic. She honked the horn, beat the steering wheel with her tiny fist, and yelled for the traffic to get moving. It was no use. Only the Port Authority, on horseback, was weaving through the stalled cars, trucks, buses, taxis and the occasional motorcycle, or scooter.

“At the airport, after my meeting with the museum,” Ian replied, ignoring the impasse, but growing silent during the interim. Rather than bog them both down in a discussion of how long she knew, and why he was never told, he asked the only other question that would give him comfort. “How long did she say she’d be gone?”

Amelia shook her head slowly, risking a glance over at Ian, who had turned back to meet her gaze. “As long as it takes for her to remember, and you to forget, whatever that means. She won’t be coming back until she’s ready, I’m afraid. I’m sorry, Ian. I wish I could give you a more definite answer.”

McQuade wasn’t satisfied. “She’s worked for the Foundation the past three years. How long does she normally take on these sabbaticals?” Pritchard’s niece shrugged her shoulders in response, turning away as the whistles and police direction got the downtown traffic moving again. The flashing amber lights returned to their syncopated patterns of red, yellow and green to regulate the flow, as the blue uniforms of New York’s finest stepped aside.

“I’m not sure,” Amelia replied, innocently, “this is the first one she’s ever taken, as far as I know.”

Ian pounced on the observation of the petite blonde. “What about when she met me in Brazil?”

“On assignment,” Pritchard said before she realized the implications. Their meeting that day in the jungles of South America had not been an accident, after all. The telephone call for him from the enigmatic CEO, and her knowing both his name and where he could be found, was a thinly veiled ruse. Ian hadn’t wanted to believe her part in the whole affair that brought him to New York and the Foundation, that she was as coerced and manipulated as he had been.

As it turns out, the cartographer was just doing her job.

“Are you going to be okay?” Amelia asked with a wincing expression of apology.

McQuade turned away, his voice thick with emotion. “I guess I’ll have to be.”

It took another forty minutes, in slowly dissipating rush hour traffic, for Amelia to maneuver the fully equipped, specially enhanced Ford Explorer to the underground parking garage. It was the same where Ian had gone with Alma Del Nephites, on his first trip to the Chimaera Building Plaza. If anything, it was even more secure, and protected by ultramodern detection equipment. The guards were younger, more intelligent than he remembered. They were also more heavily armed. He flashed his green ID badge after Pritchard’s niece, and they were permitted to enter the cylindrical elevator that lined the curved wall behind the station.

Looking up towards the ceiling, he winked at the ever-vigilant camera before the elevator dropped them twenty-three floors, in a matter of seconds, to the main reception area of the Foundation. They stepped out of the elevator as the rounded doors silently slid open, revealing a curvaceous red head that stood to greet them from her desk. Her name was Bridgette Larson, and she had assumed the administrative assistant to the CEO position vacated by Amelia when she began her training as an Operations Specialist.

After introductions that left Ian’s hand moist and his words struggling, Ian and Amelia were ushered down to the medical center after a courtesy call to the infirmary to see if Cyril was up to receiving a guest. All three were surprised when

Nurse Raines, resident matriarch of the medical facility, restrained a struggling Pritchard from answering for himself.

“By all means, bring the boy down here before the old man really does stroke out.” There was nothing more to the abruptly ended call. Amelia raised her eyebrows in embarrassment, as Ian shrugged his shoulders at the receptionist. She winked and shook her head. Obviously, she already knew her way around the facility and its inhabitants. They nearly all had issues. Most were common knowledge, such as in the case of paranoid Albert Myers, with his theories of government cover-ups and alien intervention.

They were in the business of validating and verifying the paranormal. From ghosts to ESP, UFOs and Ian’s field of study, cryptozoology, they had their hands full with justifying their existence and turning a profit. Patents in reverse engineering of alien technology combined with revelations concerning only the most critical knowledge relative to them. These gave the Chimaera Foundation LLC and its three principals, Pritchard, Michaelson and Burroughs, the ability to interfere for their perception of good in the affairs of society, and the welfare of mankind.

Advancing technology and benefiting the institutions that supplied its part-time agents, they justified their activities that extended to the fringe sciences. It played its advantage to the hilt as a non-profit organization, by skirting the constraints of corporate politics and competition. No other company was quite like the Foundation, and they did everything in their power to keep it that way.

As chaotically random thoughts coalesced into an awareness of his surroundings, Pritchard narrowed his eyes to slits to bring into focus the young man who stood next to Amelia at his bedside. In exhaustion, he croaked out the name that had passed his parched lips for the past several hours. “Ian.” He held out an unsteady hand, which McQuade knelt and took in his own. “I’m here, Sir,” he said quietly as a sign of respect he reserved normally for his father, a retired naval commander.

