

**Forgiven:
Finding a Path
Home**

Richard D. Bangs

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Also by Richard D. Bangs:
Forsaken: Searching for God's Fingerprints

What readers have said about *Forsaken*:

“Just finished reading your book this morning, as I started it last night. It really is a great story and hard to put down. I liked it a lot and am looking forward to the sequel.”

Tom B., Inverness, MT

“Read (*Forsaken*). For a person like me that is not a sci-fi fan, it was a good read - plenty of action to keep one turning the page. Enjoyed the references to Montana and Australia.”

Steve L., Littleton, CO

“Just finished reading *Forsaken* and it was great!”

Linda D., Salem, OR

“Doggone you, Rich. I’m trying to finish reading a book I started over a week ago. And then I peeked at *Forsaken*. I can see it will be a few days before I get back to my other book. The first few pages are certainly compelling.”

Bill W., Kilgore, TX

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Chapter 1

FEAR CREPT UP ON JARROD MCKINLEY as he looked over his shoulder and scanned the cabin of the Qantas passenger plane.

He was getting that “sense of evil” that he had learned to trust over the past twelve months. That sense had alerted him to the energy wave that destroyed the listening post he had been manning in orbit around the Saturn moon Titan.

In the two months after that, he had learned that every time he sensed evil something was waiting to leap from the shadows and attack.

It had been about eight months, last February, since he’d had that feeling; the day he and his companions had finally ripped open the conspiracy of the Forsaken project.

He was now on a flight from Sydney to Adelaide, the last leg of the fifteen-hour flight from Los Angeles. When the captain turned off the seat belt sign, McKinley stood and walked to the forward lavatory. He ran some water and brushed his short brown hair back before easing his five foot eleven inch frame back into the aisle of the plane.

He had not felt that sense of evil on the flight from LA to Sydney. But as soon as the plane touched down in Sydney, a dark cloud began to form. The feeling was just strong enough to put McKinley on edge.

Figures. This damned country seems out to get me, McKinley thought, remembering the several narrow escapes he and his friends had had while blowing the top off of The Rev. Christopher Larchmont's Forsaken scheme.

He walked slowly down the aisle, carefully studying each person. He remembered many of the passengers from the long LA flight, but there were a few new faces on this Sydney to Adelaide leg and he gave those the most attention.

In first class, a variety of business types were busy looking at documents, ordering drinks or harassing the attendants. No alarms there.

The first few rows of the economy section were occupied by a couple of families, some students, and several European travelers. None were cause for concern.

About halfway through the economy section, he spotted a likely suspect. The man was probably in his mid-forties with blonde hair cropped close. He had his head down pretending to read a magazine. McKinley couldn't remember seeing him on the LA leg of the flight. The man was sitting in the aisle seat and as McKinley walked by him he pretended to stumble and brushed hard against his shoulder.

"Oh! Excuse me," McKinley said.

The man looked up, smiled and said, “No problem, mate,” and went back to reading.

No bad vibes there, McKinley thought.

Just across the aisle and two seats down, a tall, slim man with short black hair stared silently at McKinley. He was seated in a window seat and McKinley smiled at him and nodded. The man gave no response. McKinley recognized the man from the LA leg and there were no bad vibes coming from him.

McKinley continued down the aisle. When he reached the end, he still had no idea where the bad feeling was coming from, but it was much weaker now.

He wondered if he was imagining it. He didn’t think so, but it had been more than eight months since he had this sensation.

He returned to his seat and settled in for the rest of the flight to Adelaide. He would be met there by Janet Brighton and Sam Filmore from Wilpena Pound, the center of the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence.

Wilpena Pound, in the Flinders Ranges in northern South Australia, had been chosen because the natural bowl surrounded by tall ridges had been ideal for the placement of a large radio telescope spread out across the valley of the bowl. The center itself was inconspicuous with six of its seven levels underground. Only a reception area, visitors’ center and an observation deck rose above the ground level of the valley.

