

# **Escape from Earth**

*A Sci-Fi Novella*

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## Part One: The Encounter

### Chapter One

Lucas watched twin sister Jan's antique Civic speed away from the farmhouse. Four months ago, he would have been following her in his old but newer GMC pickup for a bit just in case the car broke down again on the old country roads. Now, at her insistence, he just kept his fingers crossed and hoped she made it back to the turnpike and the city.

Four months ago, their once-per-month visits to the old homestead where they had grown up allowed them a nostalgia fix that helped preserve memories of happier times with their parents. That was before the highway accident that took the old-timers' lives. That was also before Becky, who had often accompanied Lucas to the farm, broke up with him. And before he quit his job.

Both Jan and he had made their parents proud. Farm kids who became doctors, she a successful pediatrician, he a successful neurosurgeon. Jan still loved helping the little ones. He had traded helping others for returning to his childhood fascination with all things scientific and especially electronics and computers. That allowed him to become a recluse and forget about flirty Rebecca Hanlon, who was afraid of a permanent commitment and never sure about their relationship.

After the Civic disappeared over the horizon in a cloud of dust and dark gray exhaust from burning oil, Lucas debated whether to finish a project in his basement workshop or go fishing. He looked back at the farmhouse. Jan and he probably would never have sold it even before, and now it seemed like his solid fortress against the world's randomness. He opted for fishing, remembering a deep pool in the river he hadn't visited for a while. He wasn't much of a cook, but he could prepare an acceptable dinner out of a few catfish and instant wild rice.

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There was just the hint of autumn in the late September day with its anemic sunshine. Outdoor excursions in winter reduced to treks to the woodpile through the snow, so he knew the choice to go fishing was the right one—not many chances left. The pleasure he felt as he cast a hook and bob onto dark waters confirmed that. He watched the float swirl around a bit in the lazy eddy currents and tried to focus on the past. He stuck the pole in an anchored stand, sat, and studied his hands, wiggling his fingers and shaking his head. After months puttering around the farm, he could still do fine work with a soldering gun and small tools, but his hands were no longer the soft, skilled hands of a neurosurgeon. He smiled. *It's better this way. I have all the money I need, and I can pretty much do what I want.*

That's when he heard the groan. Looking over his shoulder, he decided it had come from a small copse of trees bordering a tiny creek that ran along the border of the property and finally into the river. *Maybe an injured animal?* No, the groan was from a human being. He stood and tried to see beneath the trees. Too many shadows. He walked toward the copse only to discover there was nothing on his side of the creek. He knew it narrowed enough away from the river that he could jump it as a boy. *Can I still do that?*

Almost. With his sneakers a bit wet, he was soon searching under the trees on the other side. He spotted her, the tall grass making a shell for her like Venus's in Botticelli's famous painting. Where Becky's swarthy and curly brown hair had made her seem exotic when he'd first met her, this woman was a ghostly pale, her skin almost translucent even in the filtered sunlight. And she was in trouble. Unlike the Venus in the painting, she had short black hair matted with blood and weeds. He could see bones protruding from one arm, more blood covering face and torso, and more dry weeds mixed with dirt and mud covering her legs as if she had been making adobe in a vat used to crush grapes.

She saw him and sent a weak smile his way.

It was still a come-hither smile that would have increased the pulse of any pubescent boy hooked on centerfolds, the woman a Baroque Honey Ryder rising out of the waters to tempt James Bond's eyes. His own pulse ticked up a few notches too, not because of her nakedness, but because of the smile. He went to her. She tried to crawl away. He put his light jacket over her.

"You need help."

*Stupid statement!* He would have to set that arm at least and then call 9-1-1. *Again, stupid!* The nearest hospital was twenty-five miles away. *I'll have to search through the trunk in the basement for my old intern's kit. This one is on you, Lucas Wright.*

The woman muttered something unintelligible and passed out. He scooped her up and headed back to the farmhouse. This time he forded the creek. The water was cold already, but it only came to the middle of his calves. He began to shiver, but he had kept his precious burden dry.

## Chapter Two

Art Needham studied the report just in from Cheyenne Mountain. No doubt about it—that was some strange meteor shower. Five objects uniform in size had appeared out of nowhere at the same spot in orbit and streaked earthward. NORAD lost track of them at low altitudes. No telling where they landed. And they had no reports so far from concerned citizens. Authorities actively seeking information from locals might put UFO nuts into a frenzy. *Can't avoid it. We need ground intel.* That required some real gumshoes activity, something he never relished at his age.

With only two years to retirement, Needham had taken the opportunity to head up the FBI's dead-end office that worked with police and sheriff's departments and the rest of the federal agencies on unusual criminal cases that baffled a lot of people, including the FBI. Some jokingly called the Exterior Liaison Office for Special Projects the X-Files, and there was some similarity. Needham's last case involved a weird psycho who had a fetish for eating human organs of military officers, for example. It had turned out that her father was a general, and the family had moved all over the world. It wasn't clear how many she had murdered—there were still missing officers—but she was now in a prison for the criminally insane.

During the first year in the office, that was the only major case, though. He still thought his choice was a good one. The job mostly involved touring the country and talking to people, a lot less dangerous than many other assignments and a clear path to the safe life as a pensioner. He had no secretary to make his life miserable and his partner, a recent graduate from the Academy, was green enough that she generally paid close attention to what he said.

But now the bosses said he had to manage a task force on this one, at the Air Force's insistence. *Why don't they solve their own damn problems? Aren't they the UFO experts?* He smiled at that private joke, thinking of Area 51 and all that crap. Of course, when a dog poops on your lawn, it's always easier to hand off the problem to someone else. "Not my problem" was a slogan that often went right up to the presidency and beyond. Of course, one could argue that the owner of the pooping dog should be in jail for violating civic health codes, but the government officials in Flint, Michigan had never let that bother them.

Even picking the task force members was a pain. Most of them would be assigned to watch social media to try to find out if any debris had come down somewhere—it was just as hard to screen the shouters there as in a mob of rubberneckers who witnessed a serious altercation between cops and robbers. People admitted to or claimed the damndest things online, so the usual suspicion about the reliability of witnesses often applied, but some clues might turn up there.

He would spread other task force members across the Southwest to check for unreported sightings, far enough from him to keep him sane. His justification? Authorities like rural sheriff's deputies were often reluctant to report strange happenings in their skies for obvious reasons. The gumshoes would be the tires on black, unlabeled SUVs at first. City cops often had polluted skies that hid even a full moon, especially in the LA area. He expected nothing from them.

It bothered him that the NORAD tracks weren't standard reentry ones for meteorites. At least that's what the Mountain said, and they should know. Just before they lost the blips, there was a huge deceleration. Even he knew that hinted at some kind of braking mechanism. Not typical meteorite behavior. His first call had been to NASA for that reason.

"Yeah, we have the NORAD report," his contact there had said. "These aren't ours unless the Pentagon is doing some really secret space stuff they don't want anyone to know about, including us. I probably have a higher clearance than you, and I'm not violating the conditions of that clearance to say I didn't hear anything about special shenanigans going on. I wouldn't blame the EU either, so China and Russia are potential candidates. That North Korean wunderkind is always saying he's putting a satellite into orbit, so maybe we're just talking about shards from one of his failed ICBM tests. I guess I'm saying that maybe you should bring in some international types to help."

Needham had already considered that. Didn't want that. International complications were always a drag. He'd had enough experience with them in his career, and they hadn't been fun. Posturing by arrogant SOBs always made it difficult. And he was never good at languages and didn't trust interpreters. But Russia was as secretive as ever, and he wouldn't put it past the Chinese to try something. Or the spoiled brat in North Korea. Any of them could be testing something that was destined to threaten the U.S. *Maybe a secret sat-kill platform that blew up?* But the debris would have been in freefall, not slowing down. So would pieces of a North Korean ICBM.

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Two days later, a task force member entered with a strange report from a sheriff's deputy in Kansas. Needham waved the sheets.

