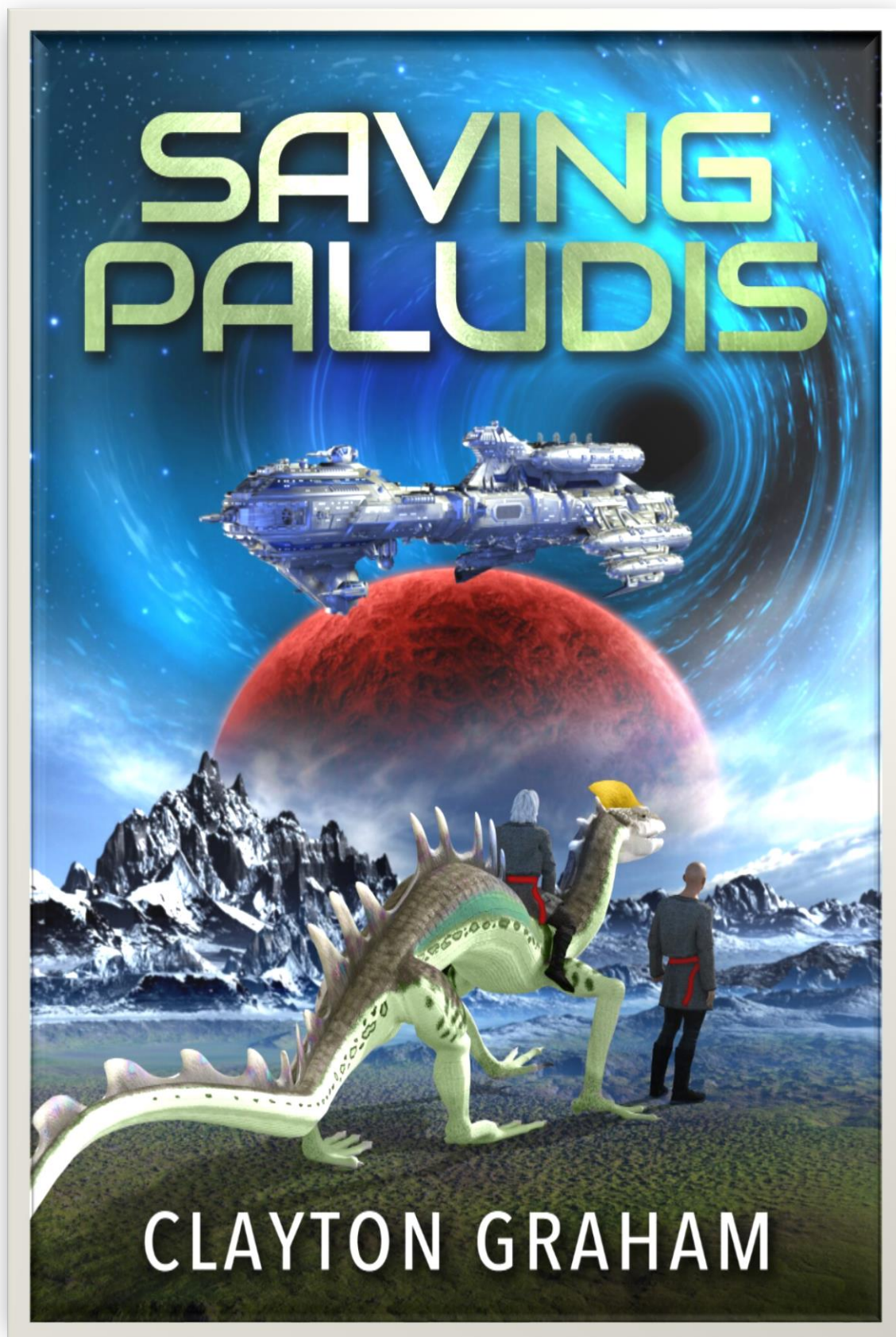




CHAPTER 31 MISSILES AND MAYHEM

Chapter 31: Excerpt from Saving Paludis

Doubts started to invade Stefan's mind after an hour of waiting. *What if the pilot didn't return until morning? What if they had given up the search?* He glanced at the controls. Simple enough but lethal in the hands of a novice, even if he could switch on the power. Suddenly, as if in answer to his subconscious prayers, searchlights played over the lawn and three dark shapes whined overhead, descending to land close by. Instantly, he changed his plan. He would have to abduct one of the incoming pilots and seize his machine.

