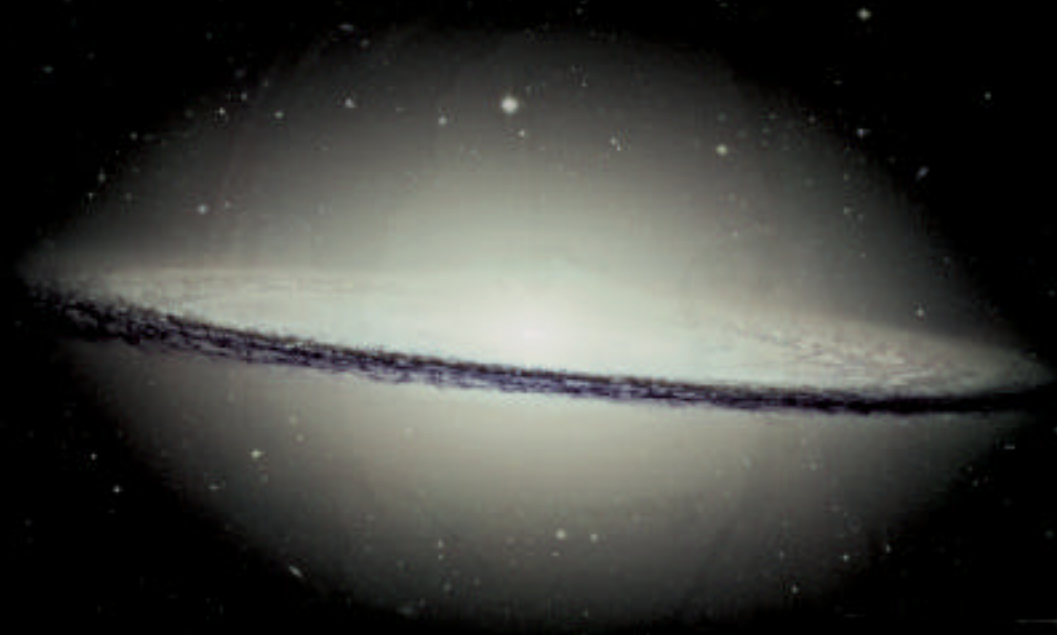


# Distant Cousin

a novel



A L P A S T

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Al Past

iUniverse, Inc.

New York Lincoln Shanghai

## **Distant Cousin**

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# Book I

## C H A P T E R 1

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# APRIL

It was the cool air blowing gently on her face that finally woke her up. Her eyelids twitched spasmodically, but to no avail—they were stuck shut. Rubbing helped. Gradually, the low lights overhead came into imperfect focus. She drew in several breaths, each deeper than the one before. Still not fully conscious after several minutes, she stretched her arms and legs, flexing her toes backward. Her back and shoulders arched gently.

After quite a few more minutes, hardly knowing why, she eased one leg and then the other over the edge of the bed and pushed herself up carefully, still blinking and rubbing her eyes. The air was humid, with a hint of electricity to it. She was thirsty.

The clock indicated she'd been awakened early, way ahead of schedule. She cleared her throat, took another slow breath, and cleared it again.

"Hleo," she croaked, "Hleo, what's going on?"

"Greetings, my lady!" came the voice out of the speaker. "It's early, I know. I apologize, but there's something important to show you. If you please, clean up, have something to eat and drink, and then join me in the computer room. At your convenience, of course."

Phooey! Hleo had practically no sense of humor, so his faint effort at a joke probably meant he felt a little guilty about interrupting her sleep. There was no help for it but to get herself into motion, carefully. True, it had been a good while since she'd checked in on her people, but even so, it was hard to imagine what

Hleo might have thought important enough to interrupt her sleep schedule. He'd never done that before. What could have changed? Could there be word from home? Very unlikely....

"Look at this!" he announced, when she finally dragged herself into the computer room, stretching and yawning. She still needed to fully revive herself, but there would always be time for that.

In front of her were two screens covered with ovals, lines, and rows of calculations and numbers. She blinked several times—her eyes still weren't focusing properly—and tried to make sense of the displays. What was all that? Try as she might, she could find no meaning there. She swallowed and cleared her throat. "Hleo, this is not about war or environmental changes or anything else I was expecting. It looks like mathematics. Have you been dabbling in astronomy again, Hleo?"

"Yes, I have." He sounded a little defensive. "There's not much to occupy me all the time you are sleeping. We don't have all the equipment we might wish for scientific endeavors, but I do the best I can. Look at what I've discovered!"

She was beginning to lose patience. She was stiff as a board, couldn't see properly, and in no frame of mind for puzzles. But Hleo was sensitive to sarcasm, so she stifled a sharp retort. "Maybe you'd better just tell me." Her voice sounded rusty.

"Oh, very well. As you know, this solar system is full of little bits of piffle zooming everywhere. According to my calculations, and I've rechecked them many times, these two meteoroids (two dots blinked) will collide here (a red blinking dot appeared where several lines crossed) and the debris will fall into the sun on this path (more lines blinked)."

"That's kind of neat, Hleo." She was impressed at first, and then she thought further. "When will this happen?"

"In four years, two hundred and fifty five days and six hours."

"What! You woke me up for that? I had an awake period scheduled for two years from now. I could have seen it then, Hleo."

"No, no! There's more!" The elderly voice from the speaker went up a major third in excitement. "Look at these lines! This one is the orbit of Earth. Do you see? Earth will pass directly under the debris field at the worst possible time. It will be showered with meteoroid fragments, and any chunks bigger than you, if they fall in an ocean, and many will, will cause such a tidal wave that coastal cities will be inundated and many inland cities too! And there are certain to be much larger pieces, which will make craters and dust clouds that will cover the entire planet!"

That got her attention. “Hleo, that’s terrible! That would be a catastrophe! Are you sure?”

“Well, yes. I can’t be sure how many pieces will land where, but since the earth is mostly water there’s little doubt that we’ll have quite a show.”

“A show? A *show*?? We can’t just sit here and watch! We’ve got to do something, Hleo!”

“There’s nothing we can do, my lady. For one thing, we have our orders—we must not interfere. We only observe. You know that as well as I. For another, what could we possibly do?”

“I don’t know, Hleo! But we have to do something! We’re pretty sure these are our people. We can’t just sit here and watch them die when we have it in our power to help. We have the escape pod....”

“Not an option, my child. First, I repeat: we are not to interfere. And second, the escape pod is not a transport vehicle. It might land on earth, if one were very careful, but it would never return. Its engines don’t have the necessary thrust! That’s out of the question! I can guess what you are thinking! Don’t even consider going down there! Besides, the people are not all that civilized, as we have seen. It would be terribly dangerous.”