"This is worth following up. Tell Julie to pack her bags. We're off to KC."

“Off on a wild goose chase probably,” said the heavy set woman. “But better you than me. I missed my daughter’s last play, so she’d really be upset if I did it again. Not that I wouldn’t appreciate a good excuse to avoid it.”

He nodded. Normally he would say to send Dad, but his colleague was a divorced single mom with three grade school children. He admired her ability to juggle home life with work. He’d never been able to do that and had paid with his own divorce. He was thankful his ex and he had no kids. The imps would be a huge complication. *If there were a test for being a good father, I’d surely flunk it.* It wasn’t that he didn’t like kids; he did. He just didn’t like responsibility. And the thought of paying for college educations in his retirement could only add to that responsibility. *Shit, I couldn’t afford to go to college now.*

Julie Carpenter was young and single, though, graduating from the Academy only three years earlier. His partner was smart and energetic with a tendency to act without thinking through consequences, so they made a good team—his experience complementing her exuberance. She was also a surrogate daughter, one that was financially independent. Better yet, she seemed to think he was the cat’s meow (she had three), or maybe that was all an act?

“KC wasn’t bad, Art, but how can people live out here in the sticks like this?” she said as they neared the town that was little more than a mail outpost for surrounding farms.

“Farmers are a dying breed, but some are sticking it out even though they’ve become basically tenant farmers to the big agribusiness concerns. I couldn’t do it, but I admire them. They’re close to the land. Good, solid people, if you discount the fruitcakes in state government.”

He knew Julie wouldn’t put much stock in such sentimentality. She was from NYC and probably had never worried about where all that readily available fresh produce and meat came from. People take things for granted until those things become scarce.

He parked the rental car in the parking lot at the county sheriff’s department.

“Let’s go meet the locals.”

### Chapter Three

“You’re looking better,” Lucas said to the woman.

She pulled the covers higher. No smile this time. Just a terrified expression. He shrugged and opened the blinds. Early morning sunshine filled the room.

“I cleaned you up the best I could and set your arm. I think I can mix up some plaster for a cast. You might need it. There’s a bag of it somewhere in the barn. I’ve just wrapped the arm for now. Stay put and I’ll bring you some breakfast.”

It wasn’t much—dry Cheerios, a glass of OJ and coffee, and toast. Jan would have made bacon and eggs or pancakes with maple syrup, but his breakfast cooking was limited to making toast and boiling water for instant coffee most of the time.

His patient was examining herself in the bedroom’s full length mirror when he returned. The sling was empty, and she was flexing the arm. He only saw her back but the frontal view in the mirror did a good job of eroding his professional detachment. Of course, he’d only dealt with heads in his specialization, so that professional detachment was a bit rusty.

She wasn’t tall and not Madison Avenue’s stereotype of a beautiful woman by any means. Becky had looked sexier in her birthday suit, for example. But there was a healthy glow to her now, one that had always made Lucas think some women were more than mere mortals, perhaps a separate species dedicated to making men their slaves? Stroking her arm now, she

smiled. The face that launched a thousand ships—he remembered his hated courses in the classics, but the authors of the old sagas had the right words! *And maybe too appropriate here?*

He put the breakfast tray down on the bureau and approached her. She turned and smiled again. Pointed at herself. “Saki.” *Her name?* She pointed a finger at him. He said his name. She repeated his name, he hers. It was a beginning.

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Jan missed the next weekend because she had to attend a convention in St. Louis, but the following Lucas watched as the Civic came up the gravel drive and his sister jumped out. *How is she going to react to Saki?*

“You look better today,” Jan said, giving him a hug. “Last time you looked so depressed.” She punched him in the gut. “Did you meet some nice country girl at the general store? Some nice God-fearing evangelical to get that Becky slut out of your mind?”

“Not exactly. I found a wood nymph. Her name is Saki.”

She studied him. “I’d prefer a Bible-toting woman who could keep you in line. You’re not regressing to your childhood and your imaginary friends, are you?”

He knew Jan would see nothing wrong with children having imaginary friends, but her question implied that he was going crazy. *Maybe.* He decided to ignore it.

“I gave her some of your old clothes to wear. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Are you going to introduce me then?” She winked. “If she exists, of course.”

He nodded and led her inside and through the house to the back porch where Saki was sitting and enjoying the sun. She and Lucas had made some progress in communicating, more along the lines of her learning English than Lucas learning her language. She stood and faced Jan but didn’t say anything.

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Lucas pointed at Jan, saying her name, and then at Saki, saying her name.

“Sigh-ster Jan,” said Saki, pointing at Jan. “No sigh-ster” as she pointed to herself.

“My Lord, Lucas, she doesn’t speak English.” She laughed. “But she’s real, at least.”

“We’re working on the English. Maybe you can help. I think she has a story to tell. I found her in the woods completely naked and injured. Her wounds healed amazingly fast, including the mending of the broken arm.” Saki nodded, pointed at the arm, and flexed it.

“Did you contact the sheriff? Maybe she was in a car accident and suffered a brain injury that affects her language skills.”

“I was going to, but what would come of it? They’d take her to KC and probably put her in a mental ward. There’s nothing wrong with her except she can’t speak English. Lots of people have trouble with English nowadays. That’s no reason to put her in an asylum.”

“But they could check records and make posters to see if there were any accidents having missing victims. Her family might be looking for her.”

“Maybe. I don’t think so. There are strange things about her. She’s afraid of water, for example, and only takes sponge baths.” Jan smiled. “Don’t leer like that. I don’t give them to her. She’s very strong too. She bench-pressed Mom and Dad’s bureau to find one of the Chef B’s meatballs that got away from her. And she doesn’t have a navel.”

“Plastic surgery, probably. Her facial features are perfect, although a bit rubenesque.”

"I'd be surprised if a surgeon ever touched that face. Her hair doesn't grow, what she has. She doesn't have any—well, you know, down there."

"A recent waxing or laser removal of follicles, probably."

"OK, Dr. Wright, you examine her then. I'm saying that turning her over to authorities might be a bad idea."

"Maybe she's an android," Jan said with a smile.

"Not with those broken bones in her arm. She's human with human blood, but not from here."

She stared at him. "Are you suggesting she's an ET? C'mon! That's crazy!"

"I'm not suggesting anything. I'm just trying to find an explanation. She came from somewhere. She's not a country girl. Oh, and I forgot, she dashes after rabbits, catches them, cuddles and pets them for a bit, and then let's them go. She could run in the Olympics, at least in the short races."

"I thought she was injured."

"Not anymore. We have to find out more about her."

"Did you closely survey the area where you found her? Maybe there's a damaged truck or car there."

Lucas nodded. "I've been focused on getting her well and trying to talk with her. That's a good idea, though." He beckoned to Saki. "Come. Walk."

## Chapter Four

Saki was on a mission once they approached the old fishing hole. Jan and Lucas struggled to keep up. She leapt across the creek better than they did, left the copse, and headed up and over a hill. At the bottom on the other side of the barbed-wire fence marking the neighboring farm's property, they saw a wide furrow in the ground as if some ancient giant had been planting seeds. At the end was something that looked like a broken egg. It was the same color as the thick grass it sat in.

Saki ran to it and rummaged inside. She took out a large disk that hung on a chain. She put it around her neck but waved it over the egg. Sections began to open.

"There's a body!" said Jan.

Saki lifted out a man's body. Lucas saw the tears and felt an immense sadness. *Did this woman project emotions? Did that mean she could feel theirs?*

"Boki," she said, putting the body on the ground and kneeling by it.

"Oh, my Lord!" said Jan, going to her and putting her hand on Saki's shoulder.

The stillness of late autumn gripped them in its fist, their moods matching the dark skies. Lucas knew snow was on the way. He shook off his empathetic sorrow. Saki had brought him out of his four-month funk. He didn't want to return to it now. She looked at him with tears flowing now, but Jan seemed to be the receptor of the strong emotions because she was also crying.