Stefan scrambled to the front seat of the copter, crouched low and observed the landed craft. The nearest was no more than ten metres away, engine running down, lights still on. He leapt from the cockpit and raced across the grass. The other two copters were sheltered behind the one he was approaching. He closed on his target from behind, waited until the pilot started to open the door, then leapt forward and slammed the muzzle of the pistol into the pilot's teeth.

"Back inside, quick!" Stefan snarled.

The pilot jerked his head away and stared wide-eyed at his shadowy assailant. He opened his mouth to yell but Stefan pushed the pistol into his face again.

"Not a sound. Back in." Stefan sounded hoarse, like an animal.

The pilot, bleeding from the lips, retreated into the cockpit, sheer dread on his face. Stefan clambered after him, casting a swift glance over to the other two machines. Their pilots were both kneeling down near the tails of their respective craft, no doubt performing some post-flight check.

Stefan held the weapon at the pilot's head. "Up. Hover at five metres."

The whine of the twin engines rose in crescendo as the pilot pushed the throttle forward. As the copter rose, Stefan leant out of the door and swiftly put two rounds into each of the four canopies below. At least that would keep them busy for a while.

He moved the gun back onto the pilot, somewhat belatedly checking he was unarmed.

"Right, friend," he said. "Move east to the sea."

The pilot was another of the president's mercenaries; Magellan of course, no doubt originally brought in to work on the dredgers but now seconded to the military. He looked in

CHAPTER 31 MISSILES AND MAYHEM

bewilderment at the agent.

“You’re police,” he sneered. “You’ll be burnt in oil for this.”

“Probably,” Stefan replied as they gained height and moved away from the campus.

“Keep low. Fly east till we hit the sea. Then follow the coast north.”

The copter droned and they flew on, a dark shape in the night sky. Stefan glanced at his watch. Ten fifteen. Not too bad. The clouds had parted and the moon had found the heavens. Ahead he saw a glint of ocean.

“North up the coast,” he told the Magellan.

The pilot was sweating, strange pale red secretions trickling down his brow.

“They’ll bring us down,” he rasped, “as sure as—”

He never finished the sentence for the copter was suddenly caught in a ferocious gust, which tumbled the craft like a helpless feather in the wind. Stefan was flung against his restraints and he saw the horizon twist and somersault as though gravity had lost control of its own nature. The copter’s correction devices pulsed into action and then a fearful booming sound echoed all around them, shaking the bones in their bodies and the teeth in their heads.

Within a minute, they were picked up and hurled five kilometres out to sea. Waves tossed and turned direction beneath them and, it seemed, the remaining clouds scurried to keep pace, changing shape and colour before their eyes. Following his initial blaspheming, the pilot had managed to correct the craft and, when the wind ceased its violence, he switched to automatic hover. Both men were battered and bruised and not a little disorientated. Blood trickled down the Magellan’s chin.

“Face the coast,” Stefan ordered, his eyes seeking land.

The copter rotated and they saw what appeared to be thousands of shooting stars climbing into the sky above the city of Tanberg. Immediately, Stefan thought Tanberg had been attacked. *Has Serpentine’s dark shadow already spread west?* A terrible wave of depression overcame him and for the first time he began to entertain misgivings about Paludis’s future and very survival.

“Shit!” the Magellan said suddenly, palming a switch. “There’s a missile approaching.” He watched the trace intently and then relaxed. “It’s hit the water.”

Stefan nodded. “Blown off course.” He eyed the pilot. “Get back to the coast. We’re

CHAPTER 31 MISSILES AND MAYHEM

going to Hourglass Bay.”

The pilot nodded, just thankful to be alive. “I know it.”

“Fine,” Stefan responded, keeping his pistol trained.

“What was it?” the Magellan asked, as they skimmed over the waves.

Stefan shrugged, studying the map display on the canopy. He cast a glance towards Tanberg. There were fewer shooting stars now, just occasional silver bursts into the sky.

The copter was banking even before Stefan issued the next order, and then the shore came into view, a broad silver line etched onto a dark coast, and somewhere down there, Clare and Serpentine.

“Three minutes,” the pilot said. Stefan checked his watch again. Ten twenty-one. He fervently hoped Clare and the seer had made it safely.

