

**MAKE  
MAD  
THE  
GUILTY**

**A NOVEL**

**WILLIAM NORRIS**

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MAD  
THE  
GUILTY**

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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ALSO BY WILLIAM NORRIS

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The play's the thing  
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *HAMLET*, ACT II

## PUBLISHER'S NOTE

*MAKE Mad the Guilty* is a new edition of William Norris's novel *The Gonzago Principle*, which first published in December 2001. The story stretched from the '80s through what he considered the near future, 2012. The author's imagination of what would come to pass in coming years did not align fully with reality, and so this book has become something of an alternate history against the author's original intent. Norris set out to place the Lindbergh Trial in a new context that would help readers understand just how shocking and unjust were the circumstances of that infamous history. We defer to our readers to judge the result and beg pardon for what has become the language of a man in an era brought to a close by dramatic cultural shifts over the past two decades.

BOOK ONE

*NEW ORLEANS*

1988

## ONE

THEY WERE the worst seven months of his life. Standing before the television lights night after night, the audience an almost invisible mass behind the cameras, he sweated out the fear of exposure. One word, one hint of his adultery, and he was finished. The media would be on him in a feeding frenzy. The arranged converts for each program were vetted as never before—his producer thought he was crazy, but the possibility of one of these yo-yos shouting out an accusation on camera was too real to be risked. As for the girl, money would keep her mouth shut, but she had adamantly refused his demand that she have an abortion.

It had been an embarrassing scene, one that Grayson did not care to remember. “Damn hypocrite” was the least of her accusations, and however true the charge on both counts, it still hurt. “You’re always preaching the goddamn right to life,” she had railed. “But when it comes right down to the wire, you’d kill my baby without a second thought just to save yourself embarrassment. Think again, preacher. I’m having it,

and you're paying for it. Or else you know what's going to happen."

Grayson had never seen her again. Thank God. He had arranged through a discreet law firm to make generous monthly payments to the girl and tried, without success, to forget that she existed. His wife's own swelling abdomen was a constant reminder of that other fetus, somewhere out there, which could destroy him in an instant. Helen was close to term now. He supposed the girl must be too. Grayson did not wish to know that.

As for Helen, if she noticed the tension in her husband, she was too wrapped up in her own maternity to care. This was going to be the most perfect, most cosseted baby of all time. How could it be otherwise with such a father?

Timmy had been attentive to her every need, perhaps even overprotective: for instance, his insistence that she go alone to a private obstetrician instead of a clinic, where she might meet lots of mothers-to-be. She would have liked that, but Timmy said she couldn't be too careful; she might catch something and hurt the baby. Ah well. She smiled to herself. Timmy knew best.

The labor pains, when they finally arrived, were not as bad as she had feared. Timmy rushed her to the hospital and stayed by her side as she delivered a perfect eight-pound baby girl. The name was already chosen: they would call her Jenny.

That night, before a television congregation of 13 million souls, Rev. Timothy Grayson wept for joy as he told his flock that he had become a father. It was an occasion for celebration, not least because a preliminary analysis of phone calls during and after the broadcast indicated that contributions that week would reach an all-time high. In

consequence, Grayson was less than sober when he unlocked the door to his empty house some time after midnight.

Grayson kicked off his shoes, ripped off his tie, and poured himself a large scotch before settling down to contemplate his triumph. Surely his public image had never been better. Now, at last, he could preach the virtue of family values with the backing of a real American family of his own. Personable, pious, and squeaky clean, the Graysons would become the role models for fundamentalist Christians across the United States. *Hell*, he thought, *why be modest: tomorrow, the world.*

In his mind's eye he could see the satellite hookups into every cable system on the globe. Helen and little Jenny would be beside him on the podium, radiating goodness, and he would preach to the benighted heathen as he had never preached before. Grayson took a large swallow. "Match that, Swaggart," he said to the blank screen on the wall. "And you, Falwell, and you, Roberts, and you, Bakker, with your overpainted floozy. I'll drive the bunch of you off the screen!"

From the corner of his eye, Grayson noticed a blinking red light on the answering machine beside his telephone. He got up unsteadily and pressed the playback button. In an instant he was sober.