Lucas examined the egg. Its surface was pitted and charred while the inside looked like two end-to-end coffins with thick padding intended to cradle human bodies. *Protection from g-forces?* Instruments lined the sides, some still clearly functioning, needles pinned to red zones.

"I think this is an escape vehicle of some sort, like a lifeboat. Only it came from up there." He pointed to the sky.



Saki stood, took Jan's hand, and led her away from the body. She then pointed the disk toward the corpse. There was a blinding flash, and it was gone. When Lucas' eyes recovered, he saw her pointing at the egg, so he jumped back. This time there was only a shimmer and the egg vanished. Jan looked at Lucas with raised eyebrows.

Saki took off the way they had come. The two siblings had to run after her again.

## Part Two: Gumshoe Activity

### Chapter Five

"Nice to see that the Feds actually listen to us sometimes," said Sheriff Olson after welcoming them. "I was happy to see your names aren't Mulder and Scully."

Needham searched for words. They were in the sheriff's small office sitting on old wooden visitors' chairs that had seen better days. The sheriff sat behind the cluttered desk.

"I'm too old," said Needham with a smile, "and Carpenter's too young."

"Is this Bob McNamara usually reliable?" said Carpenter, jumping to the heart of the matter.

"Mack's as solid as a rock. He's my brother-in-law. I believe he saw something. Neither one of us is sure what it was. It's all in the report."

"We have that," said Needham. "We want to see where he saw the flash."

"Can do," said Olsen. "Mack said it was like a huge camera's flash going off. Lit up lots of acres over by the old Wright farm. We already went out there. Did a fly-over too. Lucas Wright's truck's gone. Haven't talked to him yet. He was the only one living in the farmhouse, although his sister Janet goes out there frequently."

"We'd like to talk to them both. Probably not much chance they saw anything if it was still dark at the time and everyone was asleep. What was Deputy McNamara doing out that way?"

"Attending to a domestic dispute. Two farms over hubby returned from a poker game drunk as a skunk. Started harassing the missus, and she kicked him out. He called us on his cell phone to complain. Mack went out to bring him here to sleep it off. About as much excitement as we ever get outside the pool hall on Saturday nights."

"Cell phones work here?" said Carpenter.

Olson frowned at her. "We might live in the boonies, Agent Carpenter, but we have the usual technologies. No cable TV, mostly satellite, not that you need either one. Cell phones have taken over. Not many have the untrustworthy landlines anymore. And cell phones make it easier to socialize with the neighbors than hitching up horses and putting on fancy Sunday-go-to-meeting duds."

Needham smiled. That little put-down would give Carpenter something to chew over if she'd understood the homespun and humorous dig at a city slicker. One reason he hauled her around was to educate her a bit about dealing with other people. Figured she had a steep learning curve still to climb.

"I guess we should speak to McNamara first, and then maybe he could take us out to that farm?"

Olson nodded. "OK by me."

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“This is where I was driving when I saw the light,” said McNamara, steering his patrol car onto a narrow country road and pointing through the windshield. Needham followed his indication. Carpenter, in the back seat, rolled down the window to look. “Flash came from over there. Just above the horizon.”

“What’s over there?” said Needham.

“Grasslands mostly, fields fallow due to crop rotation. The Dobsons at the next farm over rent acreage from the Wrights. That’s about where the dividing line between the two farms is.”

“I don’t suppose there’s a road going there,” said Carpenter.

“No ma’am. Hiking or horseback’s the only way. We did a fly-over, though. All in the report.”

Needham remembered the negative report from the chopper’s survey. “You didn’t land.”

“Could have. No reason to. There was nothing there. I was a bit embarrassed, but I know what I saw. Sheriff backed me up.”

“You’re married to his sister,” said Carpenter. “Why wouldn’t he?”

“Ma’am, one thing’s family, other’s your job. Olson and I agree on a lot of things, but we disagree on some. But he knows I don’t lie.”

“I’m sure you saw a flash,” said Needham, sending a warning frown to Carpenter. “Was it like an explosion?”

“What the report said. Lots of light like a huge camera flash but no sound. You’d think some nearly naked rock diva or gang of busy underwear models were frolicking around in the pasture for some publicity stunt. Flash was too bright for that, though. Some staying power too, maybe a few seconds until my eyes adjusted to the dark again.”

“I guess we should inspect the area from the ground. Any chance of renting some horses?”

Carpenter groaned and Needham smiled.

“Dobsons have some mares the kids ride. Hardly worth the price of the hay they eat, but they’re old and gentle enough for kids.” He smiled at Carpenter. “We can leave your assistant at the farmhouse to get background on the Wrights from Mrs. Dobson. She’s a real quiet sort, but you might get a few words out of her. You and I can go out on the mares.”

Needham was happy to leave Carpenter with Mrs. Dobson. McNamara had pulled a fast one. Mrs. Dobson would talk Carpenter to death, her “few words” coming at the machine-gun pace of an auctioneer’s. Mack’s dry humor was refreshing.

“She’s a good old gal, but she’s the biggest gossip in five counties,” said McNamara, leading the way later. “Husband’s the quiet one. Has to be, I guess. Hard to get a word in edgewise, the poor man.”

Needham was enjoying himself. He loved horses. Although a bit rusty in his riding skills, the mare made the ride easy.

## Chapter Six

The ground survey turned up nothing. Certainly no sign of a space debris crash site. Needham was thinking the trip was a wild goose chase as he parked the rental car in a space at the clinic where Dr. Janet Wright practiced as a pediatrician.

"I bet you'll be sore tomorrow," said Carpenter, noting his stiff-legged walk.

"Maybe. What about your hearing?" Mrs. Dobson had also been loud.

"If I stayed here long enough," she said, "I'd get even with McNamara for that. He should have warned me."

"We won't be here for long. I just want to interview the good doctor, see what she knows and where her brother is."

Needham was impressed with the pediatrician. Pretty and smart, she fit well into the city environment, but he knew she had grown up on a farm.

"I'm on my lunch break. I'll have patients starting at one. You'll have to be fast." She looked from Needham to Carpenter. "Do I need a lawyer?"

"Like I said on the phone," said Needham, "we just have a few questions. Were you at the farm when Deputy McNamara saw the flash of light?" Her answer was a simple no. "What about your brother?" That answer was yes. "Did he see anything that night?"

"He was probably sleeping. He tends to follow farm hours. Early to bed, early to rise—you know the rest."

"And make hay while the sun shines," said Needham. "What about unusual events before or after that night?"

"He's had some problems. Our parents died not too long ago, and his girlfriend left him. He rides around in his pickup. There's a lot of beautiful country around here to help put your mind at ease."

"Is that his usual behavior?"

"Years ago, yes—he was a good surgeon—but, given the circumstances, now, maybe not. He mopes a lot."

"Has he described any unusual events? Maybe strange noises, voices, or lights. Farm animals acting up."

"Nothing of the sort. He just becomes lost in his thoughts. I worry about him."

"Any chance you know the license plate of his pickup?"

"I'm only out there on weekends. You can probably do a search for it."

"How about here at work?" said Carpenter. "Anything unusual?"

"I think little Sally Jenkins might have a brain tumor. I've ordered an MRI. That's my life, taking care of kids. I wouldn't have it any other way."

"Sounds like it could be depressing," said Needham.

"Only when I lose one."

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"She's hiding something," said Carpenter back in the car.

"I agree. I think she's protecting the brother. We need to talk to him. We'll drive back to the farm and wait for a while. While I drive, try to pin down that license plate in case he doesn't show. We might have a suicidal man."

"That's not really our problem, is it?"

"Our problem is to get his statement. We can't do that if he's dead."

But Lucas Wright's truck was at the farm now. He shook hands with them, offered them instant coffee, and they declined.

"Jan called. I'm sorry you wasted your time. I'm not into all this UFO nonsense. I mean, think about it: why would ETs want anything to do with us? Ever hear of the atomic

clock?” Needham nodded. “We’re so damn crazy we’ll probably not make it to another new century the way we’re going. The 21<sup>st</sup> isn’t going too well, don’t you agree?” Carpenter’s turn to nod. “Or, did Jan just say she’s worried about me and wanted you to check on me. She’s my twin, but she thinks I’m nuts.”