Soaring in over the surf they saw the seashore was strewn with debris, and several uprooted cane-grass plants had toppled onto the upper reaches of the sand. The copter settled down gently and they disembarked. A still peace belied the devastation that littered the beach. The moon shone through silver-lined clouds, illuminating a large lizard scuttling for the cover of the bushes further down the shore.

Stefan gestured the pilot away from the machine. There was a strange smell in the wind, like burning electrics and bad cooking mixed together. As he surveyed the sand in more detail, the agent shuddered. The branches, leaves and dead wildlife littering the ground seemed to represent the decay of the entire world. He peered towards the trees and bushes that lined the beach and called Clare’s name. There was no response. He called again and a dark, stooping figure burst from cover and made its way onto the beach a little distance away.

The seer?

“Is that you, Serpentine?” Stefan yelled.

The shadowy figure staggered some way towards them and stopped, beckoning for them to follow.

“Can you come,” the shadow called. “Clare’s hurt.”

Stefan’s sigh of relief was mixed with fear, but, he thought, at least it was them.

“Let’s go,” he said to the pilot.

As soon as they set off, the seer turned and headed back into the bushes. They

CHAPTER 31 MISSILES AND MAYHEM

followed and found Clare lying on the ground, a compress of sand and leaves applied to her forehead. Stefan shone his torch and cursed. There was blood all down one side of her face. With one eye on the Magellan, he knelt and looked closer, felt her pulse.

“She was hit by debris during the storm,” Serpentine explained. He looked sadly at the agent. “She needs treatment.”

Stefan nodded. “We can’t go back to the Muskans now. We’ll have to take her to Kentucky.” He looked at the Magellan. “How long?”

“Perhaps two hours. If the fuel rod holds out,” the pilot replied sullenly.

Serpentine was looking at Stefan as though the agent was crazy. “Why Kentucky? What’s wrong with Tanberg for God’s sake?”

Stefan stroked Clare’s cheek as he replied. “I thought you’d have guessed. There were stars shooting out from Tanberg, millions of them. Something bad has happened there.”

The seer shrugged and shook his head. “I think the fools may have tried to break into the sphere. The energy release ...”

Stefan cried, “Then it’s our fault.” He looked at Clare, so vulnerable on the ground. For the sake of one life, many had probably been lost.

Stefan looked at the Magellan, who seemed restless, and trained his gun at the pilot. “Don’t even think about it,” he said, recognising the signs. He gave the pistol to the seer, beckoned the Magellan to take Clare’s feet, and lifted her limp body by the arms. Thus laden, they made their way back to the beach.

Considering their burden, they made reasonable progress, but by the time they stood in the insect-like moon shadow of the copter Stefan’s arms were screaming for a rest. The Magellan appeared less distressed but nonetheless heaved a sigh of relief as they placed Clare gently into the rear of the copter. Serpentine stood and watched, still levelling the pistol in the general direction of the pilot.

Stefan looked at the seer, held his hand out for the weapon, and said, “You can sit next to her, keep an eye on her. I’ll look after the pilot.”

To Stefan’s surprise, Serpentine backed away a step. “I can do that,” the seer said, “but we cannot go to Kentucky or for that matter, Spaceport. It would not be wise – for many reasons.”

CHAPTER 31 MISSILES AND MAYHEM

Stefan was astounded. “Just give me the gun,” he said. “Clare needs immediate attention.”

The seer shook his head. “I know she’s hurt but I know she will be alright. We will take her north to some friends of mine.”

Stefan raised his eyes to the sky and the Magellan shuffled his feet nervously in the sand.

“North?” the agent said. “How far north?”

“Near Trenkesh-Naisom.”

“That’s much further,” Stefan protested, despairingly. “She could die.”

“She will not die. I’ll treat her in the copter,” Serpentine said, waving the pistol. “Get in both of you.”

Stefan cursed under his breath as he and the Magellan clambered into the front seats and the seer sat in the back next to Clare.

“What’s the fuel situation?” Serpentine asked before the Magellan fired the engine.

“There are spare fuel cells aboard,” the Magellan answered gruffly. “We’ll get a warning when a new one’s required. We’ll have to land to change.”

Serpentine seemed undecided for a moment, but then seemed satisfied. “Let’s go,” he ordered. “Towards the barrier.”

The pilot palmed the engine and touched a red button. “Emergency call,” he said. “It might just prevent us from being shot down.”

The copter rose, twisted and headed north, skimming the cane-grass canopy.

“Why are you doing this?” Stefan asked when they had reached maximum speed. “What the hell’s come over you?”