“Hleo, how can you know what I’m thinking when I don’t know what I’m thinking? Give me some time to wake up. Maybe then I’ll know what to think.”

Her grumpiness had been replaced by her contrariness. Hleo was an old woman sometimes, but if she decided on a course of action there was not much he could do about it. After all, he was just a brain in a bottle, and not always a good-tempered brain in a bottle at that. She was not going to watch millions die, not without trying to help them. She was in command. Hleo could be controlled with just a few switches....



## C H A P T E R 2

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It was cold and dark in the bottom of the canyon, but the crisp, dry air was wonderfully exhilarating. Overhead, the sky was lightening on one side...that had to be east. She recalled the image of her map: west Texas, U.S.A., a canyon below the University of Texas McDonald Observatory, or so she hoped.

She climbed carefully upwards, towards the lightening sky. Rocks and pebbles clattered lightly under her feet. In the gathering light she could make out all kinds of odd plants, some with formidable thorns. Out of curiosity, she touched a cactus and got pricked by a sharp spine.

She had wondered what the air might smell like. It was bracing: crisp and light and clean. There were subtle notes of some cool, spicy fragrance probably from a plant, but she had no idea which one or ones. Eventually she reached the top of the canyon to discover a hard, smooth surface along the crest, extending out of sight around curves both above and below her. A highway, she realized. And there! There was the observatory: two silver domes on two peaks a good ways off, glinting softly in the first light. That's what I want! she thought. Sucking her pricked finger in the dawn stillness, she began walking up the road toward the observatory.

After rounding two or three curves it had grown light enough to see to the horizon. The view was stupendous. Hills and mountains receded into the distance, in a silence that could almost be heard. The curvature of the earth was visible, impossibly far away. A contrail marked the sky high overhead, like a silver scratch. Had she made one herself earlier? She had no idea.

She had landed in the edge of a range of rugged desert mountains, in one of many canyons that opened out to a giant plain in front of her. In the distance on

the far side of the plain were more, but lower, hills and mountains. She could now see that the canyon she had clambered out of was full of huge boulders at the bottom. There were small trees here and there, and more clumps of low trees in adjacent canyons. She'd been expecting a denser forest, but perhaps this area was too dry to support one. There seemed to be only one highway across the plain. Where it disappeared among the hills on the horizon, a handful of lights twinkled dimly. If that was a town, it was the only one around for as far as she could see.

Walking in the silent, chill air was exhilarating. Her shoes made a crunching sound in the gravel just off the pavement, but progress was easier, more quiet, and faster on the pavement itself. The cool, gentle breeze smelled wonderful.

After rounding two curves, she became aware of a sound down the highway behind her. At first a faint sigh, it grew louder, and she had almost decided to jump down into the canyon when two lights appeared. It was an automobile! In no time at all it passed her, and then red lights brightened on the back of it. It stopped, two white lights came on, and it slowly rolled back to where she stood. A glass panel slid down. She had almost decided to run for the canyon when a woman's head appeared in the opening and a voice said, "Hey, miss, you need a ride?"

She forced her heart to quit pounding and stepped toward the automobile. The dark face in the window was smiling, and the voice had been kindly. Finally she stammered "Oh, thank you, no. I'm just walking up to the observatory."

"Oooh, that's a long walk on a cold morning," the woman said. "I work there. That's where I'm going. Get in. I'll give you a ride!"

She had seen enough movies to know that passengers rode next to the driver, so she walked to the other side, opened the door, and got in. The car gathered speed up the mountain.

She had just begun to consider the etiquette of the situation—who should speak first?—when the woman said "Oooh, this is a cold morning for a walk! And going all the way to the observatory! They don't open for visitors until nine o'clock! You gonna have to wait! You wanna see the stars?"

"Uh, no, ma'am...I want to talk to the director, to Dr. Harcroft."

"Ooooh, I know him! I clean his office! He's a very smart man! He knows everything about the stars. But he's very messy! You wouldn't believe the mess he make in just one day! I can show you his office! Those people, they stay up all night looking through their telescopes, but they sleep late—you might not see him until lunch time. I hope you patient!"

She smiled and nodded at the driver—a bit of good fortune, perhaps. There's one thing she wouldn't have to worry about. If only the rest went as smoothly.

## CHAPTER 3

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“Craddick! Craddick, get in here!” Colonel Arthur’s voice could be heard by the sentries all the way in the hall outside the two secure doors to the comm center. Colonel Jacob Arthur was the most dreaded watch officer on the staff of the Army Air Defense Center at Fort Bliss. Most of his staff assumed he was so short-tempered because their performance directly affected his prospects for promotion, but a few cynics maintained that it was also because he was short and ugly. No one liked to be chewed out, but Colonel Arthur’s tirades were in another league. His face turned cherry red, he shouted, and spittle flew onto anyone within five feet.

The door to the adjacent radar room crashed open and a startled-looking young captain hurried in. “Yessir! Here, sir!”

“You called me in the wee hours, Craddick. This better be good. I hope you haven’t detected another DEA blimp on the loose, goddammit! Report!”

“Uh, yessir. Well, at 0432 this morning we detected a blip passing through the atmosphere over the Atlantic Ocean to a landing in the Davis Mountains, just east of here, sir....”

“Sounds like a meteorite, Craddick. You pulling me out of a sound sleep for a goddamn meteorite?”

“I don’t think so, sir. For one thing, the object’s track indicated it had dropped out of earth orbit, sir. And it didn’t burn up as it descended; it was going too slowly. For another thing,” he paused briefly, “it changed course four times.”

“WHAT!?” the colonel gaped. “Changed course? Are you sure? What are you guys smoking back there, Craddick?”

“Nothing, sir. I swear, the object slowed several times and adjusted course, once by six degrees and then by smaller amounts, and it slowed even more before dropping off the radar. It can’t be a meteorite, sir. The station in the panhandle picked it up too, sir. If the New Mexico base detected it, we can triangulate where it landed, maybe. That’s why I called you.”

“Oh, crap! Sparks! Sparks, dammit, where are you?”

A wide-eyed radioman half stood from beyond a nearby console. “Here, sir.”

“Sparks! Notify Homeland Security! Flash priority, Sparks! Have them check with NASA and their Euro buddies for screwed up satellites or orbiters or whatever the hell. Contact Special Ops at Fort Bliss and tell them to get up a team of SWAT guys and a couple of choppers. Craddick! Get that landing point triangulated to save your ass and send the posit to the Special Ops office. Don’t forget to copy NORAD on that too. Also, contact law enforcement on the ground in the area to ask the locals if they saw anything. Whatever that is, we damn well better jump, and now! Move! Sparks! Craddick! Go!”