After a six-hour drive to the Pound, McKinley would finally get a chance to analyze and discuss the

signal they had received. The message appeared to be from outer space and it asked explicitly to talk to McKinley.

The SETI team had kept the receipt of this signal secret after the fiasco of the Forsaken incident in which a fake signal was used to promote the mission of the old SETI Special Command, or SETISCOM. That conspiracy had badly stained the credibility of any SETI program and, even though public interest was now high, SETI management was being cautious. The team wanted to be sure that everything released to the public was true. After the lies of the Forsaken conspiracy, in which a signal had been shot back to Earth from a secretly launched rocket, it was going to be hard to convince anyone that another communication had been received. The old SETISCOM had tried to use the hoax to generate more interest, and cash, to keep Larchmont's private and religiously focused empire afloat.

Now, in November of 2088, SETI, renamed for the original effort begun in the 1960s, was on a tight financial string, hence the commercial flight and car trip to Wilpena Pound.

By the time McKinley had shuffled all this through his mind and reviewed background data about the new signal on his e-tab, the captain announced they were approaching Adelaide.

As the plane taxied to the gate, McKinley again started to sense evil creeping up on him. By the time the plane reached the gate and the captain turned off the seat belt sign, the feeling was strong enough that

McKinley was looking around again, searching for danger.

The blonde-haired man was busy collecting his personal items and paying no attention to McKinley. Families gathered their belongings from the overhead bins and students grabbed their backpacks and looked for their passports.

Across the aisle and down two seats, the tall, slim man was pulling a long overcoat out of the overhead bin. McKinley thought that was a bit strange. It was too hot for that kind of coat in Australia. It was November, just heading into the summer months, the hottest time of the year.

But there were no bad vibes coming from the man and he had been on the flight since Los Angeles. No, there's something about being in Australia that is causing these feelings of fear, McKinley thought.

McKinley collected his carry-on and waited as others began slowly exiting the jam-packed plane. He stepped on the walkway that connected the plane to the gate, plagued by a growing fear. As he went through the gate and entered the concourse he glanced nervously around. He could see no danger, but he knew it was there.

Brighton and Filmore would be waiting for him at the end of the concourse, just beyond the security barriers. There, down the concourse through the mass of bobbing heads and waving hands, he spotted them. He waved but they didn't notice him.

And then he ducked, but not soon enough. A fist grazed his head. Another slammed into his stomach

and he buckled. Someone grabbed his wrist and put a hand over his mouth. It all happened so fast he didn't even get a look at his assailants. He was pushed roughly into a maintenance closet as a bag was placed over his head.

The whole maneuver had taken less than three seconds. He tried to yell but a strip of duct tape was slapped over his mouth. He was pushed to the floor, his hands jerked behind his back.

"If you want to live, keep quiet," a man rasped, as plastic ties were cinched tight around McKinley's wrists and ankles.

"We don't want to hurt you, but we will if you struggle," said another gruff voice. "And there are others who will be hurt if you resist. How much do you like Janet Brighton, or Laura Henning, or Sam Filmore? Or, Liza Alvarez? Yes, we know she's still in Montana on the farm with your dad."

"Are you going to behave?"

McKinley nodded yes.

"Okay, we're going to put you in this tub and wheel you out of here. There's someone who wants to talk to you. We're not going to hurt you, so don't struggle. But, just to be sure, take a whiff of this."

Before he could move an acidic odor assaulted his nose. Though he struggled, the two men pinned him firmly to the floor. His limbs quickly went limp and when he tried to talk under his gag he couldn't move his mouth or even formulate words of protest. Strangely, he could still hear. The two men dumped him in the tub and grabbed dirty towels and rugs to

cover his slumped body. They grabbed a large rug and covered the tub.

“Okay, let’s get out of here. We’ll take the next door to the left, drop one floor down and we’ll be right in front of the van.”

“Righty-o. The boss says make it quick because our client wants to talk to him as soon as possible.”

