

THE AUTOPSY OF PLANET EARTH

by R.J. Eastwood

EXCERPT

Daniels' voice broke his thoughts.

"Say when, Catherine."

"Okay, Ethan, hit it."

Daniels tapped several computer keys. A sharp crack sounded. Gabriel flinched as the door's locking mechanism was set free. Slowly, the one-foot-thick steel door glided open. A hot prickly flush coursed from his head to his toes. His legs suddenly felt weak, like his muscles would give out and he'd slump to the floor in a sweaty heap.

The vault door was now fully extended revealing a dark cavern ahead. Catherine stepped into the void. As she did, an amber-colored light flooded the space. About eight feet in front of her was another steel barrier the size of a standard interior door.

"Step in, Mr. Ferro."

Gabriel put one foot in front of the other and entered. Once he was in, the outer vault door closed with a deep and disturbing metallic clang. Suddenly, he felt small, scared, and insignificant. He was startled yet again when the tumblers on the door in front of them were released. Despite the sweat beads that had gathered on his brow, he felt cold and his mind was racing. *I'm intelligent enough to accept that if intelligent life exists on Earth, it's only reasonable it exists elsewhere, so get your act together.* "Get a grip, Sparky," he whispered.

"Did you say something, Mr. Ferro?"

Gabriel coughed. "Clearing my throat."

As they cleared the second door, it closed behind them and the sound of the tumblers locking kicked in. The sudden realization they were sealed away from the outside world scraped at Gabriel's already frayed nerves. He checked his ties Windsor knot and tugged at the hem of his navy blazer.

The vault was dark, too dark to see anything clearly. The only illumination came from a gooseneck floor lamp by the left wall. Once his eyes adjusted, he began scanning the space. He was able to make out a three-foot-high wooden table next to the lamp. Perched on it was a large flat-screen

monitor, a DVD player, an assortment of DVDs along with a small stack of books and magazines. To his right was a brown leather sofa and a matching chair facing it. He could not be sure, but about fifteen feet from where they stood, he thought he saw a small bed pushed up against the back wall. Next to it was a table and two chairs. There was no sign of the extraterrestrial. That only served to heighten his anxiety. Several agonizing seconds of eerie, nerve-wracking silence passed, enough for his imagination to take hold. Like conjured up visions in an all too realistic dream, more grotesque images raced through his mind's eye.

Catherine's voice jolted him back. "You have a visitor."

There was no response—that rattled Gabriel even more.

"This is Gabriel Ferro, Chief of Staff to the President of the United States."

It was a straightforward introduction, no fluff, no formality. Seconds felt like minutes. Then, something was moving in the shadows back in the far-right corner near the table. Gabriel's skin felt ice-cold, and his heart kicked hard at his chest. Ever so slowly, the alien inched its way toward them. At that moment, Gabriel wanted to leave this cold, dark chamber of horror as fast as his feet could carry him. Primal Fear, the kind that sticks to the back of one's throat bubbling up like hot lava as a scream or a choking gasp, raced through him. *Come on*, his inner voice was shouting, *one more step! Move into the bloody light. Get this nightmare the hell over with!*

The alien stopped just short of the light. Gabriel strained to make out facial features, but he could not. He waited—seconds passed—more cold sweat formed on his brow.

"This is Gabriel Ferro and—"

"I did hear you the first time, Catherine."

Finally, the alien stepped forward into what little light there was. Every imagined image that had raced through Gabriel's mind turned out to be a miscalculation. Like a shot of adrenaline pumped straight into his veins, his whole being snapped alive. His mouth gaped, his spine went pole straight, and he took one brisk involuntary step back.