THE LAW FIRM OF MARKHAM, MOLOCH, AND FEINSTEIN was housed in a small suite of offices down a side alley in the French Quarter. Even at ten in the morning, Grayson could hear the plaintive sound of a trumpet echoing from nearby

Bourbon Street as he mounted the staircase, glancing furtively behind him to make sure he was not followed.

He wore a shabby raincoat, purchased that morning from the Salvation Army, and the famous blond hair was hidden beneath a black hat. Filthy sneakers peaked out from the frayed bottoms of ragged blue jeans, and dark glasses mocked the cloudy sky. All in all, his flock would have had a hard time recognizing the Reverend Timothy Grayson, which was precisely what he'd hoped for. On the other hand, any self-respecting police officer was liable to arrest him for loitering with intent to commit a felony.

Pushing his way past an alarmed secretary, Grayson threw open the door of the senior partner's office without knocking and entered. Henry Markham looked up in alarm.

"What the devil . . . oh, it's you," he said, as Grayson removed his hat and dark glasses. "Why the disguise?"

"You know damn well why the disguise." Grayson was not in a good mood. "What was the meaning of that message you left on my voice mail last night? I expressly told you never to contact me at home. What if my wife had taken that call?"

"Your wife is otherwise engaged right now," Markham said. "I know it, you know it, and after last night the whole damn world knows it. What they don't know is that you got to be a daddy *twice* yesterday." He leered. "You've been a busy little preacher, Mr. Grayson."

Grayson shrugged. "So what? It was going to happen one of these days, after that damn-fool girl refused an abortion. I've been paying you to take care of that matter and to leave me out of it. You didn't have to call me up and tell me the bastard was born. I don't want to know."

"It's not as simple as that. Not anymore." Markham began shuffling papers. "You see, Mr. Grayson, the girl's dead."

"Good God." Grayson was genuinely shocked. "But that's impossible. I paid for the best medical care, didn't I? Women don't die in childbirth these days."

"This one did. And I'm afraid that's not the end of the matter, Mr. Grayson. You see, she left a will."

Timothy Grayson felt a small shiver pass down his spine. "A will? Why on earth should she make a will? Hell, the girl was only twenty-two, twenty-three at most."

"Standard practice on these occasions, Mr. Grayson. I'm not saying she had a premonition or anything like that. As a matter of fact, I advised her to make it."

"You did what?" Grayson lunged across the desk and seized the lawyer by the shoulders, shaking him until his teeth rattled. "You stupid moron. I suppose you're going to tell me that she named me in this damned will? That thing is going to be on public record, and how the hell do you think I'm going to explain it?"

Markham shook himself free and backed away. "I am the executor of that will, Mr. Grayson. I am legally obliged to ensure that its conditions are carried out."

Grayson subsided. "All right. Put me out of my misery. What does it say?"

The lawyer unfolded a single sheet of paper. "This is a copy, you understand," he said. "The original is in a safe place. Do you want me to read it to you?"

"Go on."

"I, Lisa Emanon, being of sound mind . . ."

"Skip that bit. Tell me the worst."

"Very well. 'I bequest and bequeath all that I possess to

the father of my child, Timothy Grayson, of New Orleans in the state of Louisiana, and do hereby grant him full parental rights in the upbringing of said child until he or she shall attain the age of eighteen years or complete his or her full-time education, whichever shall be later.' That's all."

"It's enough to ruin me," Grayson gloomed. "Does that mean what I think it means?"

"It does. Congratulations, Mr. Grayson. You have a son."

"Now wait a cotton-picking minute. What about our arrangement?"

"Our arrangement, as you put it," said the lawyer smoothly, "was for me to make arms-length payments to Miss Emanon. The lady is now dead. Ergo, our arrangement is at an end. The boy is your responsibility."

"And what if I refuse? What if I deny paternity?"

"You could fight it in court, I suppose. Would you really want to do that? All those DNA tests. All that publicity." Markham grinned slyly. He was enjoying this.

"I get the point. But what the hell else can I do? I can hardly foist the kid off on Helen and pretend she really had twins without noticing. My wife may not be very bright, but she's not that stupid."

Markham let him sweat awhile. "There might be a way . . ." he said finally.

"So, tell me."