McKinley struggled unsuccessfully to regain control. Whatever they had given him had numbed most of his senses. He could hear and he could process what he heard, but there was no feeling in his limbs or in the rest of his body. He couldn’t move his arms or legs, or even make out what he was lying on or what was covering him. He wasn’t able to move his mouth, lips, or tongue.

Since he could hear, he tried to focus his mind to make sense of the noises coming through whatever material covered him. He heard the sound of a door opening and the noise of people in the airport’s concourse and the public address announcements. Now, another door opened and closed. He had no sense of the direction he was traveling, as his limp body lay in the bottom of the tub. He heard another door open, then a second, and then a door close.

The next sound was a sliding door on a van. He heard the engine of a vehicle start and then accelerate. But he could not feel the van move. There was no sense of movement. No rocking back and forth or bumps up or down. The engine acceleration noise drowned out all other sounds and soon he stopped trying to determine where he was headed.

The tall man with the overcoat draped over his arm, watched intently as the two men exited the maintenance closet pushing what looked to be a covered laundry cart. He saw them move down the concourse away from the security barrier where Brighton and Filmore were stretching their necks looking for McKinley. In just a few steps the cart and the men disappeared through a door marked: *Employees Only, Secure Area*.

The tall man touched his hand to the side of his head for a few seconds as he looked at the floor and then walked toward the door.

He glanced quickly around and, when he was sure no one was watching, placed a small object on the door lock, opened the door and slipped inside.

Chapter 2

“I’M WORRIED.” JANET BRIGHTON TURNED to Sam Filmore. “That was the last of the passengers. I asked the flight attendant. There’s no one else on the plane.”

“How can that be? We know he was on the plane. He called us after he took off from Sydney. Maybe he’s in one of the restrooms.”

“No. There’s no men’s room on this section of the concourse. Now that the crowd is gone, we can see all the way to the gate and there are only a couple of doors there, and none that a passenger can go through,” Brighton explained.

“We must have just missed him.”

“I doubt it. I was watching closely. He didn’t pass here.”

“Well he must have. Let’s go down to the main terminal and look around. And, we can have him paged.”

“I think we should call security,” Brighton said. “Who knows what’s happened to him?”

“You’re being a bit hasty. He’ll show up. Let’s just go down to the main terminal. Try to find an information booth so we can page him.”

“Sam! You’re acting way too cavalier! Remember, this is Jarrod McKinley we’re talking about. You know, the guy who seems to attract trouble wherever he goes. Remember Sydney? Wilpena Pound and Alice Springs? Jarrod attracts trouble like honey attracts bees.”

Filmore sighed. “Now Janet, that was more than eight months ago and there hasn’t been any trouble since we put Larchmont away.”

“But there hadn’t been any new signals either, until the one we got two days ago that was directed at Jarrod. Remember the last time there was big trouble? A signal directed at Jarrod started all of that, as I recall.”

“No one but the SETI staff knows about the new signal,” Filmore protested. “We haven’t told a soul.”

With a sense of foreboding, they stopped and looked at each other.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Brighton asked.

“A leak?”

“If the word got out, then Jarrod might be in danger. I think we need to contact airport security now and take no chances,” Brighton said.

“Okay. You find an information booth and put out a page for Jarrod. I’ll find a security officer and alert him that something’s not right.”

They both headed toward the main terminal. Filmore soon found an airport security guard and started to explain their concerns.

Brighton had to go farther to find an information booth and before she got there her cell phone rang.

“Brighton here,” she said into the phone.

“Janet. It’s Laura Henning,” said the voice in the phone. “How’s it going? Was Jarrod’s plane on time?”

“Yeah, the plane came in, but, Jarrod wasn’t on it.”

“What happened?” Henning asked.

“Not sure. We’re making some inquiries now. How are things at the Pound?”

Henning was now in charge of the signal monitoring at the SETI Wilpena Pound center. When the Forsaken conspiracy had been revealed, Sam Filmore had left that position to help Brighton with the administration of the complex. It seemed only natural that Henning should be promoted from her command position on the Titan Base to the job of monitoring controlling officer at Wilpena Pound.

