

THE NEAR DISTANT

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All characters are fictional, and any resemblance to real people, either factual or historical, is purely coincidental.

From Erin:

*To everyone who needs a little more light to outweigh the
darkness.*

From Brett:

*This book is dedicated the glory of God without Whom there are
no words worthy of writing and with Whom home is truly
forever found.*

From Kevin:

To all who seek to be free from the bondage of this age.

“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

(John 8:31b-32; ESV)

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PROLOGUE

1



PROLOGUE

The Monolith

“PAST THIS CLUSTER OF TREES, according to the map.” Ned pointed off to his left, letting his three friends catch up.

“Don’t you think everyone else on Lake Tahoe would have seen Tessie?” Tyler took a swig from his water bottle and twisted the cap back on. “Were there any other reports?”

“No.”

“Right. I don’t buy it.” Tyler turned toward the water. “The so-called witness would’ve needed a camera with a telephoto lens or binoculars or something, but he claimed he ‘saw it with my own two eyes while I was jogging on the Flume Trail.’ Come on, man.”

Tyler shrugged and raised an eyebrow at the couple lagging behind. “Sounds a bit fishy, if you ask me. No pun intended.”

Ned set his backpack on the ground. “Yeah, but he never said it was Tessie. Just that the wake caught his attention.”

“It could have been a boat,” Everly, the only female of the group, chimed in.

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“No.” Ned unzipped his backpack and pulled out the newspaper. He flipped the pages around pointing to the article. “See? Right here. ‘I knew it wasn’t a boat because the creature bobbed in the water with its head sticking out. Like the water turkeys we have back home.’”

Everly peered at her date Carter. Would he come to her defense?

Ned folded the paper back to its original state. “Boats don’t bob when the lake is like glass,” he said, pointing to the calm water below.

“Uh, sorry.” Everly lowered her head, backing away. “I was just thinking logically, you know. I didn’t mean to step on anybody’s toes.”

“Don’t worry about Ned’s feelings,” Tyler said. “He doesn’t have any. He aspires to be a robot someday.”

Ned feigned laughter, lifted his pack, and threaded his arms through the straps. “When I’m being awarded the Nobel Prize and the Copley Medal, maybe you’ll take me seriously.”

“If you win either one of those awards, we’ll still know *you*. The *real* you.” Tyler repositioned the ball cap on his head. “And will we have stories to tell when they come to interview us.”

“Ooh, ooh, ooh,” Carter finally contributed to the conversation, “I get to tell the one about the chemistry lab last year. I can see the headline now: *Nobel Prize-Winning Recipient Nearly Burned Down Chemistry Lab in Early Days.*”

“And then there’s the girl from UC-Davis,” Tyler said.

“Oh yeah ...” Carter scratched the back of his head. “I’d forgotten about her.”

Everly slipped her backpack off her shoulders and dropped it at her feet. “What girl?”

“Could’ve easily been Gemma Chan’s sister. Looked just like her. Was all into saving the environment.” Tyler paused

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and winked at Everly. “And apparently was all into Ned too. She found all sorts of ways to come on campus to see him. It was—”

“Embarrassing,” Ned said.

“Embarrassing?” Everly peered first at Tyler and then back at Ned. “How?”

“She followed me around like a lost puppy. Always asking questions about what I was doing, what I was studying, where I was from.”

Everly laughed. “What’s wrong with that?”

“You laugh. She was intrusive. Overbearing.”

“Maybe she simply liked you, Ned. Did you ever think of that? She asked all those questions because she wanted to get to know you better.” Everly shook her head, glancing at her own date. “She was probably hoping you’d return the courtesy. Show some interest in her as well.”

Ned squinted, looking away from the group. “Yeah ... well ... I don’t have time for all that.” He left the trail and headed into the small patch of trees off to the left. “Love is for fools.”

Everly faced Carter. “I take it she stopped coming on campus?”

“Pretty much.”

Tyler jammed his water bottle into the backpack’s pouch. “I know I would have, if I was told to stop bothering him.”

“He actually said that?”

“I was there when he did.”

Everly’s gaze oscillated back and forth between Carter and Tyler. “Men.”

“What?” Carter said with a sheepish smile. “I didn’t do it.”

“Hey, guys! Are you seeing this?” Ned stopped at the edge of the cluster of trees. “That reflection. It flashes like someone is trying to get our attention.”

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Everly followed Ned, with Tyler and Carter behind her. “I see it. Looks like a mirror. Is it signaling Morse code?”

“Nah, not the right pattern. Whatever it is, it’s blinding when you look directly at it.” Ned ducked under a low-hanging branch, shielding his eyes.

Carter scanned the ground in front of him. “Be careful, guys. This underbrush is the perfect cover for snakes.”

“Snakes ... why did it have to be snakes?” Tyler said.

“Just a warning, Indiana. No need to be a putz.”

“I would think we’d need to be more concerned about a Sasquatch or a mountain lion in these parts.”

Ned huffed. “With the way you guys are blabberin’ back there, it’s a wonder anything is still around.”

Tyler rolled his eyes and mumbled. “I take back what I said earlier. I’ve programmed robots with more social grace.

“I’m not worried about scaring off snakes,” Everly said. “And Tessie can’t hear us from up here ... *She* is the reason we’re here. Right, Ned?”

Ned cleared the final outcropping of trees and came to a small opening. Standing before him was a silver, triangular-shaped pillar. At least eight feet tall, extremely shiny—almost mirror-like—the pillar didn’t appear to have any writing on it. The top came to a point at a forty-five-degree angle.

Ned slowly circled the object, examining it from a distance, as the other three approached.

“That looks like one of those monolith things,” Everly said emerging from the foliage. “Pictures of them have been in the news.”