"Well, I do happen to know this young couple—actually they live in France—who've been looking for a baby to adopt. With the right incentive, they might be persuaded to overlook some of the legal niceties."

"That's it." Grayson clutched at the idea like a drowning

man. "Get the damned kid out of the country and off my back."

"It'll be expensive," warned Markham. "You'll have to pay for his upkeep and his education. And then there's the matter of my fee . . ."

"I don't care. Do it. And keep my name out of it. That boy is never, ever, to know who his father is. Is that understood?"

"Perfectly," Markham said. "I'll draw up an agreement between the two of us. As far as the young couple are concerned, and the boy when he's old enough, they'll be dealing solely with me. I shall be their benefactor."

"Suits me," grunted Grayson. "One more thing: that will. Can you destroy it?"

"Really, Mr. Grayson." Markham drew himself up to his full height of five feet six inches. "You are asking an officer of the court to commit a felony. However, I think I might stretch a point and keep it in a safe place, away from the public eye. It will be, you might say, my insurance policy. Just in case you ever have a change of heart."

"That's blackmail," Grayson protested.

The lawyer smiled thinly.

## TWO

SHE WAS SO LUCKY. Sometimes Helen Grayson had to pinch herself to make sure that life was really happening. She stared with rapt attention at the handsome face of her husband, filling the television screen in a tight close-up. That backlit halo of golden hair, that firm jaw, those steadfast eyes glowing with sincerity. His voice, sometimes cajoling, sometimes thundering, still sent shivers down her spine after nearly three years of marriage. Timothy Grayson had been acclaimed in *Time* magazine as the “Television Evangelist of the Year.” And, as the writer had pointed out with what Helen thought was unnecessary asperity, he had the bank balance to prove it.

Helen shifted to a more comfortable position on the couch and sipped delicately at her glass of crème de menthe. She watched as the camera backed away to expose the choir behind her husband, and fifty young females in virginal shimmering white launched into a triumphant hymn. She reached for the remote control to turn down the volume. Just a little.

They were coming to the bit she liked best: the grand finale, when the sinners would come to be saved. Timothy did it so well, she thought: his arms outstretched in welcome, his face a picture of serene forgiveness as one by one the penitents left the audience to announce to the world that they were born again.

No wonder everyone loved him.

It was a good crop tonight—more than a dozen converts anxious to be saved. That was what Timmy always called it: a crop. He had planted the seeds of the love of Jesus in their hearts, he said, and now he was reaping the harvest. *No doubt about that*, she allowed herself to think irreverently. The harvest had been rich indeed. Helen chided herself for the thought. Wasn't he doing God's work? And didn't the good book say that the laborer was worthy of his hire? All those people who said it was wrong for a preacher to be so wealthy, to drive expensive cars and live in grand houses—they were just jealous, that was all.

At last the final newborn Christian received his blessing, and the Reverend Timothy Grayson launched into his invocation. Less an invocation, really, than an exhortation to the faithful to get out their checkbooks and send more money. *Well*, thought Helen defensively, *everyone has to live*.

Soon the credits would be rolling and the show would be over. Not "show," she told herself firmly, "service." *Remember that, Helen*. Timothy got very cross with people who got that wrong. Anyway, now that the sh . . . service was almost ended he would soon be home. And she had something to tell him.

Helen Grayson opened her dressing gown and laid her hand on her still-flat stomach as though expecting to feel a

heartbeat. Timothy was going to make such a splendid father. She just knew it.

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FIVE BLOCKS AWAY, IN AN ANONYMOUS MOTEL ROOM, THE object of her thoughts looked at his watch, swung a well-tanned pair of naked legs out of bed, and headed for the shower. From a mass of tousled hair on the adjacent pillow came a disgruntled voice.

“Hey, Timmy, you’re not running out on me so soon, are you?”

“fraid so, honey. Duty calls. My wife never has caught on to the miracles of television recording, but the show was over five minutes ago, and she knows just how long it takes to get home from the studio.”

“But Timmy . . .” her tone was plaintive, “I need to talk to you. I need to talk to you real bad.”

“Next time, honey. Next time, I promise. We’ll just sit down and talk instead. If that’s what you want.” Grayson laughed. A pillow whistled through the air, missed, and thunked against the wall.