Serpentine pursed his lips. “I told you. Kentucky is not a safe place to be, neither is Spaceport.” The seer put his left hand on Clare’s brow as he spoke, gently massaging the temples. Stefan turned and watched him fearfully. “It’ll help keep her in this world,” the seer added, by way of explanation.

“Not safe for us or for everybody?” Stefan asked, drawing an inquisitive glance from the Magellan.

“For us definitely, for everybody probably.”

CHAPTER 31 MISSILES AND MAYHEM

“Jezza! What’s happening to this planet?” the pilot interjected.

“Because of what occurred at Tanberg?” Stefan asked.

“I don’t really know what happened at Tanberg. I thought it was just a bad storm,” the seer responded. “I don’t believe it’s an Earth attack.”

“East Paludis then.”

“I only know what I feel,” Serpentine said. “There is a great darkness.”

Stefan glanced at Clare, thankful to see there appeared to be a little more colour in her cheeks. “You risk her life on one of your whims,” he said.

“Have faith,” Serpentine replied. “She’s a survivor.”

The copter flew on, drifting over the lights of inland villages. There was no sign of any other air traffic, although several large flocks of nesvin-cra, outstretched wings reflecting moonlight, could be seen cruising lower altitudes. The clouds gradually disappeared as they moved north, to reveal a sky teeming with stars. *It is quite beautiful*, Stefan thought. *Surely it could not be destroyed.*

Two hours into their journey a warning beep sounded in the cockpit and the pilot brought them down onto an isolated knoll covered by moss and boulders.

“Where do these machines store their fuel cells?” Stefan asked the Magellan.

“Tail boom. There’s a coded access panel,” the pilot replied, turning to look at the pistol in the seer’s hand. “I’ll have to get out.”

“How far to Kentucky?” Serpentine asked.

“An hour, maybe less,” the pilot replied, looking at the seer as if he was deranged.

“And to the mountains of Trenkesh-Naisom?”

“Around three hours. Why?”

To Stefan’s surprise, Serpentine offered him the pistol. “You choose now. You know my thoughts.”

The agent looked at the weapon, then slowly extended his hand and took it from Serpentine’s grasp. They looked at each other searchingly, and Stefan shook his head. The Magellan stayed in his seat.

“I still choose?” Serpentine asked.

“Let’s get back to civilisation,” the pilot said. “This guy has severe problems.”

CHAPTER 31 MISSILES AND MAYHEM

“Go and refuel,” Stefan ordered. “And remember, I have the pistol.”

With a grunt, the pilot dropped from his seat and walked to the back of the copter. There was a hiss as he released the access panel.

Stefan got out and stretched his legs. He leant on the door frame, watching the Magellan load the new cells. Above them the sky was bright with light but the moon and the myriad stars did little to ease the agent’s mind. He cast a glance at Clare, still deathly pale in the back seat, and rued the day he had journeyed to Serpentine’s lair.

Bourget hated what he saw. There before him stood a row of missiles each carrying a germ warhead and all programmed to fall out of the sky above Saltzburg. The thought of releasing them made his flesh creep. Various adjectives swam through his mind: barbaric, evil, immoral, frightening. None of them had the power to express the feelings that threaded purposeful tendrils through every sinew of his body. In his heart he felt despair deeper than any he thought the human spirit should be allowed to suffer. *Was he to release these dark angels of death and suffering?* Never had he been responsible for an action that would cause such a catastrophic loss of human life. Yet he had been directed here by presidential edict, and the foe had devastated Del-Shangi and Saltzburg.

He turned and made his way up the ramp to the control room, glad to be rid of the sight of the missiles. Some, perhaps many, wouldn’t breach the Earth force defences, but even those would release their deadly cargo in the air above the eastern continent and the Carides cocktail would fall gently to earth. He shook his head and looked at his watch. President James would soon give him the order. He was to sit and wait, alone.

The place was Doon, a long-established military training camp at the head of the Tanberg Gulf. The area teemed with militia and military vehicles of all shapes and sizes. Hidden underground, at least for the moment, were the laden missiles, crude but deadly. The arming of the missiles with their lethal cargo had taken just a few hours. Many of the Tanberg University technical staff had been stationed at Doon weeks ago, seconded to the military effort, and to them had fallen the task of ensuring the missiles were safely prepared.

