



## THREE

*11:45 am*

**M**ike Cammack had arrived in Eden that morning, but rather than jump into interviews right off the bat, the talk radio host decided he'd take an hour or so first to navigate the river town's layout—to assess the town's vitals.

Eden, Indiana lay on an evenly spaced grid of well-groomed streets, most running parallel to the Ohio River's undulating, east-west course. Nearly every street was named after a tree: an obvious nod to the original Eden in Genesis. Main Street and Broadway broke the monotony, dividing the picturesque town into quadrants.

Skirting the southernmost point along the river, between Tulip Tree and Broadway, Cammack drove past a turn-of-the-century dinosaur called the Tulip Tree Hotel. He checked the brochure he'd purchased at Howie's Stop n' Shop: The Tulip Tree was listed as the place where Jared Buchanan had 'raised the dead' in

June of that year, and where the selfsame, much heralded, post-modern Messiah held court each night, while building his new religion's 'Temple of the Seven Thunders' on a hilltop, just north of town.

Cammack loved the wealth of cryptoreality fodder that Eden provided. The forty-six-year-old radio personality, host of *Mysterious World*, broadcast each night at eleven, had an international audience of over a million hard-core listeners. This die-hard fan base eagerly devoured Mike's books, giving both Mike and his ghost writers a string of runaway best sellers; each centered on a singular aspect of the non-physical realm.

He'd nearly completed the initial outline on the fourth entry in his most recent series, tentatively called *Amazons from Space*, when the first Eden UFO reports had surfaced back in May. By mid-June, news of Jared Buchanan's 'miracles' and Katy Adamson's disappearance dominated cable news talking points, and Cammack quickly arranged for a lengthy hiatus from his radio schedule and pointed the nose of his midnight blue Hummer toward southern Indiana.

He'd originally intended to arrive in early July, but the sudden, unexpected death of his mother abruptly reorganized Mike's plans while he sorted through funeral arrangements and settled Naomi Cammack's mountain of credit card debt. It had taken six long weeks to pack his mother's belongings into carefully labeled cardboard boxes; the daily routine of it had rubbed open a festering sore, and Mike hated every agonizing moment. The uncomfortable voyeuristic peek into his mother's life and intimate thoughts grated on the only son.

She had been beautiful once. Naomi Waldorf, femme

fatale and 1950s B-movie queen. Her youthful promise had dried up with script offers, and she'd ended her life on a farm in Nebraska as a forgotten widow with unpaid bills. Stockpiles of merchandise from catalogues and every 'as seen on TV' product imaginable littered the farmhouse's cramped bedrooms—most still in original packaging, untouched, unused. *Why didn't you come to me, Mom? I'd have helped. I'd have taken care of you.*

*Why didn't I go to her and ask?*

By the time Mike had hacked his way through probate red tape, three months had passed, and a dozen or more other writers' books had surfaced on the 'Eden Phenomenon' (one book, in fact, used that very title, selling millions to eager readers throughout the world).

Jared Buchanan's hastily penned—and most likely ghost-written—autobiography, *Lazarus Reborn*, still topped the New York Times Best Seller list. Cammack may have arrived late to the party, but his instincts told him the inside story hadn't yet been told, and he intended to tell it.

It was close to noon by the time he eased the dusty Hummer into the only unclaimed spot left on Eden's Main Street. Cammack fed six quarters into a bug-eyed parking meter and headed for a corner diner called Margarita's.

He stood three feet from the restaurant's entrance—and inside Mike could see way too many warm bodies for such small digs. Heads and arms bobbed and hobnobbed, most close to the windows. The Technicolor crowd of dancing, worker bees looked more like a scene from the musical *Hair* than a slice of Americana, but in Eden, UFO devotees mixed with religious fanatics,

bankers, tourists, and farmers, forming a multi-layered and increasingly complex social order. Just the kind of crazy atmosphere Mike's audience would eat up with a spoon.

Mike had read about the burgeoning tourist business in the historic river town, but even he found this strange, alchemical mixture disturbing. Something about 'iron and clay' tickled at his brain, and he filed it for later reference.

With noon quickly approaching, hunger pangs now trumped curiosity. But a writer's mind cannot be completely shut down, no matter how hungry he might be, and Mike automatically noted all surroundings, including an unmarked white van parked just outside the diner.

*Is that a microwave dish on top?*

To the right of the restaurant's entrance, a sparkling clean window served as a makeshift bulletin board, where dozens of home-printed flyers flapped from torn cellophane, pleading for news of missing loved ones.

—Have you seen Jessie Milton? Last seen July 1st.

—Help find Tom and Tina Hunt, missing since July 4th.

—Reward for any news on Billy Grossman, disappeared from his home on August 8th.

—\$100,000 Reward for Information about Katy Adamson: Missing since June 22nd.

The last one struck Cammack hard. He'd met Katy Adamson several times, mostly at genre conferences, but once out of nowhere in London, she'd shown up to offer commiseration and support during an abysmally slow

book signing at Harrod's. This had been early in Cammack's career, years before his radio show brought fame and fortune, and book sales.