“You bastard.” She was sobbing now.

He hated women who burst into tears at every opportunity. Maybe it was time to end this particular liaison. She was getting too possessive. Could be dangerous.

“I’m going to have a baby, goddamn you! Your baby.”

“Oh shit,” said the Reverend Timothy Grayson.

BOOK TWO

*MARS*

2010

## THREE

JASON VERNE STARED through the small armored-glass porthole at the rapidly growing red disk below him and tried hard to keep his adrenaline level in check. The effort was in vain. From the sensitive electrodes taped to his chest, the spacecraft's telemetry system sent a stream of information back to Earth, betraying his elevated heartbeat.

"Calm down, boy," said a disembodied voice in his ear, "this is no time to get a coronary."

Verne resisted the temptation to giggle. Mission Control was determined to nanny him every inch of the way, as if there were anything they could do to help at a distance of 35 million miles. If he screwed up his landing approach, it would take 188 seconds for the folks at NASA to learn about it, and another 188 seconds to send a signal back, plus whatever time it took them to decide what to do. By then he would be long dead. No, whatever happened now was up to him. The long years of training were about to pay off. Or not, as the case might be.

Verne studied the array of instruments in his cramped

cabin, took careful note of the time, and fired a braking rocket for exactly 1.5 seconds. He was now on his fourth elliptical orbit of the red planet, slowing a little each time around and allowing the Martian gravity to pull him closer to the surface. If all went as planned, his sixth orbit would enable him to begin the final descent. Jason Verne, age thirty-five, American citizen and white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, was about to become the first human being to set foot on Mars.

Perhaps, Verne was acutely aware that there was still much that could go wrong. His spacecraft, a highly developed version of the lightweight single-stage NASA rocket that made its first flight in 1993, could easily be damaged on landing. Or the engines might refuse to reignite when he wanted to take off. In either instance he was a dead man. There was no backup mission waiting to take off from Earth to rescue him. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration had stretched its budget to the limit to get this flight off the ground, and Verne was under no illusion that the entire future of the space program rested on his shoulders.

After the disaster of the last unmanned Mars probe, lost without a trace before it could send a single picture back to Earth; the limping space shuttle, long obsolete and seemingly doomed to break down on the launchpad; the myopic Hubble telescope; and the fiasco of the International Space Station, NASA was making one final bid to retrieve its shattered reputation.

As ever, it had taken an outside threat to get Congress off its fat backside and appropriate enough money to do the job. This time, in a virtual replay of the panic caused by the launch of the Soviet Union's *Sputnik* in the 1960s, it was the Chinese who had provided the incentive by announcing that

they intended to put a person on Mars. Just what hazard this would have posed to the United States was never clear; the mere insult to America's supposed technological supremacy had been sufficient to send the politicians running to unlock their wallets. Or rather the taxpayers' wallets. But NASA, it was made clear, had better do it right this time. One more snafu, and the agency would cease to exist.

Even so, compared to the riches lavished on President Kennedy's promise to put a man on the moon, the budget for the Mars project—Operation Athena—was meager. NASA would have liked to launch at least two unmanned probes to the red planet first, to make a thorough survey of possible landing sites, but \$6 billion was all that Congress would spend. It was not enough, but it would have to do.

Fortunately, the Chinese had been under no such constraints. Even more fortunate, the eavesdroppers at the US National Security Agency had been able to intercept and decode the telemetry signals from their spacecraft as they prepared a detailed map of the Martian surface. Courtesy of their rivals, the Americans were able to devote all their resources to the main task: building a rocket capable of taking one person to Mars, and bringing that person safely home.

With its very future at stake, NASA had played up the public-relations aspect of the project to the hilt. Long before liftoff, Verne's face had adorned every magazine cover and every television screen in America. Whenever gaps in his training schedule permitted, he was whisked off to talk shows, interviews, and press conferences. Teenagers swarmed for his autograph; offers of marriage arrived by every post.

It was all too much for Verne, who hid an essential shyness behind his gregarious facade. He pleaded with his

bosses to bring the media circus to a halt and let him get on with his job. They refused.

