

CHAPTER ONE
The Committee
Friday, May 5, 2028

Joe Commer lurched into hard wood, legs buckling.

"Jackie! God, *Jackie!*" He clutched at the angled wood and it was like sliding off a roof. Why was he falling? Was he going to throw up? No, that was shameful, this woman was *giving* herself to him, he had to steady himself, had to get *control*.

He fought for air. His mouth fell open. His fingers dug into polished wood. Why was he on his feet? How did he get so heavy? Had Jackie fallen off the bed? He had to be out of his mind.

Joe focused on a vast auditorium of expectant, puzzled faces. Midday sun surged through tall arched windows. Beyond, expanses of empty prairie. Blue sky.

"*Oh my God!*" His heart shot to six hundred beats a minute. "*What's going on?*"

"How'd that clown get in here?"

"I don't know! I just looked up, and he was *there!*"

"Are you--are you talking about *me?*" Joe said. He grasped the sides of a *lectern*. He stood at a *lectern*. He could hardly move. His fingers were weak. His legs were wobbly chunks of cement.

"Excuse me, sir, you'll have to take your seat in the audience," said a young man in a green polo shirt striding up the stairs to the wide podium, where Joe stood in front of hundreds of people.

"*No!*" Joe shouted, waving him off. "*Where's Jackie?*"

"Where'd he get that silly red costume?" someone snickered.

"Uh, sir? We're set to start with our first speaker," Polo Shirt said.

"*I'm in USSF uniform!*" Joe cried. "I swear to God a second ago I was completely naked!"

This got a laugh from the audience. How could there be an *audience*? Joe raised a fist. "Get back! Or so help me God! I must be *insane!* She was *with* me! God, if you only knew how impossible I always thought that would be!" More laughter. An entire auditorium *laughing*. Joe caught sight of a sign at the far end of the hall: CTESOPÉ. "Oh, my God, this can't be true! This can't be happening!"

"Sir ..." pleaded Polo Shirt.

"Because if this is what I think it is--"

"He's drunk!" someone cried.

"Ranna, we may need to call the police," Polo Shirt quavered.

"Nonsense!" a voluptuous woman with brick-red hair called up from below as she passed out papers. "Just get a couple guys up there and toss him out. He's doesn't even have a name badge. How'd he get in here?"

"I don't know, Ranna!"

Joe sized up Polo Shirt. Maybe the same age as Joe. Redhaired like the woman, but strawberry blond, and slender and fragile. No threat to Joe, who at thirty-one was in peak physical condition. But where were these jerks this Ranna woman seemed to think would take care of him? Instinctively he felt for the pistol in his holster: standard-issue Martian shattergun. Polo Shirt blanched.

"Look, it's okay!" Joe said. "I don't know how it got there either! I don't know what's going on! I had to turn in my gun when I quit the USSF. But somehow I'm wearing the uniform again!"

“Sir, it really is time to take your seat,” the Ranna woman said. Joe met her brown eyes. She was older than he’d first thought, a mature woman, in command. Joe instinctively distrusted her. “Urside, just come on down,” she ordered. “He’ll leave in a second.”

“Ranna, he’s got a *gun*,” Urside squeaked. The audience gasped.

“Hey, look! It’s all right!” Joe said. “It’s okay! I won’t shatter anybody!” He drew the weapon. “See? It’s just a Martian shattergun. No big deal.”

“God, someone call the police,” Ranna whispered as the first few rows of people began spilling out of their chairs.

“No, I can explain! I can see you’re freaked out! But look at me! A second ago I was--” At this point Joe decided he didn’t need to share the story of how he and Jackie had finally come to bed. He peered at the CTESOP sign. “God, maybe it’s true. Maybe I really *did* it.” He turned to Polo Shirt on his way down the stairs. “Don’t be afraid. Your name’s Urside?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“I think I have an explanation. Maybe. This auditorium--is this the 2028 CTESOP conference? Really? Could it be? Am I pronouncing it correctly? Suh-TESS-ope?”

“Of course this is the CTESOP conference!” Ranna snapped. “And you’re wrecking our schedule! Dr. Norsen is supposed to talk about the animal disturbances.”

“The animal disturbances! I was reading about them! And would that explain why this cat is up here with me?” Joe pointed to a Russian Blue jumping onto the lectern and trotting across a manuscript titled *Animal Disturbances and Their Effect upon the TropoEcoMind*. Blue cat eyes peered deeply into Joe.

“Churchill, get down from there! He has nothing to do with anything! Why are you here, why are you armed, and why are you disturbing our conference?”

“You! You’re the organizer of CTESOP! I read about that!” Churchill folded his paws and settled atop *Animal Disturbances*. Joe scanned the audience. There were numerous cats in people’s laps. Outside the arched windows a dozen more prowled in the grass.

“Can’t you ... won’t you please leave?” Ranna said.

“I’ve contacted the cops,” Urside said, looking up from punching something into a phone.

Joe drew in another long breath. “Okay, everyone, I think I know what happened. I can’t believe it, but I must have *time-traveled*.” He met Churchill’s icy blue eyes. “That explains how heavy I feel. Because I’m back in Earth gravity. God, you can’t believe how fast you get used to one-third G on Mars!”