## CHAPTER 4

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The sun was barely halfway up the sky. She could think of nothing better to do than stand at the low wall outside the observatory and stare into the distance. Ordinarily new life forms would have fascinated her, but now not even the millions of little red ladybugs that carpeted the bases of the nearest trees attracted her interest. Some of the trees and plants had little signs identifying them, but she just leaned on the wall and stared into the distance and thought about that blasted Harcroft. What was the matter with him? A voice behind her startled her out of her gloom.

“Hellooo, Miss! Did you talk to Dr. Harcroft?” It was her recent acquaintance, Mrs. Delbosque, pushing a cart with several barrels on it towards a large steel box.

“Oh, hi, Mrs. Delbosque. Yes, I talked to him. But he didn’t want to hear what I had to say. It looks like I’ve wasted my time.”

“Ooooh, I’m sorry. Thass too bad! Pobrecita, you look so sad. What you going to do now?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where is your car? Are you camped in the campsite?”

“No, ma’am. I don’t have a car.”

“Well, where do you live?”

“Uh, a long way from here.” She considered her words. “I hitchhiked to get here, but I don’t know where to go now. I must have been stupid to come here.”

“Ay, pobre little ’cita! To think a little girl like you hitchhiking! Que molestia! So dangerous! And no place to go? You have any food?”

“No, I don’t,” she sighed. She hadn’t planned that far ahead, and she didn’t have any money either, or clothes or anything. I’m in serious trouble, she thought. I can’t get off this planet, I can’t convince that idiot astronomer of the threat to his world, and I have nowhere to go. I don’t even know what to do in the next ten minutes. What was I thinking?

“Well, maybe I can help you a little, anyway. Why don’t I drive you down to my house for lunch, and you can stay for supper and sleep on it? We have room for you, if you don’t mind company! Tomorrow you can decide what you want to do. Why not?”

The generosity of the proposal, unexpected as it was, startled her. “Oh, Mrs. Delbosque, that would be wonderful! Thank you so much! I’m so tired!”

“Ay, mija, it will be my pleasure. Let me empty these cans and I’ll get my keys and we’ll *vamonos prontito!*”

## CHAPTER 5



“Flying time is 70 minutes, Hennessey. They send you that position yet?” Brooks had to shout into his mic over the maxxed-out engines and the whirling rotor blades just above their heads. The four helicopters clattered east over the desert in the afternoon sun, packed with the hastily-assembled intervention team: scouts, trackers, snipers, medical squad, technicians, forty soldiers all told. Their briefing had been hasty but they had trained for this for two years...only none of them were too sure what to expect in this particular case. Lt. Colonel Brooks hoped it would be at least something worthwhile, and not a false alarm.

“Here it is, sir,” hollered Hennessey, passing a clipboard over his shoulder. It showed a three-sided search area about a mile on a side, over some deep canyons a couple miles from the University of Texas McDonald Observatory, near Fort Davis. Brooks handed the clipboard up to his copilot. “Gonna be a bitch, Gomez,” he hollered.

“Sure is,” the copilot nodded, squinting at the map. “Be lucky to find doodly before dark.”

The choppers roared on, following Interstate 10 East.

The Delbosque house was a rambling old structure located behind a ranch of some sort. As they drove in, Mrs. Delbosque pointed out several barns, corrals, and pens, and a large main house near the road.

“You see those? This is a dude ranch! You know what’s a dude ranch? People pay to come here and play like cowboys! Many people were here at spring break but now ees almost deserted. Here’s my house. You be safe here. I fix us lunch and you can have a nice siesta and you feel much better!”

The lunch was a simple one, but warming the various dishes filled the house with such savory aromas that she nearly fainted waiting for them to be served. It didn't seem a good idea to ask what each was, but she wholeheartedly thanked Mrs. Delbosque for the meal. If ordinary working people ate food this good, what would wealthier people eat, she wondered?

After Mrs. Delbosque went back to work, leaving her in the house alone, she was no longer sleepy. She felt defeated and frustrated and ashamed of herself. There was a lot to think about, too many questions and not enough answers. She could try to contact Hleo, but even if she was successful, he might not speak to her. He was such a stickler for regulations. How could he help anyway?

Tiny whirring noises—insects, she hoped—came from the trees around the house. Much of what she had seen so far she recognized from pictures, movies, and books. The reality was ever so much more vivid. If only she had the leisure to explore! Her profound isolation began to weigh on her. She'd been much too impetuous when Hleo had told her about the meteoroids. It was one of her old problems, and part of the reason she had been sent on the mission in the first place. She had the necessary rank and intelligence, so how difficult could it be when her only companion would be a station manager built into the machinery? It should have been simple. Instead, she'd followed her old impulses and got herself into serious trouble—and not just herself, but the mission, and her people.

Sitting on the Delbosque's back porch and looking at the silent trees in the canyon through the screen, her thoughts turned to her home, so far away and so long ago. If she had just agreed to marry Herecyn like her parents wanted, her life would have been totally different—maybe not better, given Herecyn's coldness—but at least she wouldn't be marooned in a world of strangers.

Instead, fed up with what he considered her selfishness (she preferred pickiness), her father "promoted" her and had the Tribal Council send her off on the biggest mission her people had ever undertaken. The thinking was, it was a task she couldn't mess up and maybe it would teach her to value her obligations to the tribe. When she returned—if she returned—she might be more cooperative. But no; instead, she had found a way to ruin everything once again.

To calm her nerves and explore a bit, she left the porch and walked through the nearby trees to some huge boulders at the bottom of the canyon. She leaned against a rock in the warm sun and stared at the ground. What else could she have done? Could she have waited until a space shuttle was in orbit and flown around it in the escape pod, maybe holding a sign to the window? That would have created a sensation, for sure...but a shuttle flight wasn't scheduled for years as far as she knew, and time was running out on those meteoroids. Hleo could



have sent a warning by internet...but the internet was full of hoaxers as it was. She could locate another expert like Dr. Harcroft and try again to make him or her understand. Well...no, that wasn't any more likely to work than it had the first time. Being a young-looking female was apparently a disadvantage—she could tell from Harcroft's body language that he thought she was out of her mind. If she were an older man, perhaps with a beard, he might have found her more credible. She just hadn't appreciated being taken seriously would be so difficult. She hadn't thought it through. And now she was in deep trouble. Idiot!