“She said you were thinking some things through,” said Carpenter. “Do you plan to return to medicine?” Needham could tell Carpenter liked Lucas Wright. “It seems a waste to give up a successful career, not to mention the chance to help people.”

“It’s a mixed bag,” said Wright with a shrug. “You enjoy it when you can help someone, but it hurts like hell when you fail. A lot of brain tumors aren’t operable, and you feel helpless in that case. It gets to you after a while.”

“It sounded like you have some other issues,” said Needham. “The loss of your parents and girlfriend. Anything else?”

“That’s enough. Say, do you want to see my workshop? I think my robot’s almost ready to walk. It’s in the basement.”

“We’ll pass on that,” said Needham.

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“He’s a nut case,” Needham said to Carpenter back in the car, “but probably harmless. I think we’re wasting our time here.”

“We have to cover all the bases,” she said.

He smiled as he swerved around a pothole. She was parroting his own words back at him without realizing it. *Or, was it on purpose?*

He remembered passing a homey looking diner just after leaving the sheriff’s office. Nothing like a good, solid country meal to prepare for the trip back to KC and home.

“I take back my comment,” said Carpenter sipping her coffee after finishing an excellent slice of home-cooked apple pie. “I could imagine a good life here. A man like Lucas Wright, a couple of kids—it could be very peaceful and rewarding. Different than the Big Apple, but still rewarding.”

“Just part of the learning experience, kid,” said Needham. “Our great country has something for everyone, and you have to respect the choices people make.”

“So, not a waste then?”

“Not for you. I’ve seen it all.” He thought a moment. “We’re just federal cops, Julie. We have to chase down the leads like any other cop. Our beat just happens to be the whole country. That can be daunting but also educational.”

She nodded. “What do you make of McNamara’s bright flash without a boom?”

“It’s as mysterious as those bogeys appearing out of nowhere in space. Too bad the ISS was on the other side of the planet.”

“That might be intentional if China or Russia is involved.”

He shrugged but nodded. “We’re back to square one for now, but let’s keep Mack’s report on the table.”

## Chapter Seven

Three months passed. Snows came and went. Lucas worked with Saki on her English. Jan would visit the farm on the weekends when she could, often showing up with bags of

groceries. One Friday she hit the supermarket and decided to just keep going. By the time she reached the farm, it was snowing again.

She entered the kitchen and put two bags on the counter. “Lucas? Saki? I need some help with the groceries!”

Not a sound. *Where are they?* She had never liked her brother living alone. The neighbors, the Dobsons, who rented acreage from Jan and Lucas for their crops, were miles away. The twins had inherited their father’s small arsenal—hunting rifles and shotguns—but Lucas kept them in a locked gun case in the basement where they served more as decorative artifacts from a previous age than protection against intruders. She didn’t think Lucas could ever shoot anyone anyway. Their work as doctors had always been about saving lives, not taking them.

“Lucas? Saki?” Jan checked the basement door. It was locked. *Maybe upstairs? Is someone sick?*

She stopped when she entered the bedroom that had become Saki’s. The two were lying naked and asleep, Lucas embracing the strange woman and spooning her from behind. Jan sniffed. *No doubt about it!* She backed away smiling and went downstairs, leaving them to their privacy.

She knew enough psychology to realize that what had happened was probably inevitable. Saki had just lost someone important in her life. Lucas had first lost his parents and then Becky. *But is it just rebound sex or something more?* Her main concern was that she didn’t want her brother to get hurt. *I don’t want that for Saki either.* Jan had felt a bond with the woman ever since the scene at the egg.

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“It just happened,” Lucas said with a shy smile, looking at Saki.

“Yes, happened,” said Saki, winking at Jan. “We need. Long time. Good feelings, not bad.”

Jan nodded. “I understand. It was just a surprise.” She went to the stove and brought back the coffee pot. “I’m just happy you two took a shower before coming down.”

“Shower good too,” said Saki with a laugh. “Hungry now.”

“I brought steaks. Dad used to barbecue them in the fireplace.”

“Good idea if you can do it,” said Lucas. “I’d probably burn them. About the only thing I was good at were the marshmallows afterward.”

“I have those too,” said Jan.

Later Jan and Lucas sipped brandy while Saki read a book, a worn copy of *Tale of Two Cities*. Jan watched as the pages flew.

“Is she reading?”

“She taught herself,” said Lucas. “She now has a prodigious reading vocabulary although her spoken language skills aren’t great. She has problems with the consonant combinations still, for example, as well as tenses. She understands a lot, though.”

Saki stopped and smiled at them. “Lot. Overhear. Whispers no matter. Love me?”

Jan smiled and nodded. “We love you, Saki, but what are we going to do with you?”

“When English good, Lucas take me west.”

“West? Where west?”

“LA hills. Rest my people there.”

“What? There are more?” said Jan. “How many? And how do you know?”  
“Six.” She held up the disk, tapped it. “They tell me. Two more dead. We repair their eggs.”

“Tell Jan what you told me,” said Lucas.

“Eggs for escape. Ship hit. No air. No power. Ship there. Repair it too. You help.”

“Are you kidding?” said Jan looking from Saki to Lucas. “We don’t know how to fix anything like that.”

“Saki thinks we can help.” He held out his hands and wiggled his fingers. “She saw me working one night. Read through about ten electronics parts catalogs I have and became excited. Who knows? I have to try.”

Jan thought a moment. “And risk the chance of losing her?”

“No lose,” said Saki. “He go with us.”

“No! Then I lose my brother.”

Lucas shrugged. “If I had married Becky, you wouldn’t have seen me much. If you ever get married, I wouldn’t see you much. Logically, it’s the same thing.”

“But this is just infatuation. Simple lust. It would be a hundred times worse for you than going to live in some foreign country.”

“Lust,” said Saki, making the t extra hard. “Known word. Infatuation? Meaning?”

“It means Lucas’s feelings are all about sexual chemistry, not love. The latter comes with time.”

Saki thought a moment. “No time. No work, still good. Yes? No problem. Big venture. You come too. See friends. Decide later. OK?”

“I can’t leave my kids. My place is here, Saki.” Jan frowned. “What Lucas decides is up to him.”

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Saki and Lucas waited until the forecast called for a good ten days without any snow.

“Keep me informed,” Jan told her brother. She leaned into the pickup to kiss him on the cheek but whispered in his ear. “I still say it’s an infatuation. For all you know, her friends are dangerous.”

He shook his head. “I can’t believe that. I’ll be fine. What was I doing here before? Nothing! Take care of yourself.”

Jan watched the pickup pull away with Saki waving at her with a big smile.

“I hope you’re right, little brother.” She was only eleven minutes older, but sometimes it felt like many years.

## Part Three: On the Road

### Chapter Eight

Saki walked around the parking lot and stretched her legs while Lucas went inside the roadside diner for takeout. When he came out, he saw that a motorcycle gang had surrounded her.

“We’ll give you a good time,” said the biggest leather-jacketed ogre. The gang name on his back said *Devil’s Wheels*. These Devil’s minions all looked like Vikings, although some shaved their heads.

Lucas had an idea about what the man meant by a good time. “What’s going on here?”

Big man studied Lucas. “Stay out of this, dickhead. The woman just wants to have some fun with us, right honey?”

“No,” said Saki, “no want smelly beasts near me.”

“Smelly beasts?” said another gang member with a testosterone-charged snarl. “That’s a bit insulting, right Big George?”

The circle closed in on Saki. Before Lucas could act, Saki took the disk from beneath her blouse and held it facing away from her. She spun. All the gang members staggered and fell to the ground unconscious.

Lucas saw the startled faces of the people in the diner who had been watching the altercation through the windows. *Not good!* “Let’s get out of here, Saki.”