The pair had spent several hours together that evening, and Cammack had fallen a bit in love with the whimsical, kindred spirit. Katy Adamson had other romantic interests—or so she'd told him—although Mike had wondered just how deep her commitment could be if the mysterious man she called simply 'David' allowed her to fly around the world alone—unguarded and under-appreciated.

Katy had spoken fondly of Eden over several rounds of Guinness, as if the small Indiana town held mythical status, and now—nearly ten years later—here he stood, smack dab in the middle of the fertile earth that had birthed an amazing literary talent.

But the earth beneath his feet spoke of changes to Katy's wonderful Eden—and not for the better. And, perhaps, that very same earth had swallowed its golden child whole.

"There's a new one," a lean, bedraggled man in denim overalls said from Mike's right.

"Excuse me? New one?"

The man nodded and pointed to the collage of posters. "I'm puttin' up the flyers. The name's Whit Lancer. It's my brother's boy, Jake. Disappeared two days ago. The law around here don't seem to pay much attention no more. Too many's missin', you know? You ain't FBI, are you?" he asked, hopefully.

Mike scrambled for words as Lancer peeled an inch of cellophane tape from a broken, plastic dispenser to post a photocopied, black-and-white flyer. The hand-lettered

poster revealed a handsome boy wearing a Cincinnati Reds baseball cap.

“Gee, I’m sorry,” Cammack replied. “I just got into town, actually. Do the police have any idea where your nephew may be?”

Whitman Lancer’s bloodshot eyes blinked in the dry, warm air. “Nope. And the feds ain’t any better. We’ve had government crawlin’ our streets for months, but not one missing person has been found—unless you count Donny Alcorn. I ain’t sure that counts, though. Someone—nah, make that some *thing* is taking our families, Mister, and—and...” His face screwed into a mask of unwept agony, and he brushed at his eyes. “Dang allergies. Maybe Jake’s run off. Maybe not. I blame Jared Buchanan. He’s no ‘Messiah’ like some around here thinks. He’s the devil come to Eden, that’s what. If you’re smart, you’ll leave this town just as quick as you come.”

Lancer pocketed the tape dispenser and crossed Main Street toward the Chronicle building, wearily dropping a precious leaflet into the street. The white van Cammack had noticed earlier pulled out without warning and drove over the flyer, narrowly missing Lancer.

“Hey, Whit! You okay?” Cammack called to the stunned farmer.

Lancer brushed dirt off his jeans and nodded. “I guess. Eden ain’t safe no more,” he muttered, hobbling into the Chronicle building.

Mike paused for a moment and stared at Jacob Lancer’s freckled face and sleepy eyes. *Some THING*, the boy’s uncle had said. Some Thing was taking people from their homes, from their beds.

Cammack felt a chill as he pushed through the restaurant's glass door. A bell overhead tinkled, and a wave of unwelcome *déjà vu* swept over his mind. *Have I been here before? What the heck...?* He blinked to clear his head. The odd conversation outside played in his brain like an out of tune calliope. Why had he come to Eden? For a second, he could have sworn he heard his mother's voice whispering in his left ear—*Where were you when I needed you, Mickey? I died alone.*

Cammack shook it off and forced himself to concentrate on the smells of food—something real, something honest.

“Can I help you?”

A petite redhead had appeared at Cammack's elbow. “We're jam packed, as you can see, but I can set you up with coffee or a cold drink while you wait.”

Mike pasted on his never fail, three-dollar smile. “Gee thanks,” he gushed, setting aside the odd feelings and donning one of several useful ‘masks’—*Mom isn't the only one with acting talent.* “A large, cool drink sounds great. It's freakishly warm here for almost Halloween.”

“It's been near eighty every day this week. What kind?” the auburn beauty asked as she led Mike to a less crowded corner by the counter.

“Kind? Oh, kind of drink you mean. Well, what kinds you got? Is vodka straight up one of the choices?” Mike rarely drank anything harder than an occasional beer, but finding the right answers meant asking a variety of open-ended questions. Wearing the ‘mask’ of a lonely man with a chip on his shoulder had often garnered a sympathetic ear and a wealth of insider information.

The girl blinked an unsullied set of coppery lashes

and laughed. “We don’t serve liquor, but we’ve got a couple of places left in town that do, starting at four that is. Since the Temple Group started recruiting, a lot of folks have gone on the wagon. I’ll get you that Coke.”

“Thanks,” he said as she sashayed toward a busy kitchen. The place felt like a hive, and Mike would have sworn he heard buzzing. His corner spot offered a panorama view of the entire diner. The main section formed a roomy L-shape that followed a curving, linoleum-topped counter. Square, 1950s era, metal tables lined the wall-sized windows on either leg of the ‘L’, and three more rows of identical tables formed ranks toward the counter. To Mike’s far right, a pair of swinging doors kept rhythm to the buzzing of the patrons, as each slapped open or closed to reveal a series of waitresses and waiters carrying melamine, cafeteria style trays, piled high with spicy combinations of American and Mexican cuisines. Cammack’s stomach began to rumble.