The peaceful afternoon was interrupted only by the twittering of unseen birds until a black and white cat emerged from some boulders, making throaty rrowing sounds. She knew people kept cats as pets, but she also knew some cats were wild. She hoped this one wouldn't attack her. It was a beautiful animal.

She remained perfectly still. The cat sat and looked at her, stuck a back leg out and licked it five or six times. Then it got up and walked directly to her. It began purring loudly and rubbing back and forth against her pant legs. Just when she was about to bend down to touch it, there came a growing whapping sound high in the sky, and suddenly a helicopter passed low overhead and thundered out of sight. When she looked down again, the cat was gone. Smart cat, she thought, and walked back to the house to sit on the porch to await Mrs. Delbosque's return.

By the time Mrs. Delbosque came home from work, shadows had nearly filled the canyon. The air, still light and refreshing, had taken on a distinct chill. But two hours later, full of delicious frijoles, amazingly fragrant tortillas, and with her tongue burning from Mrs. Delbosque's salsa, her mind had been diverted from her problems by the lively family. The husband, a round, mustachioed man named Gustavo, left the house to take care of some chores in the barn, and the four children clustered around the new guest and peppered her with questions.

They wanted to know her name. The closest she could come to her real name was "Darcy," a name in general use, she knew. The oldest daughter, Luisa, a junior at Sul Ross State University in Alpine, asked where she came from. Trying for a place sufficiently far away that further questions might be finessed, she answered "Canada."

The middle two girls, Clara and Maria, wanted to know if she spoke Spanish. She had to admit she could not. "But you can teach me," she offered, which started them giggling.

The youngest child, eight year old Geraldo (though he corrected his mother that it was "Jerry"), was even bolder than his sisters. "Is this real?" he asked, of her long hair. She let him play with it while she tried to copy the Spanish of Maria

and Clara. Her clumsy attempts at the rolled “rr” in their nursery rhyme, “*Rapido corren los carros cargados de azúcar del ferrocarril*” made them shriek with laughter.

Luisa was too sophisticated for such silliness, shushing some of Jerry’s more direct questions: “No seas tonto, Jerry” (“Don’t be stupid, Jerry”). Silly or not, all the children called her “ma’am,” or “miss.”

At about ten pm, Mrs. Delbosque put her hands on the table and said “Ay, mijos, es tiempo para acostarse.” The children were getting sleepy, it was Friday, and they needed to get to bed. She showed Darcy to a cot in a tiny room containing a sewing machine, several dressers, and piles of material, and after pointing out where the back washroom was, bid her good night.

Darcy felt better than she had all day. She was tired but not hungry, and relieved that she could interact with people in a seemingly normal way. Probably the movies and television she had seen, and the books she had snagged off the internet, depicted extraordinary cases, like normal people who were really serial killers in secret. At least she hoped so. The Delbosque family was boisterous but congenial.

She washed up and fell into the cot and pulled the two quilts over herself. It took her five minutes to warm them up, but by that time she was asleep.

## CHAPTER 6

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Matt Méndez was not having a good day. Whoever said career change was good for the soul should be drowned in a cow tank, he thought, driving his old pickup out of Fort Davis. As a boy growing up in Albuquerque he'd always been regarded as having a great future...so where the hell was it? He was smart, not bad looking, and popular enough. He'd stayed in school like his parents expected, even getting a master's degree to their great pride. But where had it lead?

The best job he could find was teaching writing to college freshmen at El Paso Community College. The pay was adequate though the work was laborious, but he could never get over the feeling that what he was doing wasn't that different from trying to teach the deaf to sing. When the state of Texas began to cut back on money for schools, and especially for higher education, he realized reluctantly that there was even less future in that line of work than he had thought.

Well, he had always enjoyed research as a student, and he could write, so maybe reporting would be a fun challenge. He had made the leap and taken a job as a reporter for the Alpine, Texas *Avalanche*. The job was a challenge, all right, but unfortunately the challenges seemed to be, first, making enough money to pay for food and housing and second, getting along with the editor of the Alpine *Avalanche*, a curmudgeonly skinflint named Clint Eastman. Plus, the career switch had cost him a pretty good girl friend—her mother thought a reporter wouldn't be a good enough provider for her daughter—and left him with few good prospects for replacement girl friends. Dammit! On the plus side, he was getting an education in how a small city worked. He figured he'd give it another couple of years. He wasn't consumed with ambition, exactly, but he did expect

better things for himself. If this job didn't catch fire, then perhaps another career change might be a good idea.

Eastman, called "Crusty" by the locals, stared Matt up and down as he walked in after lunch with the story of the wedding at the Fort Davis State Park, the old, restored cavalry post. Probably that was because he had never seen Matt in his one suit, an all-purpose black affair, and wearing his good shoes, shined, no less. Still, it was a better-than-average story. How many weddings feature a groom and groomsmen dressed as old-time cavalry officers? The pictures he had snapped of the wedding party on horseback would make a good story all by themselves.

Eastman growled that people had been calling all day about government helicopters raising hell up around McDonald Observatory, landing on their parking lot and armed soldiers running around like crazy. It didn't fit the pattern of the typical lost hiker situation, but no one he could contact could tell him a damn thing about what was going on. Well, that's what reporters were for. Méndez, get your ass up there and get the story.

He needed a cell phone. If he had had one, he wouldn't have driven 30 miles back to town from Fort Davis only to turn around and go right back up there, plus the extra miles beyond, to the observatory.

His pickup groaned up the steep approach below the domes and pulled into a visitor's slot. The director of the observatory, a Dr. Harcroft, was "out of the office," the secretary told him. But luck, or maybe persistence, paid off. He knew enough to slide by the "Private Residence" sign and walk through the little housing area below the main buildings. Just as he had walked the full circle and was about to head back to his truck, a Volvo driven by a man with a big white handlebar mustache passed him and turned left, downhill. Bingo, he thought! That guy matches the picture on the wall at the visitor's center!

There were only two highways leading to the observatory, and the intersection was visible from miles away, so he eased his truck down the slope and watched the Volvo turn left, towards Fort Davis and Alpine. OK, doc, he thought. Let's see where you go for fun on a Friday evening!

No surprise, really: the Volvo pulled up in front of the Hotel Limpia in Fort Davis, a favorite upscale watering place and eatery, long on western atmosphere but also with linen napkins. Matt couldn't afford the place, but tonight might be an exception—maybe Crusty would accept the expense. If he got the story, of course.

The doc was seated at a table in the bar, apparently ordering a drink from a waitress. As she walked off, Matt moved in. "Dr. Harcroft? May I ask you a few questions, please?"