But now, at last, he was where he wanted to be: all alone and in charge of his own destiny. Originally it had been intended that a crew of two should make the trip, but the payload capacity of the *Athena* proved to be insufficient. It had to carry enough liquid fuel for two liftoffs and two landings, plus maneuvering in space. There was food and water for 119 days to be put on board, allowing a stay of three days on the Martian surface, plus sufficient creature comforts to make the trip tolerable. One person was all it could take, and at that the scientists wished that Verne's frame was somewhat smaller than his six-foot one inch and 195 pounds.

Whatever their past failings, Verne had to admit that the NASA engineers seemed to have done a good job this time. Thus far the trip had been boringly uneventful. He clicked his microphone button and reported his position to the listeners in Mission Control, though it seemed a pointless exercise. Traveling at eighteen thousand miles an hour, he would be somewhere entirely different before they received the signal. Still, they liked to know he was there.

Verne waited patiently for their acknowledgment, which ought to come in six and a half minutes, give or take a few seconds. The moment passed, and there was nothing but a quiet static hiss in his headphones. He looked at his watch. There was no mistake: Houston was a minute late in replying.

No cause for concern. Not yet. Glitches in communications were far from unknown. Still, Verne could not help remembering the loss of the *Mars Observer* and the numerous Russian spacecraft that had suffered disruptions to their radio systems in the vicinity of Mars. It had

happened so often that scientists joked about the presence of a “great galactic ghoul” prowling Earth’s nearest planetary neighbor. Suddenly, those jokes no longer seemed so funny.

Without haste, Verne checked the functioning of *Athena*’s systems. Every light came up green. He keyed his microphone once more.

“Houston, this is *Athena*. Do you read me?” He repeated the message three times and waited for the answer.

The silence was thicker than darkness. “Screw this,” Verne muttered to himself, “I’d better get back to flying this thing.” He was well into his fifth orbit. Once more around and he would have to commit to a landing, but should he do so if the radio remained silent?

Well, why not? He hadn’t gone through all that crap in the past three years to chicken out now. Houston’s help might be useful if anything went wrong, but probably not. And he was the pilot in command, damn it. By every rule and tradition of flight the decision was his, and his alone. Verne made the decision. He was going in.

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AT MISSION CONTROL, WHERE TELEVISION CAMERAS watched and waited to record the first steps of a human on Mars, the atmosphere was one of quietly controlled hysteria. The spokesperson who announced “We appear to have lost contact with the spacecraft” was old enough to remember a predecessor who said much the same thing as a horrified nation watched the space shuttle *Challenger* explode shortly after liftoff. At least, he thought thankfully, this one is

happening 35 million miles away, well out of sight. The thought didn't help very much.

At a console behind him, a controller was talking urgently into a microphone, pausing, flipping switches, and trying again. Computers on board the spacecraft, which should have responded even if Verne was in some way incapacitated, were equally mute. Minute by minute the sense of disaster grew. America glued its face to the television. And absolutely nothing happened.

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ON THE BACKSIDE OF MARS AT THAT MOMENT, PLENTY was happening. Verne had been able to identify his landing zone on the last pass from a height of 120 miles. Now, much lower, he braked hard with his thruster rockets and brought the *Athena* to a halt relative to the spinning surface of the planet. More jockeying with the controls, and the rocket was vertical, its strong landing gear extended beyond the tail fins.

After being weightless for so long, Verne welcomed the tug of Martian gravity as it pulled him closer to the surface. Now deprived of direct vision, he activated the downward-pointing television camera that should be giving the folks at home their first close-up view of Mars. Should, but probably wasn't. There was no way of knowing.

Verne concentrated on his instruments, using the thrusters to correct any deviation from the vertical and firing the main engines in bursts to slow the descent. The radar altimeter now read twenty thousand feet, dropping at five thousand feet per minute. Too fast, but he would have to be careful how much he used the engines. There were no gas

stations on Mars. Probably not, anyway. He let the free fall continue to four thousand feet, then held his breath as he opened the throttle for a healthy burst of power. The deceleration forced him back on his couch as the altimeter stabilized, and the great rocket eased itself down through the last few hundred feet to drop like a hundred-ton feather on the surface.