Ten miles down the road, he pulled off the highway and parked under a few trees. He handed her a bag containing a burger and fries.

“Not dead,” she said.

Her bad English was second nature to him now. “I know. The people in the diner will soon know that too. But they’ll also know something strange just happened. Someone might investigate.”

She nodded. “Stun them too. Bad men. Not like you.”

He smiled. *Stun? A new word for her.* “I should hope not. You sensed what they wanted to do, didn’t you?”

“Easy. Primitive planet. Feral humans. All emotions.”

Lucas checked his watch. “We’ll make Albuquerque and change cars.”

“Change? This one OK.”

“Not after the bikers or diners describe it,” he said.

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In New Mexico, Lucas made a bad deal at Happy Horatio’s Used Car Emporium, trading his pickup for a Land Rover that had seen better days. He didn’t have to spend any money on the Rover except for plates and sales tax. They found a motel.

“Al-boo-ker-kee,” said Saki, rotating around to see the surrounding mountains. “Nice.” She hooked her arm in his. “Tomorrow see. Too tired now.”

They went to bed early. Saki wasn’t too tired to get frisky, though, and he responded. As she fell asleep with her head on his chest, he was thinking that their last meal was the late lunch. They would be starving in the morning.

Bright sunlight was streaming in the window when he awoke. He took a quick shower, dressed, and left her a note that he had gone to find food. When he returned, she was in the shower.

“Soft water,” she said, stepping into the room with only a towel wrapped around her hair like a turban. She sniffed. “Good smell. We eat?”

Lucas split the food. He had gone overboard, but they wolfed it down. It was her first experience with breakfast burritos and hashed browns. She liked them. She liked the questionable coffee too.

“How far now?”

“One long day or two short ones. You’ll have to be my navigator.”

“Explain please.”

Lucas told her that he had no idea where her people were. He didn’t know the LA area even if she gave him the name of a location.

“Yes. I show. But use Google too. Need roads there.” He brought up a map on his cell phone and handed it to her. She played with it a bit and handed it back. “Hills above valley. That road.”

A road into the San Gabriel Mountains’ Angeles National Forest was displayed on the cell phone’s screen. “That’s pretty good. I can get us there. Once there you need to be more specific.”

“Can do,” she said. “But maybe place not on map?”

“We’ll find it,” he said.

## Chapter Nine

“Don’t you need a search warrant?” the motel owner said to Needham.

“Is the room empty?” he said. The owner nodded. “Then we don’t need a warrant.”

“It hasn’t been cleaned.”

“Even better,” said Carpenter.

The latex gloves and booties went on as the owner stood at the doorway and watched them. A bit later, Carpenter brought the wastebasket out of the bathroom.

“I’m guessing these condoms were to protect the woman with the long hairs left on the towels,” she said. “Maybe that girl from the diner is with him. The clientele of the diner didn’t mention Lucas, though.”

“The others will track down the bikers. They didn’t want to be prosecuted for attempted gang rape, so they took off. Too many witnesses. I wonder how the woman did that?”

“She’s obviously an ET,” said Carpenter, mocking Needham’s suspicions. “You know, maybe this is only the ex-girlfriend getting back together with Wright to have a road orgy, and the sister doesn’t approve. We never got her name.”

“An explanation for why the sister was acting peculiar way back when?” he said. “But remember Mack’s bright light? I like my ET theory better.” She laughed. “Let’s bag things up and move on.” He turned to the motel owner. “Did they say where they were going? Excuse me. I have a call.”

Needham stepped outside and learned that the bikers were still on the lam. “I don’t want to backtrack,” he said to his office, “so get two more out here to follow up. They can get the bikers to talk by dropping all charges. We just might be onto something, so Carpenter and I will try to catch up with our Bonnie and Clyde. Send me any intel when you have it.”

“You don’t know if they’ve done anything wrong,” said Carpenter, stepping out into the hot sun. “This might just be an elopement and escape from a controlling sister. Older sisters are like that sometimes.”

“The voice of experience? They’re twins, you know.”

“I bet Janet is still older than Lucas. And I don’t trust the sister. She definitely was hiding something.”

“Don’t let the estrangement with your older sister influence your opinions on this case,” said Needham.



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They went to the local office in Albuquerque.

"I want to put a BOLO out on that pickup," said Needham. "They're heading west, and it would be useful to know where."

They were already in the parking lot ready to leave when his cell phone rang. "You'll want to come back inside," said the agent-in-charge they had just spoken to. "The local police have the pickup and its driver in custody. They're bringing her in."

*Her? Where's Lucas?* Thinking the worse, they returned to the office.

But a local woman had recognized a good deal when she saw one and had purchased the pickup right off the lot. The used car dealer had just detailed the pickup. No chance for DNA, but they now had the license plate of the Rover.

"Let's change that BOLO," said Needham. The dealer also provided a description of the couple. The man's description matched Lucas; the woman was not the ex-girlfriend.

"They're on the run," said Carpenter. "No one would make that bad a trade."

"Agreed. Still doubt my ET theory?"

"Stop channeling Mulder. This is real life."

"The truth is out there," he said, starting their car.

## Chapter Ten

"The FBI is after you," Janet said. "They interrogated me again. Different ones. Gorillas. Not so nice."

Lucas had his sister on speaker phone. He looked at Saki. *Did she understand?*

"What did you tell them?"

"Nothing, but I think they were suspicious. I sensed that with the first ones too. I'm a terrible liar." Lucas told her about the incident with the motorcycle gang. "That's not good. If that deputy hadn't seen that flash, nothing would have come of it, but now they'll put two and two together. Cops don't believe in coincidences. Or shouldn't, if they're any good at their jobs."

"I think you'd better go buy some burn phones. I'll do the same."

"You mean those prepaid cheap-os? I'm way ahead of you, brother. You should smash the one you're using now. They probably have the NSA listening to our conversations. They've had months to set that up."

"I don't think they can do that anymore without good reason, but we're thinking along the same lines."

"You look out for Saki, get her where she needs to go. The sooner she's with her own people, the better off she'll be. I don't like this at all."

"Agreed. Ten-four, Sergeant Wright. You're never wrong." That was a joke from their childhood.

Although he was worried, Lucas decided to take two more days for the trip. First, he thought it wouldn't do any good to arrive late at night and be looking for Saki's people while he was tired and bleary-eyed. Second, he might not have more nights to spend with the exotic ET woman. That last reason was selfish, of course.

They found a Motel 6 off I-10 in Phoenix, had an early dinner, and relaxed a bit watching TV. “Evil,” said Saki, seeing the latest ISIS atrocity. “Feral humans. Reason we watch you.”

“Watch?” said Lucas. “Your people were watching us?”

She nodded. “Worried. Your people can leave planet now. Decisions needed.”

“You’re trying to decide what to do about us?”

Another nod. “Feral humans dangerous.” She pointed at him and then to herself.

“Related. Many years big group lost. Not know alive until later.”

“Your people had a shipwreck on this planet?” A third nod. “How many years ago?”

She thought a moment, stood and went to the desk, and returned with the notepad provided by the motel and a pen. She wrote: 50000?

He mulled that over. He couldn’t remember exactly, but he thought the first records of Cro-Magnon man were from that era. Were all modern human beings descendants of shipwrecked ETs? What about the Neanderthals and other primitive homo sapiens? If he had time, he would have her write all this down—she wrote much better than she could speak, not uncommon for someone learning a new language. But there was no time.

She put a forefinger on his forehead. “Think too much. Need your body. Now.”

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Lucas stopped in front of the simple gate. “You sure they’re in here. It might be private property.”

“Was empty house, other buildings,” said Saki. “Open gate for you.”

She hopped out of the Rover, studied the gate, and lifted, swinging it in to the side of the gravel road. He leaned out the window.

“Close it after I go through. If your friends are here, they wanted it closed.”