“Here you go,” the pert waitress said as she returned with his drink. “That fella’ near the kitchen door is about to pay his check. I can seat you in a minute. You want to order now?”

“Sure if you tell me your name.”

The redhead eyed him for a minute then smiled. “It’s Kelly. Kelly Miller. It’s on my nametag.”

Mike shook his head. “No tag that I can see,” he countered.

Miller glanced at her starched white blouse. “Of course it is—oh, I forgot to put it on this morning! I guess that’s what I get for running late. Here’s a menu,” she continued.

“Bring me whatever is on special for the day. I like



spicy food, so don't spare the hot sauce. Miller, you say? Any relation to the farmer?"

Kelly smiled from ear to ear. "If you mean Ben Miller, he's my uncle. My dad is Howard Miller. He owns Howie's Stop n' Shop. All five of 'em. He's not crazy about me workin' here, but I like to pay my own way. One *fuego* platter coming up," she added with a laugh. "That seat just opened up. Follow me."

She led Cammack to the newly vacated counter stool and left. Mike searched for a napkin but the dispenser rattled empty. Sighing, he swallowed the rubbery wad of gum he'd been chewing since he passed through North Vernon and took a swig of the Coke.

"You're new," a sandy-haired gentleman said from behind. "Reporter or cop?"

Cammack swung around to find a lean, medium height, professional looking man—most likely in his early thirties—wearing olive Dockers and a light yellow shirt. "Fresh off the truck," Cammack replied. "A cop? Hardly. Reporter misses the mark, too. Let's say I wanted to see what all the fuss is about."

"You must be a UFO buff then."

"Sort of," Cammack replied. "You a local?"

"I feel like one," the man said with a weary grin. "I've been here since August. The name's Cal Tinsley," he said extending a hand. "I'm working the construction site where the Temple complex is going up."

Cammack nodded, noting the sarcasm in the man's voice. "Nice to meet you, Cal. I'm Mike Cammack. I guess you're not a believer in the new Lazarus. You know, I passed the Temple site on my drive in this morning. It looked to me like you had some action hap-

pening. I saw a couple of county cars there, didn't I?"

Tinsley licked his lips nervously. "Honestly, I'm not sure I'm allowed to talk about it. You drove past the site this morning? You're in construction then?"

"Some might say I'm into de-construction. I'm a writer." Mike conveniently left out any mention of his radio show.

"Oh. We have a whole set of those around here. Fiction or non-fiction?"

"A little of both," Cammack answered vaguely as the patron to his right paid and left. "Some might say everything I write is fiction—certainly, my critics do. But the books sell, and the royalties keep me comfortable. Sit down, Cal. Looks like a prime seat just opened up."

Tinsley climbed onto the metal and vinyl stool, setting his lemonade next to Mike's half-empty Coke glass. "Thanks. I take it you're here to investigate Katy Adamson's disappearance and all the UFO claptrap."

"That's part of it," Mike said, finishing his own drink in one gulp. "When a fellow writer meets with a mysterious end, it's blood in the water for our inbred, little bunch."

"End? So you think Miss Adamson's dead?" he asked.

Cammack studied his new friend's face with a practiced eye. Cal Tinsley had the air of modest breeding, and he smelled like a librarian. The hands showed old calluses though; the kind a man gets from honest work. "I don't know if she's alive or dead, but the news gurus seem to think the latter. I met her once, a long lifetime ago. I'd like to think she's alive and laughing at us all,

somewhere.”

Tinsley’s gaze wandered around the room, following the auburn-haired waitress. “Maybe. You could talk to her fiancé. In fact, a lot of people in Eden knew her—at least, that’s what I’ve been told.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. I’m making a list, you might say. I don’t suppose you’d show me ‘round the dig over at the Temple?”

Tinsley smiled and chugged his lemonade. “Not if I want to keep my job. If you choose to poke your nose in there, you’ll need to clear it with Jeb Lytle, the foreman. If you’re after local color, check with Adrian Fields over at Eden College. He’s a good resource for somewhat unbiased information. And he had some dealings with Katy Adamson and her fiancé—again from what I hear.”

Kelly arrived with a monstrously huge platter, overflowing with beef tamales, fried eggs, and habanera hash browns smothered in jack cheese. “I see you’ve met handsome Cal,” she said to Cammack, offering a wink to the embarrassed geologist. “That’ll be \$11.47.”

Mike handed the waitress a twenty. “Keep it. Just write me up a nice, readable receipt for my expenses. Uncle Sam is mighty picky, you know. By the way, where is the fire extinguisher in here?”

“You some kind of inspector?” Kelly asked, worry crossing her heart-shaped face.

Mike picked up a fork and sighed. “Hardly. But if this food’s anywhere near as hot as it looks, I’m gonna need an extinguisher to douse the flames.”