Harcroft looked up from the menu in annoyance, taking in Matt's black suit in a quick glance. He snapped "I already talked to you government guys. What is this, more? Don't you people talk to each other?"

Matt tried to keep his eyes from popping out of his head. He didn't want to say he was a reporter, a job description probably only two notches higher than "government man" in Alpine. But he couldn't in all honesty claim to be a government man, either. "I'm sorry. Communication is hard, sometimes," he apologized. "Just a couple questions; I promise not to take five minutes."

"Well, what then?" Harcroft grumped, brushing a finger across his fine white mustache. He had on a tie and a nice looking tweed sport coat. He must be planning a fine evening, thought Matt. Maybe rent a movie and project it inside the dome. He eased into a chair opposite the astronomer. He didn't have the slightest idea what to ask him.

"Well, first," he fished, "do you have anything to add to what you said earlier?"

"No. I told the other guys, the only odd thing that happened all day was that a young woman, probably in her mid-twenties, barged in this morning babbling about comet debris striking the earth in four years. I don't know how she came up with such a wild idea, but she was clearly a nut case, and I told her so. Though, to tell the truth, she didn't act particularly nutty—more like uncomfortable, jittery. You just can't tell about people, these days. I don't know where she went after she left. That's all. No new thoughts."

"Yes sir, thank you sir. Uh, could you give some idea of what this young woman looked like, perhaps?"

"I already did that, but I'll say again, and let's make this the end of the matter, she was small, a little over five feet tall, slender, had shoulder length dishwater blonde hair, and a not unattractive face, kind of sharp features, with striking eyes and a strong nose. Is that enough?"

"Yes, sir...but, uh, what was she wearing?"

"Oh, that. I think it was sort of a track suit thing, kind of like a uniform—gray, matching top and bottom, no jewelry, and black shoes. They looked sort of like sneakers, small sneakers."

"I see. So, after she left was that when you called the helicopters?"

"I didn't call anyone. I have no idea why those people showed up. They ruined the whole damn day. And it's not getting any better. What agency are you with, anyway?"

"I beg your pardon, Dr. Harcroft," Matt said. "I'm not with the government. I'm from the Alpine *Avalanche*. Enjoy your dinner, sir." Dropping his card on the

table, the card that said “Matt Montez, Area Reporter,” he fled the restaurant. He would leave the astronomer to his filet mignon. He, Matt the Sleuth, mild-mannered reporter, would settle for a hamburger at the Dairy Queen.

## C H A P T E R 7

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The small sample of the planet she had seen so far was encouraging. It was a splendid Saturday. The air warmed up nicely after a frosty morning, and bright white clouds drifted across the sun all morning long. The children dragged her outside and fought for turns to show her barrel cactus, yuccas, juniper trees, armadillos, and longhorn cattle. They seemed to sense that, their guest being a Canadian, she needed this basic information. They were half right, she admitted. She wasn't Canadian, but she did need information, a lot of it. What she was going to do next was never far from her mind.

The cat from the day before reappeared from behind a barn and began weaving around Darcy's ankles. "Mami, Mami!" called Clara. "Look! Musi is back!" Luisa explained that Musi was a stray cat who appeared one day badly hurt, which they nursed back to health. Never comfortable around people, it accepted food but hissed at everyone and would never be touched. Finally it disappeared entirely, until now. As Luisa talked, Darcy knelt and began rubbing the animal under the chin, to its evident great pleasure. Luisa was astonished that it didn't shred Darcy's hand.

After a morning walk they had a tasty lunch, and then after the dishes had been washed they walked to the paddock to watch several cowboys working with the horses. The dappled sun and shadow on the large animals was amazingly beautiful, and the sounds of their hooves striking the soft earth practically musical. Regularly-spaced little clouds of dust followed them around the track where they galloped.

As they returned to the house, Darcy noticed Mrs. Delbosque's husband Gus (he told Darcy to call him Gus) talking to his wife on the porch. As they neared,

the concern on both their faces became evident. "Ay, mija," said Mrs. Delbosque, shaking her head, "there may be trouble."

"Trouble?" she whispered. "What trouble?"

"Mija, Gus says there are government men all around, asking people if they have seen a little rubia on the loose. That's a little blonde girl, mija. He figures they are from La Migra, you know, Immigration. He wonders, since you from Canada, if you here legally. Maybe not. Maybe La Migra is looking for you, you know?"

Darcy hugged herself reflexively, her eyes widening. "Ooooh...."

"Don't worry, mija. We have a lot of experience with La Migra. They around here all the time. You be safe here. The children don't say nothing, right, kids?"

"Mami!" wailed Jerry, and wrapped his arms around Darcy's waist. "Don't let them take Darcy!" Clara and Maria looked stricken as well. Luisa seemed particularly grave. "Don't worry, Darcy. We'll hide you good, until they go away."

Later that evening, after supper, Darcy relaxed a little. If she could hide successfully, so much the better. If not, if she was taken into custody, surely they would take her to someone in authority. Still, she was shaken by the thought of being pursued. Whatever were they worried about, anyway? She was the one bringing bad news, but so far she had been unable to deliver it. Sleep was a long time coming.



## CHAPTER 8

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Sunday morning was, if possible, even more lovely than Saturday morning. The Delbosque family had gone to church. Darcy lazed around the house until the chilly shadows were replaced by sunlight. They had invited her to go with them, and under other circumstances she might have accepted, if only to see what a service was like. For now, she felt safer staying out of sight. She told them she'd be happy at home until they returned.

It was impossible to observe the glorious day from inside, through the windows. Nearly everything she had seen so far was novel and fascinating—the smell of fresh mint, the calls of birds, the rough feel of the lichens on the boulders—that there had to be many more surprises in store. She decided to ease out the back door and slip into the trees. It shouldn't be difficult to get to the top of the ridge while remaining out of sight.

More than anything, she wanted to watch the clouds, a few of which looked dark gray and heavy, floating over the valley floor. Maybe it would rain on her! She could not remember the last time she'd felt rain.

It took a half hour to reach the ridge, followed at a comfortable distance by Musi, the wild but curious cat. From the summit, the ranch buildings below looked like toys. On the south, the mountain fell away to the wide valley, glowing golden in the sun.

She leaned back against a boulder and turned her face to the skies and the breeze, breathing the light air deeply. Musi crouched in the shade of a nearby tree, studying nothing in particular, but very intently. It was an appealing animal: friendly but at the same time wary—not unlike her, come to that.