With no manned listening post orbiting the Saturn moon Titan, there was less work to do and Henning’s subordinate on Titan, Alan Cranston, was more than qualified to take control.

“Laura,” Brighton said. “Are we still secure on this latest signal? I’m worried that if something leaked out, Jarrod might be in danger.”

“That’s why I called,” Henning replied. “Something strange happened just after you left this morning. I didn’t call earlier because I wanted to make sure it wasn’t just an instrument malfunction. But Jack and I have gone over everything several times and I think we did have a data dump at about eight-thirty this morning.”

“What do you mean data dump?”

“It appears that someone, or something, copied all the files we had on this new signal.”

“How did they do that?” Brighton asked, “I thought our system was secure.”

“We don’t know for sure yet. We all thought it was secure,” Henning replied. “That’s what worries me most.”

“What?”

“Well, there weren’t any obvious intrusion traces. If someone hacked into our system and we can’t trace it, they must have the most advanced hacking capabilities on the planet, or it’s something off-world that we don’t understand.”

“Or,” Henning continued, “it was an inside job. That would scare me even more. It means we have a traitor among us.”

“Laura,” Brighton ordered, “You and Jack lock down everything. Make sure everyone is accounted for and don’t allow anyone access our systems unless you or he is present.”

“Already done, Janet,” Henning responded. “You forget, I’ve gone through this before on Titan Base.”

“Sorry. I wasn’t trying to get pushy and I do trust you, Laura. I just tend to be a bit paranoid.”

“We all have reason to be paranoid,” said Henning. “We all remember the attacks on Jarrod’s life on Titan and while he was at Wilpena Pound.”

“But Larchmont is in jail and his lackey Gregory Stalingwirth is still being held for investigation. They are going to be answering for the people they killed and injured for a long time.”

“Yes,” said Henning. “I still miss Charlie Snelling, his experience, his humor. I can’t believe he’s gone.

Those guys killed him when they sabotaged his plane and it crashed.”

“Larchmont has already been sentenced to a long jail term and I expect Stalingwirth will get the same,” Brighton said.

“I’ve got to go,” Brighton said, “Sam’s here with the security guard. We’ve got to find Jarrod.”

Brighton quickly filled in Filmore on what had happened at Wilpena Pound.

“That means we have to assume someone outside knows about our issue,” Filmore said, “and that they may be after Jarrod.”

“What’s your issue?” the security official asked.

“We can’t reveal that,” Filmore said. “Our concern now is that Jarrod McKinley was on that airplane when it left Sydney, and he didn’t show up here. Where is he?”

“I have my team reviewing security tapes,” the security officer said. “This whole area is covered. The entire airport is on camera. If he was on that plane, we’ll have pictures and we will know where he went. Come with me.”

Brighton stopped to put out the page for McKinley and then followed Filmore and the security official to a video monitoring room. As soon as the video began running, their worst fears were confirmed. Even before they finished watching the video, the security official put his team on alert and tried to block any escape from the airport’s concourse area.

The scenario unfolding on the video was as much puzzling as it was terrifying. Two men could be seen

pushing McKinley into the maintenance room door. A minute or two later they were pushing a cart out of the room. The cart was covered, hiding whatever they were carrying. They exited the next service door.

Just before switching camera feeds, Brighton said, “Stop. Look! Who’s that?”

She was pointing to a tall, thin man with black hair who had just appeared at the edge of the scene. He was headed toward the service door.

“It looks like he’s following them,” Filmore said. “Let’s wait and see what he does.”

Sure enough, the man approached the service door, looked around once, and entered.

“He must be in charge of the abduction,” said Brighton. “It doesn’t look like he’s trying to stop them.”

“Where does that door lead?” Filmore asked.

“It goes down to the ground level, on the concourse, very close to the boarding ramp,” the security official said. “There’s a stair and an elevator. But those doors are all supposed to be secure. Only employees with security clearance should be able to open them.”