Verne, bathed in sweat, felt his concentration unwind like a rubber motor of a model aircraft. "Houston," he said. "Just in case you can hear me, *Athena* has landed." He waited. There was no response.

Sunlight streamed through the portholes as the great cloud of red dust kicked up by the rocket engines slowly subsided. This should be the moment, thought Verne, when a little green man knocks on the door and I ask to be taken to his leader.

For all the scientific evidence to the contrary, human belief remained strong that there was, or at least had been, life on Mars. The "canals" had been explained away, but what of the gigantic human face that satellites had discovered, peering upward from a place they called Cydonia? Even a few reputable scientists had braved their colleagues' scorn and declared this evidence of a Martian civilization.

Verne was here to find out, once and for all. It was, indeed, the sole purpose of his mission. With limited resources and only one person able to make the trip, NASA had reluctantly concluded that no serious scientific work was going to be possible. What they could do, however, was capture the public imagination, make a gigantic show. And what better backdrop than the mystery of Cydonia?

Verne scanned the gauges designed to monitor conditions

on the surface. Temperature: twenty-four degrees. Damned cold, but not unbearable. Atmosphere: one part oxygen to fifteen parts nitrogen. Not breathable, but he was carrying oxygen. Atmospheric pressure: about half that on Earth but enough to prevent his blood from boiling away. At least there would be no need for a clumsy space suit—just heat-retaining overalls plus oxygen mask and rebreathing equipment.

He knew he ought to rest; the schedule drawn up by Mission Control demanded it. Screw Mission Control. What the eye didn't see, the heart wouldn't grieve about, and the eye sure wasn't seeing too well right now.

Verne groped his way around the cabin, his legs unsteady after the prolonged weightlessness in spite of doing the exercises prescribed by NASA doctors. He rummaged in lockers for the items he would need, putting on a fresh pair of white overalls, though it seemed a waste of effort—after fifty-six days without a shower he must smell like a goat. If there were any Martians out there, they were going to get a poor impression of human hygiene.

Ready at last, Verne spun the locking wheel on the access hatch and heard a faint hiss as the pressure inside the craft equalized with the outside atmosphere. He took a deep breath and swung the hatch out and away, standing poised in the open doorway forty feet above the Martian surface.

He was unprepared for the sight that met his eyes. The *Athena* had landed scarcely a mile from the Cydonia monument that had so intrigued the people of Earth. It was unbelievably huge: a full thousand feet high and more than a mile in length. Surely, he thought, no hands—human or otherwise—could have created such a monolith. And yet, etched against the skyline in the brilliant sun, was a human

head in profile, complete in every detail. What natural force could have created such a thing by chance?

Verne raised his video camera and took a long panning shot of the spectacle. Then he unrolled the flexible titanium ladder attached to the frame of the hatch and began climbing down. He dropped the last three feet and stood at last on the Martian surface, looking up at the spacecraft's television lens, which might or might not be transmitting pictures back to Earth. What a pity, he thought, that Neil Armstrong had already used that line about "one giant step for mankind."

He pondered a moment and fixed the camera with a broad grin.

"Hi, Ma," said Jason Verne.

## FOUR

AS THE HOURS without contact lengthened into days, a sense of mourning spread across the United States and throughout the world. Jason Verne, with his broad college-boy grin and his shock of unruly hair had become a familiar figure in every living room, his lone adventure a symbol of human courage. They had swallowed the hype that preceded the launch. They had listened to his cheerful broadcast commentaries over millions of miles of empty space. They had admired him, envied him, even loved him. And now he was gone.

From his pulpit in the Crystal Chapel of Christ the Redeemer, the multimillion-dollar headquarters of his television empire, the Reverend Timothy Grayson took on the task of expressing the nation's grief. Flanked by his wife and daughter, his cheeks streaked with genuine tears, Grayson poured forth a eulogy fit for a saint.

"Oh Lord," he implored, his inspiration running dry after twenty solid minutes, "take thou the soul of Jason Verne, our dearly beloved brother, and gather him to thy bosom. Guard

him and keep him in thy heavenly mansion forever and ever. Amen.”

“Amen,” chorused the congregation. “Amen,” murmured 250 million viewers around the globe.