Just as she came to a decision to climb on top of the boulder, her eyes were drawn back to the cat, now hissing viciously and arching its back, its tail puffed out to three times its size. At the same moment, a rock rolled behind her and a loud voice called out “Federal agents! Freeze! Put your hands in the air! Do not move!” Spinning around, she refocused on the trees below her and saw three, no five, no eight, large men in camouflaged uniforms with horribly painted faces and big guns of some kind pointed directly at her! But slowly, they faded away and then she saw nothing at all.

Gradually, she became aware of an immensely loud, throbbing, roaring noise. Her whole body was being shaken, not violently but uncomfortably. She couldn’t move her hands or legs. As consciousness returned, she carefully peeked out between squinted eyelids. She was strapped to a bench in a metal machine, probably one of those helicopters she had seen. Four or five armed men were seated against the sides. One of them looked in her direction and she shut her eyes completely.

When she peeked again a minute later, all the men were looking forward, evidently through the windshield. They were large, and moved slowly, like giants. She had no idea how long she had been passed out. The sun seemed to be streaming directly from ahead. With conscious effort she called up her memory of the internet map she had seen on the moon. West—they were flying west, almost directly into it.

“So, Miss Whatever Your Name Is, let’s review this. You came from outer space to tell us Earth is going to be clobbered by a flying pile of rocks. Is that about it?” Colonel Arthur was not a huge man, but he was hugely unhappy. There were two genuinely large men on either side of him, as well as guards at the door. Darcy, alone on her side of the table under a harsh light, felt tiny, like a child called to account before grownups.

“Yes, that’s correct, sir,” Darcy said softly.

“And you arrived here from the moon in an ‘escape pod’ of some kind? Is that right?”

“Yes, sir,” she whispered, her eyes directed blankly at the top of the table in front of her.

“And you picked your landing coordinates from the internet, correct?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And let me especially get this part straight: you look like we do because you are a member of a tribe of people who were moved from Earth to another planet

eons ago by beings unknown, and you have been observing us from the moon for the last sixty years—THE LAST SIXTY YEARS! You expect me to believe that too, right? RIGHT?” The colonel’s eyes were red and swollen and set close together and little flecks of moisture shot out of his mouth onto the table when he shouted.

“It’s true, sir.” Her neck ached from the strain of not shivering. Swallowing with effort, she looked across the table at him and said, more loudly, “It’s true. You are all in great danger. I can give you the orbital data, and your astronomers can confirm it. Why will you not believe me?”

The colonel sat back a little and exhaled. He continued in a slightly more friendly tone: “All right, Miss Space Alien. Let’s say I do believe all that for now. Let’s say I have lost my flipping mind and I believe you. I have one remaining question. Answer this one correctly and we’ll all feel a whole lot more like believing the rest of it.” He leaned forward again. “Tell me: where is that escape pod?”

“I did tell you, sir. I burned it. It was no use any more, and it would have just attracted attention.”

“DAMMIT!” He slammed his palms on the desk. Darcy jumped along with the pencil and recorder on the table. “All right, Miss Whoever. Jennings, take her back to the holding cell. Gentlemen, let’s consider this....”

As the guards shut the door behind her, Darcy heard the large colonel say “...have to send her to Washington and....”

In fact, Colonel Arthur was well beyond unhappy. His team had successfully found the needle in the haystack—that part of the exercise had been textbook-perfect. The problem was the needle didn’t look like a terrorist or a space monster. It looked like an underfed beach bunny, which was vastly less satisfying—embarrassing, in fact, which was worse. It would be hard to brag about at the Officers’ Club, having captured Gidget from outer space, if that’s where she was really from. No, this was looking like trouble....

Granted, she seemed to know more about orbital mechanics than the average surfer chick was likely to know. That astronomer guy had identified her with no problem, her fingerprint check was negative, and no one in the area around Fort Davis recognized her. Wherever she was from, it wasn’t from that local area. The whole exercise could have been written off as a training event, except for one big problem: three radars had unquestionably tracked a piloted vessel landing out there, one that had changed course. Even NASA didn’t have anything that could do that, except for the Space Shuttle. And NASA could account for all of their

shuttles. What was more aggravating, the little surfer kid explained every course adjustment. How could a hoaxer or a wacko arrange that?

Dammit, anyway! Well, that really wasn't in his duty description. He'd gladly pass her to Washington to sweat her. The Fibbies could have a field day, and the CIA to boot. Maybe they'd send her to Gitmo and let the dungeon masters have at her. He was pretty sure they didn't get many cute little blonde prisoners down there. When in doubt, delegate! It had always worked before.

The holding cell was tiny, about as wide as she was tall and twice as long. The walls were hard painted blocks and the small sink and toilet were bare stainless steel. The only window was a small one in the metal door. The door had a narrow slot in it, probably for food trays, she remembered from some movie or other. Despite having lived what seemed like eons in a small facility on the moon, she was getting claustrophobia. Hleo had gloated to her that these people were not above torturing prisoners. It hadn't seemed that significant when he said it to her on the moon, but now, when she was in their power, helpless and ignorant of her status, she could feel fear surging in her heart.

She hadn't behaved well in that interrogation, but then she hadn't anticipated being so frightened. The team questioning her seemed to prefer intimidation to information, as if putting her under duress would yield better answers. That should not have bothered her, but it had. She had grown up in the middle of all sorts of conflict—only no one back home would have dared to humiliate her, as these men had when they forced her to trade her beloved flight suit for a rough orange prisoner uniform. She had been without human contact for a long time, after all, and now to be suddenly held captive by large, rude, strangely behaving people was extremely upsetting. She was a chief's daughter! At least her family would never know. She was ashamed of herself. She swore to herself it would never happen again.

At the moment, though, the air in the little cell was stale and dank, the single overhead light dim. On the point of panic, she mashed the intercom button and asked in a shaky voice if she could please have a little air. In an accent she could barely understand, a rough voice said, "Jes' a minit." She waited on the hard bunk, her hands clasped between her knees, concentrating on breathing slowly.

A few minutes later, a key clanked in the door, it swung open, and two more huge armed persons escorted her down a hallway. Like all the others, they too moved as if in slow motion. After a short walk down a hall and several turns, they paused and one unlocked a door, motioning her through. "Thirty minutes," the taller of them growled. The other one lit a cigarette.

She found herself in a paved yard between two wings of the building she'd been in. Grateful almost to tears for the air and light, she automatically looked up at the sky. There was a clunk behind her as the door was closed.

She was alone! She was outside! True, the end of the breezeway was closed off by a stout chain link fence nearly three times taller than she was, and there were several nasty looking coils of razor wire across the top of it. But she was alone! She could breathe!