When camera feeds were switched to the security monitors one floor below, they could see the men roll the cart into the van, close the doors and drive off.

The van was nondescript, white, with no markings and no license plate. Using several different camera feeds, they watched the van drive away from airport concourse toward a maintenance gate at the end of one of the taxiways.

“They can’t get out that way,” the officer said. “That gate is padlocked and guarded.”

Just as he finished his sentence, an alert sounded and he picked up a phone. After a second he slammed the phone down.

“Damn. They rammed the gate and injured my guard.”

“Go back to the video,” Brighton said. “Let’s see what our mysterious tall stranger was doing.”

When they next saw the man, he appeared below the concourse and quickly moved behind a supporting column where he was out of view. But it was clear he didn’t get in the van.

“Why didn’t he go with them?” Filmore asked. “If he’s part of the kidnapping, he should go with them.”

“Not necessarily,” said Brighton. “He just might be making sure his goons got away. He’ll probably meet them later to grill Jarrod, or do whatever . . .” Brighton’s voice trailed off.

“Try to follow him,” Filmore said. “Let’s see where he goes.”

After switching around to various camera feeds, it was apparent the tall stranger had avoided the security cameras.

“I thought you said you film this whole airport,” Brighton said.

“We do,” the security chief said. “I don’t understand.”

He immediately was on the phone alerting his security team to lock down the boarding ramp area and to hold anyone who was not authorized or who appeared suspicious.

“We’ll find him,” he said. “We have a tight net on this facility.”

“In the meantime,” said Filmore, “can you call local and state officials? We need to find that van. I’m sure Jarrod is inside.”

“It’s already done,” the chief said. “As soon as that van broke through the gate, this incident became something for state and federal authorities.”

“Good,” said Brighton. “Can you give me the contacts we’ll need to keep on top of this?”

The security official was very helpful and offered not only contacts but assured them the security video would be turned over to the proper authorities.

Brighton immediately called Laura Henning at Wilpena Pound to fill her in.

“Sam and I will stay here for a while,” Brighton told her. “The signal can wait. We have to find Jarrod.”

“That’s okay,” said Henning. “I’ll take care of things here. Take all the time you need.”

“Laura,” said Brighton, “let’s keep this quiet. We don’t want to have to deal with the media right now.”

“I’ve already told Jack Simington about it,” Henning said. “But, we’ll stop it there. No one else will know. One more thing, bad news I’m afraid.”

“Yeah? “What now?”

“Stalingwirth has been released.”

“How did that happen? He was Larchmont’s stooge and surely was involved in Larchmont’s crimes.”

“After your phone call, I just wanted to make sure,” said Henning. “I called the federal prison in Sydney and a clerk said some high-powered lawyer had petitioned the court and then posted the \$10 million bond for Stalingwirth.”

“When?”

“Yesterday afternoon. Plenty of time for him to be behind all of this.”

“Damn,” said Brighton. “This smells too much like Larchmont directing something from his cell.”

“I agree,” said Henning. “Stalingwirth never had much initiative.”

“We’ll have to worry about that later, after we find Jarrod. Just try to keep a tight lid on things. We’ll keep in touch.”

Brighton quickly filled in Filmore. They told the security chief they wanted to wait there in case the search for the mysterious tall man bore fruit.

“Why don’t you go down to the main terminal and have a cup of coffee,” the chief said. “We should have him in custody within a half hour or so.”

As they walked to the coffee shop, Filmore and Brighton discussed the signal that had initiated this chain of events. As soon as the new signal had been received, McKinley had rushed from his family farm in Montana where he had been vacationing with Liza Alvarez. It had been only two days since they’d received the signal at Wilpena Pound.

When the signal was decoded, it seemed very straight forward. The decoded message indicated the Forsaken event had been witnessed. It also asked for confirmation of the receipt of the signal. Finally, it contained a strange request to have a dialogue with McKinley.