“Holy shit,” said President Gephardt as he switched off the television set in the living quarters of the White House, “old Timmy can certainly turn on the sob stuff when he wants to.” He picked up a telephone and punched the numbers for his chief of staff. “Harry? I want to see the director of NASA right away. I’m going to have that bastard’s balls for breakfast.”

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UNAWARE THAT HE HAD JUST BEEN CONSIGNED TO THE ages, Jason Verne was at that moment completing his third and final trip to the Cydonia monument. Laden with cameras and samples of his findings from the monolith, he dragged his boots through the Martian dust with sheer exhaustion and stared up at the door of the *Athena* and its long, dangling ladder. Right now, he could no more climb that ladder than fly to the moon. He smiled at the thought. Compared to what he had just accomplished, flying to the moon ought to be child’s play.

He had expected an anticlimax when he set off toward the monolith three days before. Dutifully, he carried an American flag to place on the highest point, but Verne was pretty sure it would be stationed on an ordinary rock when he finally got there. But then, as he entered the thing’s shadow, he began to change his mind. That shape in front of him had to be an ear. A vast ear, more than one hundred and fifty feet high, but unmistakably human in every detail.

He paused to photograph the feature while he could still get it in the viewfinder, then advanced toward its lowest point, the lobe. The rock, he could see clearly now, was a kind of granite, light gray in color and highly polished. Sandblasted, he supposed, by this infernal dust. But that, too, was odd, because there seemed to be no wind on Mars. Not today, anyway. The lobe—I must stop thinking of it in those terms, he told himself—stood raised above the main surface by some six feet. Verne wandered around behind it and found . . .

*Steps.*

Verne's heart began to pound. Breathing, already labored because he was trying to conserve oxygen, became almost impossible. He fumbled for the valve at his waist and turned it fully open, reveling in the metallic taste as the gas flooded into his lungs and began to enter his bloodstream.

*Steps.*

He moved forward and examined them closely. There was no room for doubt: no force of nature could possibly have fashioned this rising stairway, tunneling upward into the structure. The steps were forged with geometric precision, their edges sharp and unblemished, their treads unworn. Someone, some . . . thing, had made them. But hadn't used them much.

Did the builders still exist? What manner of beings were they? Were they waiting for him, somewhere at the end of that dark passage? Verne's brain buzzed with questions, but he knew he had already found the answer to the mystery that had plagued mankind through the ages: Are we alone in the universe? And the answer was NO.

NASA, in its infinite wisdom, had provided him with a survival kit that included a lightweight automatic pistol and

two spare magazines. He had laughed when he found it and tossed the thing aside. Who the hell did they think he was going to use it on? He wished now that he had brought it as he switched on a flashlight and advanced up the steps. One by one.

It was hard going. The risers were a good eighteen inches high; clearly intended for those with longer legs than Verne's. Soon, however, the stairway turned sharply to the left and he could see daylight a short way ahead. Moments later he was standing in the "earhole" of the monolith, looking out at the puny silver shape of the *Athena* standing silent on the plain. Verne turned. Behind him a second tunnel, this time smooth-surfaced, led steeply upward into the heart of the rock. Hesitating no more than a moment, Verne followed it.

Some seven feet high, with walls that curved into a gentle arch, the tunnel seemed to go on forever. Verne examined the sides carefully, looking for the telltale marks of tools or even, hopefully, graffiti. There was nothing—just smoothly polished stone that might have been cast from a mold, flawless. How on earth had it been done? But then, he reminded himself, he was not on Earth.

The ceiling above his head was rising, the walls beginning to separate. Soon he found himself looking at a gigantic arched chamber, its far end open to a rapidly darkening sky. Verne looked at his watch, still set on Zulu time. It was noon in Greenwich, England, but here on Mars it was clearly the end of the day. And it was going to get cold. Very cold. Cursing his lack of forethought in not bringing a space blanket from the *Athena*, he hurried toward the opening of the chamber and surveyed his surroundings.

He was standing on a softly curving slab of rock that

sloped downward to the plain far below. At such short range it was difficult to distinguish the exact form of the various shapes that rose around him, but he assumed that this was the face of the monolith. Turning, he saw that the arch from which he had emerged was one of a matched pair—the right-hand nostril of a face that made the figures on Mount Rushmore pale into insignificance.