Bourget was quite shocked that a man in his position had been left in the dark concerning some of the university research, yet here he now was in control of one of the more

CHAPTER 31 MISSILES AND MAYHEM

deadly outcomes. His stomach churned, and as he settled into a chair, watching several personnel scurry around the base enclosures of the lethal projectiles, he was near to revolt. *He could disappear. Get lost. Become a member of the Natural Order.*

Or, when the time came, he could palm the button.

Rain was falling in a steady drizzle as Selma turned into the road that led to her domicile. It was not yet fully dark and the final vestiges of sunlight creeping through a solitary hole in the clouds had turned the aluminium domes of the dwellings to a blood red. The roadway, smooth and black and shiny, snaked like a ribbon through the glistening streetscape and dark, low clouds threatened to crush the buildings beneath their ponderous weight.

Strangely, she'd encountered few individuals as she walked through the streets and, like on the drive south, very little traffic. It was as if a giant hand had been placed over the mouth of Kentucky, stifling its usual raucous behaviour. Selma assumed most people were indoors and she wondered if a storm was approaching.

She stopped outside her home, unable to resist a glance back to that part of the road where she had been abducted by Serpentine. *Serpentine! Where was he now?* She palmed the switch, pressed the code buttons in the right sequence and her door slid open. Entering, Selma turned on the light and the door closed behind her. The rain suddenly increased in ferocity, and she heard its rattling on the dome of the house. She looked around. Nothing had been disturbed, nobody had gained entry.

She strolled into the lounge and sat down. The videoscreen stared at her blankly. Selma switched it on. There was a message scrolling across the bottom of the monitor. She stared at it in amazement, leaning forward in the chair. Then she shook her head and palmed the screen off, then back on again. The message was still there, scrolling innocuously over a documentary film displaying the attractions of Martian architecture. A change of channels did not remove the words. A cold, dark chill seemed to grip her mind and Selma just sat there, unable to move even a finger. The words clutched at her sanity:

Following a savage attack on Saltzburg, Earth forces are now occupying East Paludis. West Paludis authorities have every reason to suspect an assault on our continent is

CHAPTER 31 MISSILES AND MAYHEM

imminent. Our forces are well prepared and confident of repelling the aggressor. If you are not involved in any military or civil defence body, please stay in your homes ...

After several minutes Selma rose, left the screen on, and walked through to the bedroom. She changed into her work uniform and sat on the bed, staring at the red sash of the Natural Order as it lay on the cover. If Kentucky was to be attacked, she would have been better staying with Joby and Marta. *Earth forces! It didn't make sense. Why were they here? Should she go to work? Was nurturing babies not important anymore?*

She left the house and went next door. There was nobody in, so she tried further along.

"Please," she said, as an elderly man answered the door. "What's going on? What's this about an invasion?" Raindrops trickled down her face.

The man looked at her quizzically. He was tall and frail with a head full of grey hair, large bags hung under his bloodshot eyes. Selma could not recall seeing him before.

"I've been away," Selma added. "I don't understand the message on the screen."

"It's that fool, James," the man replied eventually. "Thinks he can take on the entire universe."

Selma paled. "So it's true. We're going to be attacked."

The man shuffled his feet. "Won't worry me none," he said. "I've had my share of implants, transplants and injections. I'm about done for this world, anyway."

Selma backed away, turned and ran back to her home. Something niggled at her mind, something she had to do. A copter swooped low over the rooftops, the sound whining through her head, and she panicked, expecting some kind of attack. Frantically, heart beating madly, she fumbled with the door code and burst into her home. The words were still crossing the screen. She slumped in a chair, pondering what to do. She just couldn't wait here to die!

Tomorrow, she decided, she would go to work early. She was desperate to return to normality. Selma switched off the screen, walked into the bedroom and dropped like a wet rag doll onto the bed. Fatigue overtook her and, within minutes, she was asleep.

In her dreams, she was trapped in a cage. Only her arms could reach through the bars. A dark figure approached and leered at her: round, fat features, full of stupidity and venom.

"Earth person," the lips sneered at her. "Earth maggot."

CHAPTER 31 MISSILES AND MAYHEM

She pushed her hands through the bars and grabbed at the man's throat, feeling his Adam's apple squirm beneath her grip. Selma squeezed and her tormentor dropped to the floor, his head rolling to face the cage. Only then did she recognise the face. It was a face she had seen close up before – it was Shean James, President of Paludis!

