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OUT THERE

**THE GOVERNMENT'S
SECRET QUEST
FOR EXTRATERRESTRIALS**

HOWARD BLUM



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New York London Toronto Sydney Tokyo Singapore

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ISBN: 0-671-66261-9

First Pocket Books printing October 1991

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

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Printed in the U.S.A.

*For Jenny, with love.
And for Fred Hills and Burton Beals, wise friends.*

A Note to the Reader

This is a true story. I verified every name, incident, date, and conversation that is recorded in this account. To accomplish this, I have relied on extensive interviews with civilian and military officials, both past and present: members of the intelligence community; the FBI; and scientists working both in and out of the government. I have also consulted confidential military documents, classified research reports, and reports prepared exclusively for the UFO Working Group, as well as research papers and government publications available to the public. A more detailed explanation of my method of attribution is included in A Note on Sources.

H.B.

*The ultimate object of magic in all ages
was and is to obtain control of the sources of life.*

—W. B. Yeats

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PROLOGUE

A SPY'S STORY

The spy refused to answer any more questions. It was nearly midnight and we were sitting in a hotel room that looked straight across Pennsylvania Avenue toward a floodlit White House. There already was a row of empty miniature scotch bottles on the coffee table in front of us, but I got up and walked across the room to the minibar.

"One for the road," I suggested. I didn't want him to leave and I figured this was a better strategy than arguing. After all, he seemed to have quite a thirst.

He accepted the drink, stirring it with a long, thin finger; and, I noted, he made no move to rise from the sofa.

"I've said all I'm going to say," he insisted.

"Sure." Some people you don't push; you just give them time.

"I've already told you plenty. Right?"

"Right." Which was the truth. For the past two hours he had been the perfect source: a man with a mission. He was a senior official at the National Security Agency and he had contacted me after reading a *New York Times Magazine* piece I had written about the John Walker spy case. The biographical squib in the magazine had explained that

I was writing a book on this family of spies and the NSA intelligence officer had made the effort to track me down in New York City because, he explained, he wanted to make sure my book was accurate. Mostly, though, he was angry. Even over the long-distance phone his patriotic dismay was an open wound: "Walker told us that stealing secrets from this country is as easy as shoplifting from K mart. And I'll be damned if the bastard isn't right."

"We should talk about this," I quickly suggested.

He agreed. "The nation's got to wake up before it's too late." And he added, "Next time you're down in Washington, let's get together for a drink."

I caught the shuttle that afternoon. My plane landed in the last hour of daylight on a warm spring day in 1987, and it was dark by the time my cab made its way into the city and I had checked into my room. I waited impatiently until precisely nine o'clock and then, as arranged, went downstairs to meet him in the hotel bar. He spotted me first, and gestured with a small, very discreet nod of his head. Foolishly, I bounded across the crowded room with what I hoped was an ingratiating grin and offered my hand. He took it, but the public display seemed to unsettle him. "It's a zoo in here," he announced before I could find a seat. "Let's go for a walk."

We walked toward the Old Executive Office Building. The night was warm, yet the downtown streets were nearly empty. We talked about the cost of living in New York City, about working at *The New York Times*, about the Yankees and their owner George Steinbrenner. About anything but the Walker spy case. I let him set the pace; the source always makes all the rules. Finally, we were back at the hotel. When I walked to the elevator, he simply followed without comment.

For the next two hours, he sat on the green damask sofa in my room sipping glasses of scotch while I hurled questions. From the first, he was a ready accomplice. He was eager to share what he knew because, he said with conviction, "the public has a right to know." A moment later, though, he broke into a rare grin and noted, "Besides, if

Walker knew it, it's not secret anymore." But by midnight he was no longer cooperating. As happens in most interviews—even the most collaborative of sessions—we had reached the wall: the point he had resolved not to go beyond no matter what.

Yet watching him nurse that last drink, I realized I wasn't the only one who was reluctant to call it a night. Now that he had broken a lifetime of training and, contrary to all his professional instincts, had shared classified information with A Member of the Press, he was not ready to stink off. Playing the deep background source is an intoxicating, aggrandizing role; and, as I have so often observed, it is a repetitious calling. It was in this high-spirited mood, helpful and confiding, hoping to prolong his moment, that he reached for something else to pique my interest.

"You know," he threw out, "there's been a lot of talk around the NSA about outer space. Weird stuff. UFOs."

"Uh-huh," I said evenly. I remained determined to steer him back to Walker, but for the moment I restrained myself. Rushing, I knew, wouldn't help things at all.

"Yeab," he continued. "Heard they got some kind of all-star working group or something. A panel of hotshots zeroing in on UFOs. Going to get the truth at last."

"Think there might be something to get?" I was being polite.

He shrugged massively. "I don't know," he said after a bit of thought. "But the story's going around that a lot of strange things are happening. We're catching a lot of crazy signals on our microphones and they're not from this planet. That's a fact. You might want to look into it."

