Chapter 1

Listening Post Sentinel orbiting Saturn moon Titan:
January 26, 2088:
16:25 Greenwich Mean Time:

Jarrod McKinley shivered as a tingle raced down his spine. He recognized it as a warning sign and looked over his shoulder out the window of the listening post he commanded.

The view still stunned him. The debris-strewn rings of Saturn spread out before him, the huge, colorful planet tilted 45 degrees, just floating there like the childhood model he used to have hanging from his bedroom ceiling in the farmhouse in Montana.

He shook off his sense of foreboding, turned back and grabbed his rehydrated tuna sandwich floating in the zero Gs of the listening post. Grabbing it, he took a bite and continued to calibrate the array of radio telescopes and antennae on top of the listening post. Eight smaller dishes on two booms stretching one hundred meters each and offset one hundred and eighty degrees from each other flanked one large radar dish. The large dish was only fifteen meters wide but more sensitive than anything man had yet used in its two-hundred-year search for life in the universe.

He had started his three-month listening post tour the day before and was happy, although he realized his mom

and dad probably had something a little more exciting in mind for him. His crew of himself, Brad Johnson and Liza Alvarez was the third assigned to Listening Post Sentinel. They would spend three months at the post before being relieved. One year later, they would be back, if the program was still operating. There had been rumblings there might be cutbacks.

McKinley turned, again, and looked out the window. There was that feeling again – something was happening and it wasn't good. McKinley couldn't see anything so he readjusted his gravity chair and tapped on a control screen to bring up a shakedown schedule of tasks the crew had to complete to test the post's components. Listening Post Sentinel was a retrofitted liquid fuel tank from the first generation American Space Shuttle program and there was a long checklist to keep it space worthy.

McKinley, with a well-muscled body developed by years of farm work, athletics and space training, brushed his neatly trimmed sandy brown hair away from his forehead, tapped on the touch screen control panel again, finished the shakedown schedule and moved to the baseline data of the post. As he checked off numbers, he again felt that shiver, a presence. It was as if someone was looking at him. It was a strong feeling and he looked out the window again, almost expecting to see something appear from behind Saturn.

There it was again, that feeling. It was different, though, than the gentle nudging of nature he had learned to recognize while living on the farm.

He swung his five-feet-eleven-inch frame fully around and looked out the observation window. The shiver he had been feeling tightened into a knot in his gut and chilled him to the core. In the distance, coming around Saturn, a bright yellow-orange line stretched across the emptiness of space. The

line flickered and grew larger by the second. It was like a wave, still a long distance away but coming right at him, and fast.

A quiet tone began sounding, indicating the instruments were picking up something. McKinley hit the alarm button to scramble the crew. Now, everyone was now on duty.

"McKinley's personal log," McKinley said quietly to turn on his personal info disk. The receivers on the minidisk tucked in his uniform pocket would pick up and record everything he said and his conscious thoughts of the event. He stared out the window and began dictating. The instruments on the post would record electronic signals received and the data from the observation cameras around the perimeter, but his personal observations were important. Space exploration had quit relying solely on machines after the fiasco on Mars in 2052 when dozens of people died because they trusted instruments and didn't bother to look outside just before a canyon wall under their outpost gave way. Machines might not lie intentionally, only by omission.

The disturbance he saw outside the listening post was like a wave and distorted the surrounding space–like a huge rolling ocean breaker, only tinged with fire. It had to be thousands of kilometers away, judging from the instruments, but McKinley could see it very plainly. It was spreading across space and filling the entire view out the observation window. Plumes of fires erupted as the wave gobbled up space debris as it bore down on the post. McKinley feared the small listening post wouldn't withstand the hit–either roasting them alive or exploding.

He debated whether or not he should shut down the station and lose data or try to ride out the impact while watching and recording. His training gave him the guidelines: the signal was the most important thing. He mentally ran through the protocol; capture whatever signal there was, protect the listening post, protect the crew.

