

Chapter One - The Sacrifice

[Somewhere in the wilderness near San Saba, Texas]

The coppery smell of blood filled his nostrils, as he breathed in deeply. The smell revolted him and he instantly regretted the deep breath. The last thing Jacob desired was to inhale a great volume of that smell, letting it fill his lungs. The thought almost made him gag. He would have held his breath, if it was not for the oppressive heat of the late afternoon, which demanded a deep breath from him at that precise moment. His choice was either to inhale deeply or succumb to the dizziness and possibly pass out where he stood. The last thing he wanted to do was to faint. Therefore, he inhaled the offensive odor.

The Prophet, who the members of the commune first knew as being Brother Aaron, slit the goat's throat expertly. He performed the incision so skillfully the goat barely uttered a bleat. Jacob had watched the man they called the Prophet do this on countless occasions before. He was hopeful he would eventually get used to it, become accustomed to the heat, blood, and shock of death. However, he had not and was unsure if he ever could.

The Prophet intoned a prayer, as he held his hand fast onto the goat as it lay on the altar.

"Oh Jehovah, God, we implore you to accept this blood offering for the remission of our transgression. We pledge ourselves to you and the blood of Christ with the shedding of this blood."

The goat lay still now on the altar as the last of its life-blood drained into the catch basin. The Prophet released his hold on the goat and scooped a generous quantity of blood into a silver cup. Walking to the furthest edge of the altar site and using a dipper of some sort, he sprinkled a measure of blood on the ground. Jacob

always thought that action resembled the Pope blessing his people as he walked through his crowds of believers. The Prophet repeated the effort at the four corners of the compass and returned to the altar. The deacons in the meantime had poured the remaining blood into a stone bowl. They repositioned the carcass of the goat on the altar and arranged a significant quantity of kindling and firewood on top of it. They placed the stone bowl, containing the goat's blood, against the dead animal's belly between its legs.

The Prophet returned to the altar and closed the sacrificial ceremony with a prayer, entreating God to accept the sacrifice as their statement of obedience to him. The fire was ignited and soon roared, consuming the kindling and dead beast. The deacons remained well after everyone else had left, stoking the fire until the blood had boiled away from the stone bowl.

As the fire consumed the wood and animal, Jacob stood to the side with a small group of men, known as the deacons, attending to Brother Aaron, which was how they addressed him when he was not wearing the Prophet's robes. Water was available for him to wash his hands, the knife, and the silver cup. The deacons arranged each item in its proper position in a carrying case, which was about the size of a small suitcase. They folded the Prophet's shiny purple robe neatly, placing it in the case, occupying half of the available space. With the attention to these articles completed, the ceremony was concluded. It would be repeated on the first Sabbath of the next month, and on each successive month of the year.

Twelve members of the commune attended the sacrificial ceremony – all men. In fact, only the men were permitted to attend the ceremony at the altar. The women waited obediently on the perimeter of the area. There were sixteen women in the commune. The total population, including men, women, and children was twenty-eight. Everyone of their number was dedicated totally to the commune and Brother Aaron, who was believed to be God's only prophet left on Earth.

Jacob had never known a prophet before the Event occurred. In fact, he had no need for prophets in that time – nobody did. Almost three years ago he was a college senior on the campus of Oklahoma University. He was aware of the many churches in town and even familiar with a couple of preachers. However, men claiming to be God’s emissary on earth were not something that commanded his interest. However, the coeds of the sorority across the street from his apartment did command his attention. Along with his studies his other passion was to bed as many of them as he could; and, he was reasonably successful.

A pretty auburn-haired beauty had spent the night in his bed on the morning the Event occurred. Jacob and the young lady had been up the greater part of the evening, duly occupied in various sexcapacendes and were then intent on sleeping in on Sunday morning.

Fall had descended early and the morning carried a bite of chill with it. Jacob had taken to sleeping with his window open and always enjoyed waking up in the chilled room. On that morning a brisk breeze blew through the city, causing those who were already up and tending to business to turn their heads, making note of the unusual gust. Had he been outside he would have also observed the shimmer pass through the community, which was best described later as being like heat waves experienced in the desert. However, Jacob missed the shimmer as he lay in bed with his latest sexual conquest tucked in beside him.