[Get the complete novel Saving Paludis here](#)

CHAPTER 31 MISSILES AND MAYHEM

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



As a youngster growing up in the cobbled streets of Stockport, UK, Clayton Graham read a lot of Science Fiction. He loved the ‘old school’ masters such as HG Wells, Jules Verne, Isaac Asimov and John Wyndham. As he left those formative years behind, he penned short stories when he could find a rare quiet moment amidst life’s usual distractions.

He settled in Victoria, Australia, in 1982. A retired aerospace engineer who worked in structural design and research, Clayton has always had an interest in Science Fiction and where it places humankind within a universe we are only just starting to understand.

Clayton loves animals, including well behaved pets, and all the natural world, and is a member of Australian Geographic.

Combining future science with the paranormal is his passion. ‘Milijun’, his first novel, was published in 2016. Second novel, ‘Saving Paludis’, was published in 2018. They are light years from each other, but share the future adventures of mankind in an expansive universe as a common theme.

In between the two novels Clayton has published ‘Silently in the Night’, a collection of short stories where, among many other adventures, you can sympathize with a doomed husband, connect with an altruistic robot, explore an isolated Scottish isle and touch down on a far-flung asteroid.

He hopes you can share the journeys.

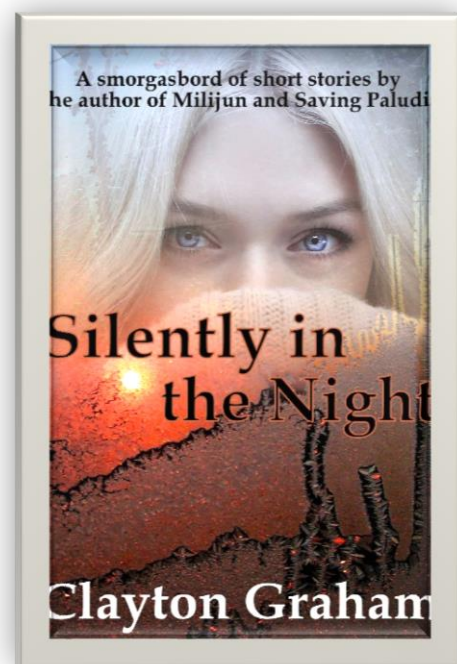
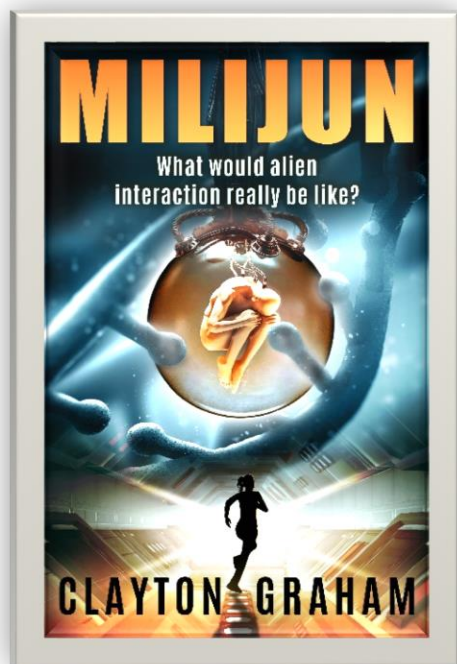
Clayton’s web site is: <https://claytongraham.com.au/>

You can follow Clayton on Twitter [@CGrahamSciFi](https://twitter.com/CGrahamSciFi)

His Facebook author page is at: <https://www.facebook.com/claytongrahamauthor/>

CHAPTER 31 MISSILES AND MAYHEM

MORE BOOKS FROM CLAYTON



Milijun: viewBook.at/Milijun

The next phase of human evolution depends entirely on her...

Laura is willing to do whatever it takes for her son. When aliens kidnap her child, it's going to take a lot more than a mother's love to get him back.

Take a deep breath and dive into the future, with contact and much more with ET. From the very start this superb novel takes you on a journey you won't forget. *Kay Mack*

Silently in the Night: <http://ViewBook.at/Silently>

A collection of tantalizing tales with more twists than braided hair...

Sympathize with a doomed husband and connect with an altruistic robot. Explore an isolated Scottish isle and touch down on a far-flung asteroid.

Just when you think you have figured everything out ... Nothing is as it seems. *Deborah Lavery*

CHAPTER 31 MISSILES AND MAYHEM