A sedan would have problems with the back-country road, but the Rover had none. They were still bounced around, though, because the old vehicle needed new shocks. After a few miles, they pulled into an area surrounded on three sides by a house, barn, and shed. The original redwood siding was still intact, but weathered, while the roofs were in bad condition, the barn and shed more than the house.

“So, where are they?”

“Wait. They come.”

Sure enough, Saki and Lucas were soon surrounded by a group of six people. Lucas saw no weapons other than disks like Saki wore. That was enough for him. He stepped out of the Rover palms up.

“I’m helping Saki,” he said.

“We know,” said a swarthy man with a beard. “I’m Joli. Relax. The disks are scanning the car. The authorities could have hidden tracers.”

“They’re too far behind,” said Lucas.

“But they’re persistent. They called for reinforcements to interview your sister and the bikers who were at that rest stop. They could have called ahead to Phoenix. Or Los Angeles. Where did you stop in the Valley?”

“A Jack-in-the-Box. I was watching the Rover all the time.”

“I want you to drive it under those trees. Sat photos or air reconnaissance might spot it otherwise. We’ve kept this place looking exactly as we found it.”

“Understood,” said Lucas, getting into the Rover again. He leaned out the window. “You speak English better than Saki.”

“She speaks as well as the others, if not better. I’m a linguistic specialist. And also leader of our little group. Welcome, Lucas Wright. We think you can help.”

## Chapter Eleven

“This is one huge road orgy,” said Carpenter upon discovering more condoms at the Motel 6. “Maybe Lucas is just off to have a good time in SoCal with your ET.”

Needham was sitting on the edge of the bed reading the report about the interview with the bikers.

“Unless we have a case of mass hysteria here, this report says that the woman is too weird for words. They felt like they were going to sleep in an instant. Maybe hypnotized or something.”

“I guess we won’t get anything from the current squeeze’s DNA then,” said Carpenter.

“No priors, if that’s what you mean. But we do have some DNA results from the last motel that are weird. Lucas’s current squeeze, as you call her, has a very clean genome with no junk DNA. Maybe not an ET, but not quite human either.”

Carpenter stared at him agog. “Still insisting the deputy’s flash was a UFO? C’mon, Needham! Those DNA results must be wrong. The lab’s fucked up before.”

“Many times. But they did a triple check in this case. And I revise my statement.” He stood and put the cell phone away. “She’s human but not our kind. Maybe we are Scully and Mulder.”

“Oh, please. When we find these two, we’ll look back and laugh at this conversation.”

He shrugged. “It’s an explanation for everything so far. But you’re right. Let’s not hang around here.”

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At the LA FBI office, Needham received an admonishment from Washington. NORAD, NASA, DHS and various VIPs had received a status report and reacted. The bosses didn’t like it when they couldn’t see much progress and phones kept ringing off the hook. So much for going quietly into retirement.

“Help me out here, Jewel,” Needham said to the agent-in-charge, a woman he’d known and liked for a few years. His same age, she was on the fast track to better positions in the organization and had left him far behind. “They’re all over my back. I don’t have the personnel to do much here on my own. It’s too big an area.”

“We need more intel, Art. You don’t even know they’re here. They could have just gone through and are halfway up I-5 on the way to Seattle by now. Let the BOLO work for you.”

“It is. No sightings of that Rover is useful intel. They must have stopped somewhere and gone into hiding.”

“How would they know you were on their tail?”

“The sister,” said Carpenter. “They interviewed her again. She must have contacted her brother.”

The agent called Jewel nodded. “It’s a big area, like you say, and a big state. They could be anywhere. Give me something to work with. You don’t have much time for that, I know, before they decide the case isn’t worth your per diems.”

“What about IT help?” said Carpenter. “They might be in hiding, but they might still use the internet.”

Jewel nodded. “That’s more doable, at least for a while.”

## Part Four: The Escape

### Chapter Twelve

“We have examined our spacecraft in orbit,” said Saki’s older colleague. “Your space debris did major damage. We’ll have to make some quick repairs with material and components we can find here. Our escape pods need repair too. We’ve been working as fast as we can.”

Lucas studied the man. *ET? Android? How to tell?* His bare feet, blue jeans, and sweatshirt made him look like an old hippy. Sitting in a lotus position while Lucas sat in an old rocking chair helped the metaphor. Saki came out of the kitchen and handed each man a beer, keeping one for herself.

“I shouldn’t keep you from your work then,” said Lucas.

“You can help us in two ways, so I need to explain that.” Joli held his hands as if he were praying. The pause seemed long—calling it “pregnant” always seemed a bit sexist to Lucas. The survivors’ leader finally rested his palms on his thighs. “Two lists. First, materials. We will create a wish list of items we need, mostly chemicals in bulk. We have no idea where to get them, but you might. And we have cell phones and something called Yellow Pages.”

“Old,” said Saki. “Not make Yellow Pages now.”

“I know. But it’s a start. I’m assuming chemical factories don’t close that often.”

“You’d be surprised,” said Lucas. “If they’re bought out by someone else, or go under because of Chinese competition, it’s here today, gone tomorrow. I don’t know the area. The phones are our best bet for determining where to find what you need, but the reception might not be too good here. I’m game to go and obtain what you need, though.”

“The regular reception is good enough,” said Joli, “but there’s no wi-fi, and we have limited data plans for these phones. We’ll have to work around those limitations, maybe use hot spots in the city. The second problem is obtaining printed circuit boards and other electronic parts. We think we can design work-arounds for fried electronics, but it’s a daunting task, especially in adapting our software to the work-arounds. I can’t begin to calculate how much time we’ll need for that.”

“You don’t have much. The FBI isn’t far behind us, according to my sister. Do you have any parts catalogs?”

“I think we need to steal those. Saki says you dabble in this stuff?”

“Saki might overestimate my skills.” He waved his fingers. “But I’ve built some complicated stuff and done a few work-arounds in my life when the available parts weren’t exactly what I needed, even after becoming a doctor. All I can do is try. Who’s your electronics specialist?”

“Modi has some theoretical knowledge, enough to make some clever design changes, but he doesn’t know about practical issues. The two of you should work together.”

“We’ll develop two lists then.” Lucas looked at Saki. “Let’s suppose we can fix the pods so they can carry you back into orbit. How are you going to fix your ship?”

“You go too,” said Saki. “Fix there.” She smiled. “I need my feral human.”

Lucas thought a bit, looked from Saki to Joli several times. *I have nothing to hold me here. Jan’s independent and dedicated to her little patients, and she can always sell the farm if finances get dicey.*

“How do you say it? An FYI?” said Joli. “There are no guarantees. Even if we think our repairs will work, they might not. We might die of starvation or lack of air trapped up there in orbit, or have to return here and burn to a crisp reentering your atmosphere if the pods aren’t able to negotiate a soft landing again. The best scenario is that we escape from Earth. The second best is that we spend our remaining days on your planet. All other scenarios probably end with our deaths.”

Lucas swallowed but nodded. “Let’s start on those lists.”

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There was no avoiding it. They had to make trips down the mountain to buy materials. Whether in the Rover or in the old sedan the others had stolen, it increased the chances authorities would discover them. Having read many crime stories, Lucas came up with the idea of switching plates. They did it several times. He also knew how to hot-wire old cars (newer ones were more secure), so they increased their fleet.

It was on Lucas to enter the stores, though. He knew what to look for and could play the role of electronics tinkerer because he’d been one. He was a bit uncomfortable using money Saki’s people had stolen from ATMs, but they had spread around the pain. And it wasn’t the kind of situation where one worries about stealing.

But the inevitable happened. Lucas was sure that a young cop on the beat, who passed the entrance to a store at the same time Lucas entered, recognized him. A more experienced cop probably wouldn’t show so much interest. Lucas felt both unlucky and lucky—the first because the cop was around at all, and the second because he had telegraphed his intentions.

“Do you have a back door?” Lucas said to the clerk. “I left my list in the car, and it’s around the block. I bet the alley will get me there quicker.”

“Straight back,” said the clerk with a smile.