The signal appeared to have come from Alpha Centauri, the three-star system closest to our solar

system, but technicians at Wilpena Pound were skeptical because that was the same area where the fake signal from the Forsaken conspiracy had come from. They were doing more analysis, hoping to discover not only where the signal came from, but also who or what had sent it.

After Larchmont's scheme to keep interest high by faking the signal, thereby keeping cash flowing into SETISCOM, the current staff at SETI used large doses of cynicism and double and triple checked all data before making any proclamations about the facts of anything.

Even though the scandal had been a serious blow to search efforts, a nimble public relations effort and the conviction of Larchmont had managed to deflect most of the blame onto Larchmont and his cronies.

Now, with the news Stalingwirth had been released, Brighton worried he might be working with others who had been at the Pound. Most of the known conspirators were fired from SETI, including the whole security team and some of the scientists who had developed, tested, launched, and managed the rocket and satellite used to send the false signal.

But there were several people whose guilt or innocence could not be proven. Some of those were still working at Wilpena Pound, though they had been moved out of sensitive positions or positions of authority.

Still, there could be people working at the Pound who had sympathies, very well hidden, for the fanatical religious views of Larchmont.

Larchmont had raved on and on about how it was

vital that the human species find other intelligent life in the universe. He preached that human civilization would descend into chaos if it believed it were alone in the universe, if God's plan did not include others in the universe made in His image.

As McKinley and others exposed Larchmont, it became clear Larchmont was the biggest hypocrite of all; that he didn't believe any of what he preached and his only motive was to keep the money flowing to support his lavish lifestyle.

But, Brighton had to admit that Larchmont had followers who probably believed his message with a fanaticism that would never die. These were the kinds of people Brighton feared.

"He's gone," the security chief said, interrupting Brighton and Filmore.

"What do you mean gone?" Filmore asked.

"We lost him. That image you saw down near the boarding ramp was the last we saw of him, either on video or any of our checkpoints. He's just gone."

"Damn," Filmore said.

"We're going to stay in Adelaide until we find Jarrod," Brighton said. "We'll contact the state and federal authorities and we will stay in touch with you. We're going to be staying at the Comfort Hotel downtown. Here are our cell numbers. We'll get you our room numbers once we get settled."

"Good," said the security chief. "I apologize for this. No one has ever gotten through our security system. I'm going to do a thorough review to find out how this man got away."

“Thanks,” said Filmore. “I’m sure you did all you could.”

As Brighton and Filmore left the terminal to go to their car in the parking area, the bright blue sky was being eaten by a large cloud bank coming in from the north.

“Looks like a storm brewing,” Filmore said.

“Great, just what we need. Let’s get to the hotel and start making calls. Maybe the local authorities have a trace on that van that busted through the airfield gate.”

As they passed through the parking lot gate, airport security was tight. They had to show identification and give the guards their names and contact information. They didn’t protest.

“Nobody gets out of the airport without getting checked,” the guard said.

“They’ll catch that man,” Filmore said to Brighton, trying to sound convincing.

By the time Brighton and Filmore left the airport, the tall thin man had traveled several miles from the airport and was securely tucked away where no one would find him. He took a small round device out of his long overcoat. It was time to get to work.

Chapter 3

JARROD MCKINLEY WAS COMING AROUND. As the feeling returned to his limbs he winced at the sharp pain from the ties around his wrists. He was still crammed in the laundry cart and the combination of being gagged, having a bag over his head and his knees pushed up against his chest made it difficult to breathe. His bent over neck ached.

He heard the crashing of what sounded like a metal on metal followed by a gunshot. He also heard one of his assailants curse at the other.

“Crikey,” said the first man. “We weren’t supposed use our guns. We weren’t supposed to kill anyone.”

“Relax, mate,” said the other. “We bloody well would have been caught if we’d waited for the guard to let us out. I seen he was talking on the phone and lookin’ at us mighty unfriendly. And I just winged him to get him out of the way. He’s gonna be okay.”