“All over the Internet too.” Tyler pulled his smartphone from his pocket. “I’ve got an article saved. According to this ... the first one surfaced in a desert in Utah. Since then, they’ve been seen in Romania, southern California, the Isle of Wight, Spain, Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands.”

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Tyler held his phone up and compared the pictures to the monolith standing before them.

Carter slipped his backpack off and opened it. "All those have been proven to be a publicity stunt of some artist in the area. Dr. Wallsay said it was a 'tip of the hat' to the movie 2001: *A Space Odyssey*."

Ned inched closer and squatted about three feet from it. "Look at this," pointing at the pillar's base. "The ground's undisturbed. Like it sprouted from the ground. You can't say that about all those other monoliths." He gestured to Tyler's phone. "With those, you could tell someone had dug a hole, dropped the thing in, and then tried to smooth the dirt out."

"Maybe they just did a better job of covering up their tracks with this one." Carter pulled out his camera and continued to rummage around inside his pack. "I'll take some pictures to document, and we can video ourselves."

"Maybe we could be on Good Morning, America," Everly said.

"Why would you want to be on that show?" Ned said, pulling at some undergrowth. "Just to get your fifteen minutes of fame, followed by a lifetime of obscurity? While they use your fame to make themselves rich?" He stood and glanced at Everly. "No, thanks."

"Oh, come on!" Carter dug through his bag with increasing force.

"Forget your lens again?" Tyler asked.

"I'm gonna kill Jamie. He borrowed my camera the other day for his final Biology project. He didn't tell me he kept the SD card."

"Shouldn't you have checked all that before we came all the way up here?"

"I was in a bit of a hurry this morning. Remember?" Carter jammed the camera back into his bag.

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“I remember you oversleeping and—”

“I’ll be back. I have extra cards in my other bag.” Carter held out his hand. “Ned, the keys?”

Ned tossed them to Carter with a shake of his head. “You need to run. It took us almost thirty minutes to get up here. We don’t have an hour to wait.”

“Why don’t we just use our phones?” Everly said.

Ned lifted his hands as if the answer was obvious. “Because you don’t shoot scientific evidence with smartphones.”

“Why not?”

Tyler dropped his chin to his chest. “Please don’t ask that question, unless you want an hour-long diatribe on the pros and cons of smartphones.”

“I just wanted to—”

“Privacy, Everly,” Ned said.

“With that, I’m leaving,” Carter turned to Tyler. “I’ll be back ASAP. He’ll probably still be rambling when I get back anyway.”

Tyler rolled his eyes. “Here we go.”

“When you take a picture or a video ...” Ned continued on without acknowledging Tyler’s remark.

TYLER, listening to the banter between his friends, circled the pillar. He examined each side from bottom to top, admiring the mirror-like qualities of the material. He paused. Written across the top was a word in a language he didn’t recognize. He took a step back, and the word disappeared. Easing forward again, the word reappeared. “I hate to break up the little debate club, but you two may want to take a look at this.”

Ned stopped mid-sentence and walked to the other side and stood next to Tyler. Everly joined them.

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“You see it?” Tyler pointed at the top of the pillar. You have to stand just right.”

Ned peered up. “What are we looking for?”

“A word, maybe? But it’s a language I’ve never seen before.”

“Maybe it’s Klingon,” Everly said with a chuckle.

“I don’t see anything.” Ned shook his head.

“Here. Let me move. Stand where I’m standing.” Tyler sidestepped to his right.

Ned did so and muttered an expletive. “I see it.” He kept his feet in place and swayed to the left and then to the right. “That is awesome. When I move, the word starts to fade and blur. Can you still see it now?”

“No,” Tyler said.

“What about you, Everly?”

“Nope.”

Ned took a step backward. “I can still see it.” He took another step back. Then another. “Yes, still there.” He took his fourth step back, and the word disappeared. “I lost it.” Sliding forward again, the word reappeared.

Ned excitedly directed the others. “Tyler, Everly, circle around each other and stand just so.” He pointed to his left and right. “Look up. Are there words written at the top?”

“I see something,” Everly said.

Tyler nodded. “So do I.”

“Tyler,” Ned said, still looking at his word, “is it the same as this one?”

“No. Yours is longer. This one only has two characters.”

Ned’s finger bounced along as he counted. “My word has eight characters. Everly?”

“Are you calling the square-ish squiggles characters?”

“Uh, no? I mean, mine aren’t square,” Ned squinted then

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widened his eyes as he spoke. "Mine are round. Like crop circles."

"Mine are ... uh, I'm not sure what mine are," Tyler said. "One looks like the lower peninsula of Michigan. The other looks like ... a fried egg. But they're connected by a straight line."

"That's weird," Everly said. "Mine are definitely square."

"Okay, doesn't matter. On three, everybody take one regular step forward. We'll move closer to it in unison to see if the words are still visible. Ready?"

"Ready," Everly said.

Tyler nodded.

"In three ... two ... one ... step," Ned said, moving forward.

Tyler and Everly did the same.

The top of the pillar pulsed with a light. The brightness pulsed faster and faster.

"Are you seeing this?" Ned said.

Tyler grabbed the straps on his backpack. "It looks like we woke something up."

Everly's voice cracked a little. "Maybe we should—"

The throbbing light brightened and shot a beam into the sky. Hurricane-force winds, radiated out in all directions. The energy rocked the surrounding trees and swept loose debris away from the pillar like a small atomic blast.

As quickly as the detonation exploded outward, it inverted the process. The trees swayed violently, but their branches held firm. Leaves fluttered in the air.

In the blink of an eye, the entire event ceased, as if sucked inside the top of the pillar with considerable power. The clearing, with only the monolith standing erect, looked undisturbed and eerily quiet.