Lucas knew he was probably thinking that inventors and tinkerers were weird. *What will he think when I don’t return?*

That was the only incident, though. Modi and he were soon busting their butts trying to do the impossible. For Lucas it was fun, but he realized their likelihood of success was small. As the days flew by, he swung from thinking of torpedoing the whole project to hoping for success. He didn’t know if an adventure far beyond an astronaut’s dreams was enough motivation. Being wherever Saki went was a lot more.

## Chapter Thirteen

“Maybe they’re building a bomb,” said Carpenter. She and Needham were still debating the meaning of the young officer’s report.

“They’re somewhere remote,” said Needham, looking toward the hills almost obscured by smog. “What was the air like here before they started to clean up?”

Carpenter popped the trunk. They got out and removed their luggage, heading for the office of the Van Nuys hotel. Jewel, at the local LA office, had decided to provide them a helicopter after the news about sighting Lucas Wright. "There are acres of national forest and state forest around here."

"You mean hills and mountains stripped of all vegetation by forest fires," said Needham. "It's a wonder everything doesn't come sliding down carrying all SoCal into the ocean."

"That could happen if they ever have the big one. I knew someone at Cal State Northridge who broke both legs in the last one. At least they don't have blizzards or hurricanes."

He smiled, remembering the story of the Donner party. In very little time, one could travel from beach to mountains, from surfing to skiing, in the Golden State.

They took adjoining rooms. Needham didn't even unpack before he started making calls. After a quick lunch, they found their helicopter at the Van Nuys airport.

"Just what are we looking for?" said the pilot, checking all his controls before taking off.

"No Santa Anas now, but there can still be strong winds in the canyons. You might be using binoculars a lot because I'm not going to fly that low."

"That's fine," said Needham. "The search might take a few days. We'll treat you to dinner each night."

"Screw that. I have a wife and kids. One kid is in a basketball game tonight. You're on your own, old man. You too, ma'am."

*Ma'am?* Needham winked at Carpenter. "Domestic obligations often trump work ones. I wish I'd realized that long ago."

They were up and flying out of the Valley.

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"You're going to kill yourself eating red meat," said Carpenter.

Needham stopped cutting his steak, took a sip of his cabernet, and looked at her over the rim of the wine glass. "You sound like my mother. A vegan before it was popular to be one. Drove my dad crazy. If you keep doing salads, you'll never round out that slender finger."

"I never want to round it out, as you call it. I get my protein from the tofu strips and my carbs from the wheat rolls. The latter makes it not vegan. I eat healthy. You don't."

"They say red wine's good for you, though, so I'm sticking with that. It's less expensive here. Visiting wine country's on my bucket list, you know."

"You should take a few days of vacation and drive up there with Jewel. Right up the coast. Hang a bit in Big Sur and Monterrey and then on to Napa and Sonoma."

"It's that obvious? I've always felt some vibes. Both of us were married before."

"You're not now. If you want a little bit of romance with her, that's another good reason to go light on the red meat, by the way." She smiled. "So they say."

"Have you been up the coast? I've been in and out of Frisco. I never had the opportunity to go to wine country."

The small talk over dinner invariably turned to the case at hand. They were both frustrated by the lack of results in the aerial search. Needham said Jewel would probably pull the plug on it soon.

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On the afternoon of the third day, they ran into trouble. One of those canyons became a narrow ravine and the pilot couldn't gain altitude fast enough against a strong breeze that was more a downdraft that carried them farther into the ravine. As the helicopter spun and burned on its way down, Needham realized that he'd probably never see wine country.

## Chapter Fourteen

"Maybe chopper down," said Modi, reentering the work area in the old barn. "Joli says search mode."

"Why didn't he say something to us?" said Lucas. "Maybe we have to leave!"

"Here still same from air. Find us, need ground search."

"There's black smoke on the horizon," said Joli, also entering the barn. "I'm—how do you say it?—torn? There might be survivors that need our help."

"They become prisoners," said Saki. "But no torn. We look. Yes?"

"You empathize with these feral humans," said Joli with a smile.

"Feelings, yes." Saki winked at Lucas.

"OK. I'll get two of the others, and we'll take a look. Keep working. Whether there are survivors or not, there will be others looking for them. Our time is getting short."

"They can certainly spot a downed helicopter from the air," said Lucas. "The area might soon be crawling with Feds."

"Feds?" said Saki.

"The authorities. Even ones not looking for us. That increases the likelihood of discovery. Be careful."

"Always," said Joli. "We're out of our element here."

By evening, the three were back. Joli had a young woman strapped to his back. The other two carried an older man on a makeshift stretcher.

"FBI agents Carpenter and Needham," said Joli. "We put them into induced comas. The pilot was dead."

"Bury pilot, hide wreck," said one of the stretcher-bearers. "Still search chopper, three ferals?"

"We need more time," said Lucas, looking at Modi. "We've only begun building the work-arounds."

"How much time?" said Joli.

"Guess weeks," said Modi.

"And now need nurse, guard two," said the other stretcher-bearer. "Better left."

Joli shrugged. "Not an option. That wouldn't have been right. And maybe we can convince them to help us."

"How? Why help?" said Modi.

"Because you saved their asses," said Lucas with a smile.

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"OK, we're beginning to understand," said Needham, looking at Carpenter. He was sitting up now, and she was walking with a makeshift cane made from a broken broom handle. "You two have the hots for each other and want to elope to the stars. Cute. So romantic. But our assignment is to solve this case."

“Solved,” said Saki. “Now know me. Know Lucas. We go. Everyone OK.”

Lucas nodded. “But we’d like your help. You two owe Saki and her people. You’d have been coyote food, you know.”

Carpenter shuddered. “Our poor pilot. He had a family.”

“Forget the animals,” said Joli. “He’s buried, the chopper hidden. They won’t find them in months, and they won’t know you’re here either. But the sooner we’re gone, the sooner you can return to your own lives.”

“OK by me,” said Carpenter. “Needham?”

“I guess. I can’t say that I can do much. I’m still in recovery mode.”

“Calls needed. Plutonium depleted. Need more. Maybe for ship in orbit too.”

“Plutonium? How in the hell am I going to get you plutonium?” Needham had struggled to sit more upright. Saki went to him to put a calming hand on his shoulder.

“Livermore?” said Lucas. “Do you have any connections there?”

“I do,” said Carpenter. She winked at Needham. “Another old boyfriend at Cal State is a tech there. He might have access.”

“That’s pretty risky,” said Needham, smiling at Saki. “He could lose his job! Or tell our colleagues about this group.”

Carpenter wiggled the little finger of her right hand. “Saki’s not the only woman who knows a man who will do anything to get laid.”

“Geez!” said Needham, and Lucas turned red.

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Carpenter accompanied Joli and the two stretcher-bearers on the long ride to Livermore. They met Raul Suarez in a restaurant that tried to look like an old New Jersey diner—the nostalgia look, she called it. Not far from the lab, it served good food and gave them enough privacy to create a plan.

“I can’t believe I’m doing this,” said Suarez, his words a mumble caused by a huge bite into his Burger Supremo with salsa and avocado. He gulped Coke to wash the bite down. “I could do life in federal prison for this.”

“What about me?” said Carpenter. “Ever read *The Tale of Two Cities*?”

“Cliff Notes,” said Suarez. “Have you ever read *Cien Años de Soledad*? Yeah, yeah, I get the idea, but I wouldn’t exactly call these ETs lifelong friends.”

“Not ETs, but you could go with us,” said Joli, watching his two colleagues wolf down their burgers with a smile. “Carpenter too.”

“Not for me,” said Carpenter, moving the salad left in her bowl around and eying the burgers. “I always wanted to go into space, but I don’t like flying. And wherever you’re going is a long ways from here, I’ll bet.”

“I’d have to convert to your measurement units. What you call light years, of course, assuming our ship is even repairable.”

“OK, let’s work on a plan,” said Suarez with a sigh. “You might be on your own if I think it’s too dangerous for me, though. I had plenty of chances to end up in prison as a kid. I don’t want to end up there now. Or dead.”