Outside the chain link she saw what looked like a residential street, with rows of stately houses facing each other across a wide grass median. Far down the street, a building with a cross on top could be seen. Beyond loomed a mountain, and above it all was the sky, a deepening blue.

"This has to be a military base," she guessed. She paced back and forth a few minutes, surreptitiously checking the windows in the two facing wings to see who was looking her way—no one, apparently. After all, it was Sunday. She hadn't seen many people since the helicopter had brought her here. She paced and swung her arms and did some hamstring stretches. She could not visualize herself returning to that cell and undergoing more interrogation, or worse. She continued pacing and stretching and studying her surroundings. There were still no faces in the windows. An idea began to form amid the confused clutter of her mind.

"Well, what's the worst that could happen?" she muttered. She walked back to a corner near the door she had exited from, turned and studied the expanse of chain link opposite. She checked the windows again—still no faces anywhere—took two deep breaths and began running diagonally towards the fence at the other end. About two thirds of the way across, she took several long steps and jumped for all she was worth at a second story window ledge. She landed on it just about right, legs bent, and pushed off hard at an up angle. Clearing the razor wire by a bare handspan, she flipped over in midair and fell on the opposite side, rolling over twice.

Nothing felt broken. Without checking for scrapes and abrasions, she took off running toward the houses across the street. There were no sirens or cries of alarm from behind her. There were no cars on the street.

She made it into the alley behind the left row of houses. Slowing to a quick trot, she passed six or eight houses until she noticed one with laundry hanging near the back fence. Three minutes behind a bush provided her with a slightly large pair of blue shorts and a yellow t-shirt. Leaving her orange prisoner suit in a dumpster, she resumed running down the alley toward the mountain.

So far she had acted on instinct, but she needed a plan of some kind—any kind. More than anything, she needed some peace and quiet and time to think. There was only one person on the entire planet who might be able to help her. But how could she get to her?

Clearly, right was uphill and left was downhill—the mountain descended to a valley on her left. The sun had dropped behind the mountain in front of her. That would be west. She needed to go back the opposite way—east. But to get east she'd need to start by going to her left, south, paralleling the mountain. Surely that's where the main roads would be, in the valley. Roads meant transportation. She jogged down the row of big houses, noticing a road leaving the base ahead to her left. Would there be a guard there to stop her? She trotted up to the cross street, turned left, and jogged off base, waving at the guard in the booth. The guard waved back.

The road became a major commercial street, with considerable traffic. She cut over two blocks and continued in the same direction on a residential street. At one intersection she found a ball cap in the street by the curb. She picked it up, beat the dust out of it, and put it on, tucking her hair up underneath. It said "Miners" in blue letters. She resumed running.

Still no sirens, no helicopters, no signs of alarm. An hour or so brought her to what was obviously a major highway, with a huge overpass over the intersection she was approaching. That looked promising. She turned left, which should be east, and kept jogging. Finally, a highway sign high overhead gave her the best news she could have asked for: "IH 10, Dallas, San Antonio." It was just like MapQuest said! Wouldn't they be amazed to know they had had a customer on the moon?

She kept running. It felt wonderful.

## CHAPTER 9

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She must have run along the access road for nearly three hours, or from time to time a block or two over from it, wherever passage was simplest. There were a few other people jogging too, all as randomly dressed as she was. No one paid her any attention.

The air was noticeably drier than it had been at the Delbosque house. She stopped for water several times: once, cupping up water from a sprinkler system at a grassy patch in front of a house, another time inside a mall, at a water fountain, and once at a gas station, where, despite seeing several cars and trucks being refueled, a means of arranging her own transportation did not present itself.

Running still felt wonderful, but not quite as wonderful as it had earlier. Daylight was fading. Lights were appearing on vehicles and on buildings. Far ahead she could see the lights along the highway begin to thin out as the interstate left the populated area and headed into the desert. That could be a problem. She couldn't run much longer, and especially not into the desert at night.

Cresting a low hill, she saw in the distance a string of yellowish lights along both sides of the interstate and a sign announcing "Rest Stop 1 Mile." A break wouldn't be a bad idea at all. The rest stop consisted of several small buildings at the center of a long pull-off area. Three vehicles were parked along the curb. She walked past the first, a low, sleek car with intricate lacy designs painted all over it. The windows of the car were dark and it appeared deserted.

The nearest building contained lighted soft drink machines behind a cage and a water fountain where she took a long drink. The building that most interested her was the second. A sign said "Women" at one end. She went in gladly.

When she came out, with her hair freshly arranged under her ball cap, she noticed the car she had passed had moved in front of the restroom building. A man was lounging against the fender, looking at her. He was youngish, had on a shiny vest of some kind, and his crossed arms sported a number of large tattoos. He was smiling.

“Orale, mamacita!” he said. “You looking for a party, maybe? I know where we can find a real pachanga, what do you say?”

“No, thanks,” she said, wringing her hands in front of her and getting ready to dart away.

A pair of arms wrapped around her from behind, young muscular arms with even more tattoos. A voice close to her ear said “Hey, mami, you see the party, maybe you change you mind, ¿que no? You think so, Rico?” A bristly cheek rubbed against her neck.

The other man drawled “Yeah. I think maybe so. I think maybe we should at least give her the chance.” He eased off the fender of the car, flipped his cigarette onto the ground, and walked casually up to her, not stopping until he was close enough she could see his beard stubble despite the darkness. He was still smiling but his eyes were cold. “Yeah, I think maybe we should. She might have a real good time.”

“Dammit to hell, Jenkins! I don’t want to hear this! People don’t just disappear! Jenkins, your ass is grass if you don’t find that prisoner. You’ll be on report until your grandkids die of old age! Find her! FIND HER, goddammit!” Colonel Arthur was redder than anyone had ever seen him. Staff were hiding behind consoles and aides were backing out doors. Half the pictures on his desk were turned over from the pounding he’d given it. He had spluttered so much he needed a handkerchief to wipe his face.

“Sparks! Call base security, call the El Paso PD, call the Border Patrol, get some choppers up. Christ, call Homeland Security. Yesterday, Sparks! Oh, my broken ass...”

He glared at Jenkins. “You let her out in the breezeway alone? ALONE?”

“Well, sir, regs allow juveniles unsupervised detention outside. She was in a juvenile holding cell....”

“Regulations? Juveniles?? I got your regulations, Jenkins! Goddam Barbie’s baby sister from outer space is in our custody and you let her get away! If the mother ship beamed her up, you better pray they get you next! Find her, goddammit, find her!”