“So they’re onto us,” McKinley heard the first man say.

“Not to worry, mate,” said the other. “We’re makin’ the switch in about two seconds and we’ll be long gone before they get here.”

“What about surveillance cameras?”

“None here. That’s why we picked this route. The last surveillance camera was at the gate we crashed through and the windy path we’ve made will lose ’em.”

“Don’t be so sure,” McKinley heard the first man say, the guy who appeared to be driving. “I ain’t breaking no speed records windin’ through this damn empty warehouse district.”

“Quit your bitching,” the second man said. “The Unit has got this well planned. For a plan put together in just a couple of days, I’d say we’re doin’ okay. Our job is to deliver this joker in the cart and then we’re long gone. Here! Here’s the drop spot. Pull into that warehouse with the broken windows and the big door up.”

The cart containing McKinley swayed as the van swerved entering the warehouse and lurched as it slid to a hard stop.

He heard the van’s front doors open and the kidnapers get out and go to the back of the van. The back doors swung open with a loud squeak and someone grabbed the cart and pulled it out of the van and down a small ramp to the floor of the warehouse. McKinley felt them grab the coverings in the cart and then the cart was tipped over and he rolled onto what felt like a concrete floor.

“Okay, pretty boy,” said a man, “let’s get you ready for the transfer. We’re gonna free your legs. You should be able to stand now so you’re gonna walk a few steps and sit on a chair.”

Someone clipped the plastic tie around his ankles and he tried to move his legs. They were not working. He could barely move them. There was no way he was going to be able to stand.

“Come on, jerk off. Stand up,” the second man said.

McKinley shook his head no and tried to motion to his legs.

“Grab him,” the first man said. “Let’s give our poor baby a little help.”

The two men grabbed McKinley under the armpits and pulled him to his feet. They steadied him and, with them supporting most of his weight, he was able to shuffle a few meters, nearly collapsing as he went.

“Sit here,” one man commanded. “The Unit should be here any minute. You’re gonna need to be a little steadier when they come. They won’t be so nice. That stuff we gave you should be wearin’ off by now.”

McKinley stamped his feet a few times bringing more feeling to his legs and feet and he began to feel much more in control. He tried to move, but a hand quickly pushed him back into the chair.

“Here they come,” said the second man. “We can make the switch and get outta here.”

“Be cool, mate,” said the first. “This’s gotta go smooth. We haven’t been paid yet.”

McKinley heard the squeal of tires as another vehicle drove through the warehouse door and stopped very near to him. The doors opened and closed on the vehicle and a new voice asked, “This him?”

“Sure is, bloke. You reckon we’d get the wrong guy? This is Jarrod McKinley. Guaranteed.”

“Let’s be sure,” the new man said. “Pull that bag off slowly, but keep his eyes covered. He can’t see any of us.”

McKinley felt two sets of hands on him. The bag was slowly removed but a hand came under the bag and clamped down over his eyes before it was all the way off.

His head was turned back and forth.

“Yeah, okay,” said the new man. “That’s McKinley. Looks just like his picture.

“Put the bag back on, get him up and put him in the back seat of my car. Jason, you get in with him just to make sure he doesn’t try anything stupid.”

“Sure, boss,” a fourth person said.

McKinley was jerked to his feet. This time he didn’t stumble or begin to collapse. Nearly all of the feeling had returned to his legs and arms.

Just as he heard the car door open, he was aware of another sound, a high-pitched swooshing sound, like a floor polisher, only at a much higher and faster vibration. The four men around him shouted in fear.

A nearly soundless hiss repeated in four quick bursts. McKinley felt the grip of two men holding him relax just before he heard them fall to the floor with a short gasp.

McKinley turned to run, even though his hands were still laced behind his back and his head was covered with the bag. He bumped into something metallic, probably the car, as someone grabbed his shoulder.

“Jarrod McKinley. It is all right. You are safe now,” a man’s voice said. Or, at least McKinley thought it