“Always melodramatic,” said Carpenter. “Just think of all the good times I’ll give you.”

“Shit, you live outside the state in DC now. Never could figure what brought you all the way out here from New York City for school. Anyway, that’s a false enticement.”



“My aunt offered to give me room and board, thinking I needed to get away from my five siblings,” said Carpenter. “I did. And there’s nothing false about the enticement. And don’t forget that one night with me is worth it. You remember, don’t you?”

“Vaguely. I’d had a bit of tequila. I remember how you look naked, though.” He winked at Joli. “She’s all woman, my ET friend.”

“I understand,” said Joli. “You feral humans do have your fun.”

## Chapter Fifteen

“It’s risky,” said Suarez, fingering his ID card before handing it to Joli. “You don’t look at all like me. Beard’s too long, for example. And I’m not going to chance it by accompanying you.”

“Coward,” said Carpenter. “You’re missing out on a lusty evening.”

Suarez shrugged. “There are layers of security, Joli. I’ve never been where you want to go.”

“I’m not going to put you in a bad position,” said Joli. He was in the back seat staring at printouts from Google Earth and comparing to some blueprints. He handed the ID back to Suarez along with the printouts. “What are these things on the roof in the area you circled?”

Suarez leaned across him and looked from the blueprints to the printouts. “Google pics are blurred, probably on purpose. Maybe they’re cooling towers. They’re big enough. I don’t know. I’m no engineer, *tu sabes*. *Si*, that’s probably what they are. Summers here are tough, and they have a lot of volume to cool.”

“That’s where we’ll go in,” said Joli.

“You’ll all get killed. They’ll think you’re terrorists.”

“Carpenter will stay here with you, but behave yourselves, or you’ll be cleaning up the car.” He winked. “If we’re not back in two of your hours, you’ll know we failed, so drive away.” He tossed the keys to Carpenter. “And I don’t blame you, Raul. You’ve done enough. How do you say it? It’s our gig now.”

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“Nice guys,” said Suarez.

Carpenter, in the driver’s seat now, turned to him. “And you’re an ass.” She patted the front passenger seat. “Come up here. I’ll be damned if I’m going to be your chauffeur.”

“You think I was wrong to bail out?” he said, slipping into the seat beside her.

“I don’t know what to think. It’s a complicated situation. I’m supposed to have arrested these people, you know, so everyone could poke and prod and interrogate them. That just sounds wrong.”

“I hear you. It’s like using chimps for cancer research or something. Do you think they can pull it off?”

“They’re smart and creative. But I’m only waiting the two hours.”

But Joli and the others only took fifty minutes.

“We probably could have gone in through the front,” he said, entering the backseat as the other two stored the small amount of plutonium, made heavy from its lead case, in the trunk. “I was very convincing. They wanted to help.”

“How’s that?” said Suarez. “Why would they?”

Joli held up his disk. "I think you call it the power of suggestion."

"Hypnosis," said Carpenter with a smile. "Yes, you probably could have gone in through the front door."

"The janitor was the most difficult," said Joli. "His English was worse than mine. We needed you after all, Suarez, but he came around."

"Back to the ranch?" said Carpenter.

"Let's make a car switch when convenient," said Joli. "I saw this one on a video surveillance screen at one of the security stations."

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"With the plutonium we'll be ready to go as soon as Modi and I finish," Lucas told Needham over breakfast. "How are you feeling?"

"Still a bit unstable. But ignore me. You need to get back to work. They'll be looking for the chopper, or at least for the black box."

"Find chopper, still not us," said Saki.

"They'll wonder what happened to our bodies," said Carpenter.

"Coy-yott-ees," said Saki.

"Coyotes couldn't bury the pilot and carry off all remains of Agents Carpenter and Needham," said Lucas. "They'll search the area in ever widening circles and find us."

Needham nodded. "That's what I'd do." He held up his slice of bacon. "Who's the cook?"

"Me," said Saki, jerking a thumb toward her chest. "Watch TV cooking channels."

Lucas had picked up several old-style TVs for parts. A few were still intact, so he had made a simple dipole tuned to VHF for each one. Reception was limited, but it was entertainment.

"Needham's right. I need to get back to work. See you at dinner."

## Chapter Sixteen

The last software and hardware checks made, all pitched in to help reassemble the four pods.

"I don't see how you could offer to take us," Carpenter said to Saki. "With you and Lucas, there's no room."

"One pod at Lucas farm. No need it now."

"You mean the one you came in. We went over that area pretty well."

"Me and Boki. Boki gone. Ship hidden. Out of phase." She waved her disk. "Simple technique."

"What about all the stuff needed to repair the ship?"

"Replace padding. Not all needed. All fits. No worry."

The roof of the barn was removed. Carpenter helped Needham out to say goodbye. There were hugs all around.

"Drop us a postcard," Carpenter said to Lucas, giving him a kiss on the cheek.

"Joli said you and Suarez have some interesting vibes," he said. "Why don't you look him up?"

"Maybe, after I get Needham hooked up with a nice woman named Jewel."

Needham flashed her a frown. Lucas laughed.

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The two FBI agents watched the pods slowly rise into the gray sky until they were lost in the clouds.

"Looks like it's going to rain again," said Needham. "I thought SoCal was in a drought."

"It's an *El Niño* year," said Carpenter.

Late that afternoon four black SUVs arrived and parked between the house and the barn. Carpenter showed Jewel into the house.

"When they found the chopper, the pilot buried, and you two gone, I figured one of you helped the other out, you old devil," she said to Needham. "Any reason you camouflaged the chopper?"

"Carpenter wanted to start a signal fire," said Needham. "Figured that the extra gas tank would be a good accelerant and get it going."

"So? Why didn't you do it?" she said to Carpenter.

"Neither one of us had a lighter. I dragged Needham's old ass here. It was a place to recover. He couldn't move much, and I was gimpy. The pilot did the best he could, Jewel. It was just a terrible accident."

"Figured that. No luck in finding Lucas and the girl, I take it?"

"In our condition, we couldn't look anymore. Sorry."

"Explain it to DC. I'm just happy we found you."

\*\*\*

"Are you still amazed?" Joli said to Lucas as they admired their work on the AI unit. It no longer had the sleek lines it had originally, looking a bit like Einstein on a bad-hair day with the tangled mess of wires and external circuit boards, but it was functional, as far as they could tell.

"More so," said Lucas. "But I've also learned this is all within our reach in a few years."

"Why we worry," said Saki, crawling out from under a bank of equipment. "Feral humans smart. They go far into space soon."

"Maybe you shouldn't call them feral anymore," said Joli. "There are many like Lucas. Consider Carpenter, Needham, and Suarez."

"Habit," said Saki. "I try change."

"Help us slide this into place," said Lucas, pleased at the interchange. "I'm still not used to the idea of having inertia in a micro-g environment. You still have to get things moving."

"Mass isn't weight," said Joli. "Your Newton knew that. But don't worry, in a few weeks, we'll be on our way. Our days of micro-g are limited. And be prepared. Our planet has a bit more gravity than Earth. You'll feel lethargic at first until your muscles adapt."

Lucas put his arm around Saki. "Funny. I'm looking forward to it."

To readers: You have just finished the novella “Escape from Earth.” I hope you enjoyed it.

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## About the Author



Steven M. Moore was born in California and has lived in various parts of the U.S. and Colombia, South America. He always wanted to be a storyteller but had to postpone that dream to work in academia and R&D as a scientist. His travels around Europe, South America, and the U.S., for work or pleasure, taught him a lot about the human condition and our wonderful human diversity, a learning process that started during his childhood in California's San Joaquin Valley. He and his wife now live in Montclair, NJ, just thirteen miles west of the Lincoln Tunnel. For more details, visit him at his website <https://stevenmmoore.com> and follow him on Facebook, Twitter, and Goodreads where he participates in many discussions with readers and writers. Steve is a member of International Thriller Writers.