Brad Johnson, answering the crew alert, shot out of the hatch from below like a big canon ball.

"What's up?" he blurted, followed by a quiet, "Oh shit," as he looked out the observation window. He forgot to catch himself, hit the ceiling then lurched to grab a handhold.

Liza Alvarez floated through the hatch and asked calmly, "Problem?"

"Might be," said McKinley as he pointed toward the window. "Start reading those monitors, I need to know how fast that thing is coming and how much energy it's carrying. We could be in trouble if we can't get our shielding up in time."

Johnson, a blonde from California, was ready to raise shielding immediately.

"No," said McKinley. "I want to watch it as long as we can. Liza, get on the monitors. Tell me about that wave. How fast is it moving? How much energy? Brad, get the shields ready, but wait until I give you the word. We're going to play this one tight."

"Man, give me a break," said Johnson. "Play it tight? Let's just lock up right now."

"On my command, Brad. Liza, how fast, how much energy?"

"It's moving about four hundred kilometers a second. It's still one hundred thousand kilometers away and the energy . . . well . . . it's fluctuating. Ranges between four hundred and eight hundred megawatts," said Alvarez.

"Good, we have some time," McKinley said. "Brad, send a message to Titan. Make sure they see this thing. Maybe they can get a lock on it."

"Oh shit," said Johnson. "Did you see that? It just toasted another piece of space junk."

"Make the call, Brad."

"Roger."

"We've got about four minutes," said Alvarez.

"Make sure the backup computers are powered down. Go only with the primary. We want to have some brains left when this is over."

"Done," said Alvarez. "Jarrod, the energy levels are increasing from that wave, or whatever it is. I'm getting readings now of between eight hundred and one thousand megawatts."

"Okay," McKinley said. "Everyone, have an emergency air mask close enough so you can grab it."

He spent the next two minutes checking all the monitors and confirming his personal log was recording everything he was saying and thinking. An image of his mother, from when he was six years old, flashed through his mind. He was sure this is not what she meant when she told him quietly but with an absolute certainty, while looking at the Dig Dipper, that his future lay among the stars–to get roasted inside a listening post. The cigar-shaped Sentinel was a dull orange-brown and bristled with a radio telescope array on top, half a dozen other antennae protruding at all angles and a large solar panel on the bottom to collect the dim sunlight to help power the station.

Inside, the station was divided in three sections. On top was a command center with porthole windows in each quadrant. Just below were the living quarters and the bottom level housed the main power plant, a backup power plant, cargo hold, computers and atmospheric mechanics. That level also was the way out. A crew escape module was tucked neatly near the exit hatch.

Sentinel was a program SETISC started in the late 2070s as a bold attempt to finally establish contact with intelligent life outside the solar system. The effort had started more than one hundred years earlier when the original Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) began peering

through telescopes, manning radio telescopes and launching Earth-orbiting devices of all kinds. But SETI had struck out. Early tantalizing signals turned out to be only static from other stars that had become distorted by atmospheric and solar interference.

A listening post on the outer reaches of the solar system eliminated the Earth's atmospherics and isolated the solar interference enough to get a clear reading of extra-solar signals. Sentinel was in geosynchronous orbit over Saturn's biggest moon Titan.

On Titan, a mining company had set up an extraction and exploratory colony a few years earlier and SETISC leased a building in the colony for its off-Earth base of operations.

The Titan SETISC base supported the Sentinel listening post by providing supplies, service and maintenance. Staff at the base compiled reports from the listening post, verified data and relayed it all to Earth.

"Brad," McKinley said, "standby at the shields, are they ready? Did you send Titan the message?"

"Ready, message sent."

"Thirty seconds," said Alvarez

"Raise the shields. Okay, everyone hang on. Keep one eye on your instruments and one hand on a fire extinguisher. Here it comes."

An ozone-like smell tinged the air in the small control room just before a fiery orange glow enveloped the listening post.

McKinley thought he heard the crack of lightning just before he lost consciousness.