In a semi-conscious state, Jacob felt the breeze stir his hair and registered a definite sense of difference. He opened his eyes slowly, checking the time on the bedside clock, expecting to return to slumber immediately. However, a coppery smell caused him to retreat from slumber and blink his eyes into consciousness. It took a moment for him to orient himself and remember the antics of the previous night. It was then he registered the absence of the warm body which should have been next to him. At first he figured it was like many times before where the girl had risen and silently collected her possessions, steeling out of the apartment as he slept.

But something was different. First of all was that strange smell he detected.

"What is that?" his mind asked.

He looked around the room. Nothing appeared to be disturbed. Slowly he tossed the covers off of him and attempted to get out of bed. It was then he noticed the rusty residue that filled his bed.

"My god!" he exclaimed as he jumped to his feet.

He yanked the covers from the bed completely, staring at the rusty stain, which claimed the place the auburn-haired coed had occupied next to him. The stuff felt like sand; but, it smelled like blood.

"Jody, Frank, Thomas!" he shouted, calling for his roommates, expecting at any moment they would burst forth laughing and kidding him about the prank they had pulled.

"Come on, guys! This ain't funny!"

No one returned his call. He rushed to the nearest bedroom and threw Jody's door open. There was no Jody – only a pile of rusty sandy residue spread in Jody's bed.

He checked Frank and Thomas's bedrooms and found them empty. The rusty, sandy residue was also missing. He padded down the hall and into the kitchen. There he found a bowl of cereal and a rusty pile of sand scattered on the bar stool. Next to the stove he found another pile of residue. He turned the heat off of the bacon which was burning in a pan.

"This is crazy!" he spoke to himself out loud. "What am I supposed to think? That this sandy crap is all that's left of Jody, Frank, and Thomas? C'mon now, give me a break!"

He rushed to the door and ran into the front yard not caring he wore only his briefs. He stood in his front yard near naked, desperately looking for someone to tell him he was the brunt of a colossal joke. He stood there on that early Sunday morning which registered only a silence that was near oppressive due to the lack of

human activity. There were no vehicles moving. No families were loading into cars on their way to church. There was nothing, except for the bark of some dog, obviously upset about something. And as far as Jacob could tell, he probably was well justified. Things were definitely not right.

He frantically rushed to the house next door, knocked, and busted through when no one answered. He found no one there. What he did find was the same rusty residue. Still wearing only his briefs, he rushed across the street and pounded on the door of the sorority house. There were thirty-six girls living there.

"Surely, someone will be here. There is always a girl here." he reasoned as he pounded on the door.

Again, no one answered the door; so, he made his way to the back door and found it locked. Feeling desperate, he chose a large landscape rock and hurled it through the big picture window facing the swimming pool. It shattered, leaving a pile of glass blocking the way from his bare feet. Grabbing a couple of chair mattresses from lounge chairs, he laid them across the glass to protect his feet as he entered the sorority.

Upon entering the living area, he briefly considered how he was going to explain the presence of a near nude male in the sorority. He figured he would cross that bridge when he came to it. However, he knew this was not the first time a nude male had been in this house. Nevertheless, he discovered there would be no need for explanation, for each room revealed only the same rusty residue found everywhere else he looked.

"They're all gone," he stammered. *"Gone--no one is left. They've been changed to that rusty crap!"*

His mind revolted at the idea as he reasoned, *"Damn it, Jacob. That just can't be! That's crazy talk. People don't just instantly change in to rusty crap. There has got to be some other explanation – just has to be."*

But there wasn't. He sat on the stairs in his briefs and began considering the options.

"It wasn't an EMP (electro-magnetic pulse.)" he reasoned. "The electronics and electrical systems were not disrupted."

He would discover later that afternoon, when somewhere along the grid, some power plant malfunctioned simply because there was no human attention given to it. Like dominoes, the grid came crashing down. And, once it was down, there was no one to restart it. Satellites, orbiting the earth, left without human attention regarding course corrections, soon wavered out of position, causing communications to be lost world-wide.

"Could it be a virus that mutated and ate living flesh and bones, leaving only that rusty crap?" he considered. "Possibly, but if that was so, why am I alone immune to the thing? Maybe it's something in my DNA that protects me."

He didn't know, but for some reason he doubted it was a virus. He also could not explain the instant morphing of all humanity at a single moment. As far as he knew there was no virus that spread that quickly.