Verne debated trying to scale the nose in order to plant his flag. But somehow such an act would seem puerile, even sacrilegious.

He decided to compromise. The planting of the flag was something NASA would expect of him. It would be the definitive picture flashed around the world, assuming that he managed to get home, so he had better get on with it. He set up the camera on its tripod, extended the fragile frame of the Stars and Stripes, and positioned it so that the nose would be in the background. Then he set the delayed-action timer and stood beside the flag in a suitably heroic pose, resisting the temptation to lift a derisive finger as the shutter snapped. There, it was done. Verne refolded the flag and tucked it out of sight into a small crevice. There might, after all, be Martian litter laws.

The sun, smaller than it appeared from Earth, was vanishing below the horizon. Verne shivered and hurried back down the tunnel, leaving the camera where it was. Tomorrow he would return for a full exploration. Right now, he had to get back to the *Athena* to avoid freezing to death.

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MISSION CONTROL IN HOUSTON WAS A DESOLATE PLACE; more mausoleum than keystone of the space program. With nothing left to control, and not much likelihood that there ever would be, the remaining staff were reduced to showing parties of schoolchildren around the ranks of blank and silent monitors.

It was sixty-three days since contact had been lost with the *Athena*. Right about now, Russell Brandon reflected gloomily, the craft would have been approaching the moon's orbit and making preparations to land on Earth. This room would have been humming with activity; the media would have been going crazy.

Instead, the world's attention had passed to other things, and the former chief controller was left to explain the debacle as best he could to bunches of pimple-faced students. At least he still had a job, for what it was worth. Not many did. NASA was being dismantled by presidential order, the loss of national pride having finally proved too much to bear.

Brandon turned to face the latest party of young tourists. This bunch, he had been told, were rather special. They came from the Thomas Jefferson High School in Alexandria, Virginia; Jason Verne's old alma mater. He noticed that they wore black armbands. Even more soberly than usual, he launched into his routine.

The kids were bright. Brandon had to admit it. Once he had finished his introduction, they hit him with questions from every direction, wanting to know the function of each instrument, every technical detail of the mission to Mars. And as always, they came back to the one question he could not answer: What had gone wrong?

He was standing beside the main communications

console, long silent, feeling as though his back was against a wall, when a girl's voice piped up from the back of the room.

"Please, sir, won't you try again? Just one more time?"

"There's no point," said Brandon sadly. "We've tried and tried and tried. He's gone. We've got to accept it."

"Please, sir. PLEASE." There were a dozen voices now.

Reluctantly, Brandon switched the console on. A deep hum came from the speakers around the room.

"*Athena*, this is Mission Control. Do you read me? I say again, do you read me?" How many times had he said that over the days that followed Verne's disappearance?

He repeated the message three times and switched the console to receive, turning to stretch out his hands in helpless apology to the students. There were twenty seconds of silence, and then:

"About time!" said a disgusted voice. "Houston, this is *Athena*. Where the hell have you guys been? I've been calling you for the past four weeks."



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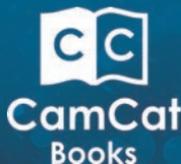
# THE TRIAL OF THE NEXT CENTURY

**J**ason Verne is an all-American hero. As the first man to set foot on Mars after a solo journey into space, he quickly became a familiar figure in every living room. His good-will and human courage won over the hearts of many, including the daughter of world-famous televangelist, Timothy Grayson. His meteoric rise didn't end there. While settling into the limelight with his wife and new baby Timmy, he became the perfect candidate to move into the White House.

But this kind of fame and power comes at a price. The midnight kidnapping of Timmy Verne leaves the world aghast. Who would commit the capital offence of breaking the Lindbergh Law?

Then veteran reporter Albert Choate notices suspicious parallels between the kidnapping of the president-elect's only child and another event that occurred almost a hundred years ago—the Lindbergh Kidnapping. History seems to be repeating itself. Is this some sort of twisted coincidence, or could the Trial of the Century be occurring all over again for some other sinister purpose?

William Norris is the author of numerous true crime books and novels inspired by his years as an award-winning investigative journalist. Look at the end of the book for a book club discussion guide and a preview of *The Badger Game*.



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