Instead of responding, Cyril searched Ian’s eyes, the expression on his lips, and was content that his ordeal was ended at last. He gave his sleep-deprived body and mind permission to rest, and was fast asleep in seconds without a sedative.

“Thank God,” the large, black Nurse Raines sighed. Without missing a beat, she laid a firm grip on the confused anthropologist’s shoulder. “He was not going to stop calling for you, or mumbling about Bigfoot chasing after him.”

McQuade looked up at her. “Bigfoot?”

“Yes, I know it sounds crazy, but he’s had nightmares three evenings in a row, the same bad dream at the same time every night.” Ian wasn’t sure what made him look, but he recalled strange dreams he and Alma shared the night before they left for Chaco Canyon in search of the reclusive Milo Platt and his clutch of stolen thunderbird eggs. The dreams, with few exceptions, were remarkably similar. There was something more as evidence of their common experience. He had noticed a pair of perfectly round marks on the side of his neck and temple. Alma, with her fair skin, showed the marks even more clearly.

Tilting the sleeping man’s head so as not to awaken him, McQuade revealed reddened circles of the same size and shape, in nearly the same locations, on Cyril’s neck and forehead. “What are those?” Amelia asked over his shoulder, leaning close to his ear for a better look. Her flaxen hair tickled his neck, and her perfume filled

his nostrils. Nurse Raines pushed through them both, as Ian struggled to regain his composure. She examined the discolored, slightly raised welts without touching them.

“I don’t know, but I think we better get the doctor in here.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dallas Tanner was born in 1956, at the stroke of midnight during the worst storm of the century to that date, in the seacoast township of North Kingston, Rhode Island. The eldest child of a career naval officer, he attended 9 schools in 12 years, as they moved about the country. His interest in local myths, legends and all things paranormal grew out of the ever-changing diversity of his upbringing.

His first novel, “Shadow of the Thunderbird”, was required reading at a large technical college in South Carolina. He has frequently lectured, appeared on or hosted radio shows, and presented at conferences on his books and interest in cryptozoology. He is often cited in the media as an expert on unknown or unexpected animals.

He was instrumental in salvaging Dan Taylor’s Nessie chaser mini subs, the Viperfish and the Nessa II, and is currently pursuing an interest in fossil diving. When he isn’t exploring remote locations such as the Altamaha River, Mt. St. Helens or Loch Ness, Tanner is content to write novels in his study under the watchful eye of his longhair Tabby, Samwise. He now lives in Greenville, SC with his wife Carla and their five children, where he is at work on his latest project.

You can visit the author online at www.dallastanner.com
or email him at author@dallastanner.com

Dallas Tanner is available to speak locally with your group, or remotely via phone or chat. Visit his web site for more details and scheduling information.

THE CRYPTIDS TRILOGY

We live on just 10% of the Earth's surface. Only an estimated 10% of all the known species of animals on this planet have been encountered and classified. Cryptozoology is the study of unknown or undiscovered cryptids, animals out of place or time. There are no degrees or curriculum in any college or university to become a cryptozoologist. Ian McQuade tries and fails to become the first, and embarks on the adventure of a lifetime!

ENTER THE WORLD OF CRYPTOFICTION IN THIS GROUNDBREAKING EPIC

THE JOURNEY BEGINS...

SHADOW OF THE THUNDERBIRD

BOOK 1 OF THE CRYPTIDS TRILOGY

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES...

TRACK OF THE BIGFOOT

BOOK 2 OF THE CRYPTIDS TRILOGY

THE JOURNEY ENDS...

WAKE OF THE LAKE MONSTER

BOOK 3 OF THE CRYPTIDS TRILOGY

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES...

In the U.S. Geological Survey, there are over 100 tribal and 2300 location names, in the United States alone, for a creature that walks in myth and legend throughout the 25,000 square miles of the Pacific Northwest.

As a young boy on a family camping trip, 9 year old Ian McQuade encountered one of the giant, apelike beings. The experience changed his life forever, limiting his academic prospects and ruining his professional career.

Now, twenty years later, an anthropologist and a Ph.D. in his own right, Dr. McQuade sets out on an urgent mission for Cyril Pritchard and the Chimaera Foundation in pursuit of Bigfoot, without partner Alma Del Nephites.

In the process, two of the greatest mysteries about Bigfoot will be uncovered, in a desperate race against time. One must remain a **secret** at all costs. The other must be revealed, before it is too late....

Haunted by dreams of his own traumatic meeting with Bigfoot, the CEO withholds information that puts his agents in the field at risk. Not only from vengeful enemies seeking conspiracy theorist Albert Myers, but an ancient evil that even Bigfoot fears.

The secret will become a matter of life or death for Ian's team at Mt. St. Helens. One is there to kill a Bigfoot, and another will die to save it.

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