"Aliens?" he briefly considered. "Damn, I don't even want to go there. If ET was the cause of this thing, the green goober is taking his good time revealing himself."

Finally he reasoned, *"Was it an act of God?"*

Jacob didn't even know how to begin analyzing that option, for he knew very little of God. His only experience in church was Vacation Bible School one summer. And, the only reason he attended then was because Stephanie Williams had attended. For a twelve year old she was remarkably well-endowed, and Jacob was fortunate to spend a whole week with her. However, God appeared to be the only solution to his question. That being the case, Jacob decided to leave the question of 'what the hell happened,' unanswered.

After finding the sorority house totally absent of living human bodies, Jacob chose to check the rest of the city for inhabitants. After finding suitable clothing, he made his way to the

parking lot, wondering if his car would even start. His car fired up instantly when he turned the ignition.

“So much for an EMP frying all electronic circuits. I guess I can mark that one off the list,” he reasoned.

He spent the next couple of weeks searching the residential areas and the business centers of Norman, breaking and entering homes and businesses alike.

“If this is an elaborate hoax, I’m going to be in a world of trouble when the cops come back,” he mused, as he stood in the mayor’s living room with a bag full of goods he had looted from the pantry.

Everywhere he looked all he found was the rusty residue in place of people, with the exception of one occasion at the local Walmart store. As he pushed a shopping cart down the aisle, gleaning supplies he figured may come in handy, he encountered a nine year old female huddled in the bakery area eating cookies.

She cowered under a counter as he approached her.

“Hey there,” he greeted.

She remained silent and scooted further under the counter. Jacob lowered himself onto his hands and knees and crawled under the counter with her. She had the bluest eyes he had ever seen and sported an expertly tied long blonde ponytail. He could only imagine her mother morphing into sand even as she finished this last act of love.

She scooted over further, being careful as to not touch the stranger. Her face was smudged with dirt and grime. Her dress was torn and dirty, having crawled through or over no telling how many fences, holes, and pipes over the last week or so. Jacob could only imagine the trials this young girl had experienced. As he approached, she carefully guarded the package of Oreos she had liberated.

“My name is Jacob,” he shared. *“I thought I was all alone. I was sort of scared. How about you? Are you scared?”*

She nodded her head ‘yes’ slowly.

"Do you live near here?" he asked.

She shook her head 'no.'

"Hmm," Jacob replied. "Looks like you've been traveling. Have you walked a long way?"

She nodded her head 'yes.'

"What are you eating?" he asked.

"Oreos," she replied.

"I love Oreos. Can I have one?"

She offered him an Oreo and then replied, "My name's Cassandra. My mom calls me Cassie."

"Well, Cassie, it's very good to meet you," he replied and then added, "I mean it's really good. My name is Jacob."

She just stared at him, trying to determine if this was a good thing.

"How old are you Cassie?"

"I'm nine, but I'm going to be ten on my next birthday."

Jacob chuckled, "I remember when I was ten. That wasn't so long ago. I'm twenty now." and, then he smiled as he added, "But, I'm gonna be twenty-one on my next birthday."

She smiled and nodded she understood.

"Have you seen any other people, Cassie?"

She shook her head and quietly said, "No."

"Well, Cassie, Darlin', I haven't either; and, it looks like you and me may be the only people around here."

She pondered what he said and then asked, "Where did they all go?"

"Cassie, I don't have a clue. I wish I did. But, it looks like it's just the two of us."

"Will they come back?"

"No, Darlin', I don't think they will ever be coming back."

Tears filled her eyes and began to slowly track down her cheek. However, she didn't sob. Her lips quivered and she cried deeply, silently.

"I know just how you feel, Darling.' I want them to come back too. But I don't think that will be happening."

They sat for a moment eating Oreos and not speaking. Finally, Jacob asked, "Hey, what do you think, Cassie? Would you like to hang out with me from now on?"

She studied the stranger she had just met and with whom she had just shared her Oreos. She asked, "Are you going to hurt me?"

Jacob was taken aback by the question. He was totally floored and instantly realized to what extent the little girl was vulnerable. It had never crossed his mind to do her any harm, but it had certainly crossed hers.

"Oh, Cassie, Darlin' I would never, ever do anything to harm you. Please believe me; you are safe with me."

She considered his words and then smiled and responded, "Okay, then I think I will go with you. Can we take some Oreos?"