And that was how it all begun. That was how I first learned about the government's covert search for extraterrestrial intelligence. That was how I received the first clue that would lead me on a two-year chase across the entire country, from military bases under snowcapped mountains to installations hidden away in the midst of vast deserts, from laboratories guarded by military policemen to classified government engineering projects staffed by long-haired graduate students, from the New Mexico hill country to the

woods of northern Wisconsin. That was why I first began to wonder what was out there—and what the government really knew about it.

Yet at the time I paid little attention; it wasn't the story I had rushed to Washington to hear. Instead, I affably told my source that maybe all this "weird stuff" was, indeed, a lead worth pursuing. Then, realizing it was now or never, I made one last attempt to bring the conversation back to John Walker. And this time around, much to my delight, I managed without too much effort to batter a large hole through my source's wall of resolve.

The next day I flew back to New York and sat down at my desk to write about the Walker spy family. I didn't give the NSA man's talk, an aside really, about "weird stuff" and "a panel of hotshots zeroing in on UFOs" much attention. I had a book to write. But by the time the final pages on the final diskette had spewed forth from my printer, his words—a challenge!—were resounding unexpectedly through my consciousness. Was the government back in the UFO business? Had they found anything? Was there life in the universe?

No doubt about it, I was curious. Very curious.

Notebook in hand, I began to poke around official Washington. I made a hundred calls, sat in suburban Virginia living rooms on couches covered in meadows of chintz, took notes in Beltway offices where the doors closed ominously behind me at the touch of unseen buttons, met with crew-cut, square-jawed military officials in surveillance-proof rooms, shared lunches with avuncular scientists in crowded institutional cafeterias—and along the way I began to perceive the outlines of a startling story: there was a top-secret government "panel of hotshots." It was called the UFO Working Group.

And if I had any doubts about the veracity of my original NSA contact, they were assuaged when the government, bless it, provided me with proof of his bona fides. It was not long after the publication of my book on the Walker spy family that my publisher received a letter from an indignant

lawyer. He had been retained by an NSA official who was being accused by the agency of being one of my sources. The good news, I told my publisher, was that the spiteful powers at Fort Meade had targeted the wrong man. But the even better news, I rejoiced silently, was that if the NSA was so concerned about where I was getting my information, my source must have access to the Real Thing. It wasn't fool's gold that had been waved before me. I returned with renewed enthusiasm to my prospecting in the deep mines of official Washington.

Yet the details of the story I was chasing still seemed to be beyond my grasp. Facts, always a precious commodity, were very hard to come by. I needed help. That was why, hat in hand, I decided to call on Seymour Hersh. Sy and I had both put in time at *The New York Times* and like anyone who has had the experience of sharing a newaroom with this Pulitzer Prize winner, I had quickly become aware of two things. First, he was an impeccable and relentless reporter; pity the poor soul who dared to stand between Sy and The Truth. And, a dangerously close second: He was a man, as an intimidated editor had once remarked, whose bite was truly worse than his bark. So it was not without some trepidation that I went marching into his cluttered, closet-sized office in the National Press Club.

I was a model of politeness. I explained to Sy that I was working on a story about the government's secret search for extraterrestrial life. In fact, I had reason to believe that a clandestine panel called the UFO Working Group had been formed. Could Sy, for old *Times* sake, give me a hand in getting to the bottom of this?

Sy went from zero to sixty in about a second: "Get out of here, Blum! I got enough to do without helping you check out kooky stories. You go New Age on me or something? You think I give a damn about that sort of craziness? What do I care about UFOs?"

But before he finished his tirade, he had also reached for the phone.

Two days later I was back in New York when I received a call: "Blum? Hersh here. You're right—the government

is as crazy as you are. They do have some kind of committee that's looking into all that kooky stuff."

"Can you give me a name? Someone I can talk to?"

"You think I'm gonna do your work for you? There's a story here. Isn't that enough for you? Now find it yourself." And then he hung up.

So, I went to find it.

I started, a modest but necessary first step, by making formal inquiries at all the relevant government agencies. Of course, I was not optimistic about what I would learn. I expected weary, noncommittal shrugs or, at best, succinct "no comments." I was mistaken. The denials were surprisingly tenacious and absolute.

The Department of Defense spokesman took three days to mull over my question about the UFO Working Group and then reported back: "There is no record of any committee, either official or unofficial, called the UFO Working Group. Further, since the conclusion of Project Blue Book in 1969 there has been no official or unofficial investigation, study, or involvement in the matter of UFOs by any branch of the Armed Forces or the Defense Intelligence Agency."

The CIA spokesman took only a day to reply, but he spoke with similarly earnest certitude: "On the record and off the record, the agency has no knowledge of any group by the name of the UFO Working Group. The agency has no active research into UFOs or extraterrestrial life. In fact, its only involvement with UFOs was the Robertson Panel Report which was issued in 1953."

The NSA spokesman was terse, yet a bit more cautious: "I can find no one who will confirm the existence of the UFO Working Group or an involvement by the NSA with UFO investigations."

And, I soon learned, all three statements were lies.

PART I

**THE UFO
WORKING GROUP**

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