His voice tapered to a whisper as he looked down at the wreckage on his desk: “Oh, fuck me. This is it. Oh, fuck me.”

Matt didn’t get reimbursed for his hamburger—Crusty said he’d have had to eat, anyway—but he did get mileage, at least. The story got filed, but dammit, it was only of the “mysterious happenings in the mountains” genre at best. The readers of the paper were never surprised to hear about the government running wild and not telling anybody anything. Not even the local law enforcement community seemed to know anything. Maybe someone would call in a tip that he could pursue, but for now he couldn’t do any more. Still, it nagged him. Illegal aliens were common in the area, so what was so special about a small blonde woman? Who raised the alarm? What had happened to her? He’d continue to make a few inquiries, but he didn’t hold out much hope for the story.

His weekend was pretty much shot—the price of glory for being a newspaper sleuth, he reckoned. There was still time to make the Sunday buffet at the Sirloin Warehouse. After that, there was always television, a book, or maybe a visit to the gym. Tomorrow the preparation for the winter livestock show began. He was paying the price, but there was precious little sign of glory.

Ofelia Delbosque’s children were heartbroken to realize that their fun guest had disappeared. The twins were especially downcast. “Mama, you think La Migra got Darcy?” asked Maria.

“I don’t know. Maybe so, mija,” said Mrs. Delbosque. “The helicopters are gone también. Maybe they took her.”

Jerry’s sniffing added to Clara’s and Maria’s. Their mother changed the subject. “Look, mijos, mañana es un school day. You gotta get to bed or you won’t wanna get up at all. Everyone take a bath and go to bed, ahorita pronto!”

It had been a little awkward having a guest in the crowded house over the weekend, but during the week, after Luisa went back to the university, there would have been plenty of room. Darcy had been such a good guest, not like the big shot tourists that came to the dude ranch. They were always tearing around on horses or four wheelers and treating her husband like a servant if they noticed him at all. Darcy had actually helped her fold laundry. She wished her well, wherever La Migra took her.

## CHAPTER 10

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Rico was practically breathing in her face—she could smell his sour tobacco breath—but the guy behind her had unwisely left her arms free. She had been terrified in custody, but now, with these two, she was furious. Adrenalin surging, she acted without hesitation.

She made a fist with her left hand, the third knuckle extended, and hit him sharply in each eye, pop pop, before he could react. He dropped to the ground screaming and clutching at his face.

It happened so fast the man who was holding her evidently didn't realize what she had done. He dragged her back a step but didn't tighten his arms enough to prevent her from making a convulsive movement and turning within his grasp to face him. Her face inches below his, she swung her arms, palms flat, and slapped the man's ears as hard as she could, catching them flush. The man acted as if a bomb had gone off in his head, which it might as well have. He dropped to the ground alongside Rico, hollering in pain.

Darcy moved away quickly, before they recovered and tried again. The next vehicle in line was some kind of camper. In the darkness she could make out a sticker on the bumper. "Jesus is Lord," it said. The camper was idling and there were lights on inside. She knocked on the door, which was opened by a gray haired woman in capris pants and a flowered top. A white haired man stood behind her, holding a pistol down at his side. "Yes?" said the lady, looking surprised.

"I need a ride, ma'am," Darcy said, trying to keep her voice even. "Could you give me a ride, please?"

The lady looked stunned. After a second or two she began shaking her head. "Why no, dear, we couldn't do that. Where are your parents? Get your parents to give you a ride." And she shut the door. Below the window on the door was another sticker: "Love thy neighbor."

That left only one vehicle at the far end of the parking area, an old rusty pickup with dents in the side and odds and ends of wire, drifts of hay, and a stack of large paper bags weighted down by metal bars and hand tools in the back. An old man seemed to be sleeping inside. Darcy knocked on the window. The man opened his eyes, blinked several times, looked left and then right, saw Darcy, and slowly rolled the window down.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but I really need a ride, sir. Could you give me a ride, please?"

"¿Que? Wha...Whazzat, miss? A ride? You need a ride? Where you going?"

"East. I'm going east, please. And I really need to be going now, sir, if you can, please."

"I'm going east too. Well, not right now. I was taking a nap. But I'm going that way myself." He covered his mouth as he yawned. "Sure, you can have a ride. Tell you what—you can drive! You drive?"

"Oh! Uh, not right now. I'm sorry. We need to leave now, if we can." She looked left to the faint outlines of the two men on their knees, their hands on their heads. "If you start now, maybe I can take over in a little while."

"What time is it?" He looked at his wrist watch. "Ay, I slept too long. Sí, we can leave now. We need to leave now. I gotta be home before midnight!"

The camper lumbered by them as the old man popped the lock on the passenger side door and slid over to the driver's side and started the engine. Darcy hesitated two seconds and then opened it and got in. The man turned on the headlights and rolled down the onramp, right behind the camper. She looked back at the rest stop. The low car was still parked there.

The owner of the truck introduced himself as Ezekiel Hernandez, "a sus ordenes," he said, "at your service." Darcy thanked him again for giving her a lift.

"How come you need a ride just now?" he asked, in a loud, raspy, high-pitched voice.

"Oh. I'm going to visit someone in Alpine. I don't have a car so I was hitchhiking. I was doing all right until two men at that rest stop started bothering me." She looked out the back window of the truck. "That's their car coming up behind us." She slid down low in the seat.

The car changed into the left lane and pulled even with the truck, where it stayed a long minute. Hernandez looked at it and gave a friendly wave. Finally, the car zoomed toward the camper, which lumbered ahead in the distance.

"Ees OK now," he said. "You can sit up. They gone."

"I asked the people in that camper for a ride before I asked you. They told me to leave them alone. The man had a gun."

"Well, maybe those vatos in that ranfla gonna get a big surprise!" said Hernandez. "If they bother them in that camper too much, the Border Patrol up ahead will grab them, you bet."

"Border Patrol? What's that?"

"Awww, that's a place in the highway where La Migra stop all the cars and trucks and look for illegal aliens, drogas, and stuff like that. Whatsa matter?" he asked, as Darcy put a hand to her mouth.

"Oh, Mr. Hernandez. I may be in big trouble." She was visualizing herself back in that tiny holding cell.

"How come?"

"Well, you see, I'm from Canada," she almost sobbed. "I don't have any papers myself. Maybe you should just let me out somewhere so you don't get in trouble too."

"Ai de mi! You poor child! Hijole, I know what we do. You a little thing, really. You can get behind the seat here and they don't see you in the dark. They know me anyway. They look under the stuff in the back, that's all. You don't worry. It gonna be fine."

By the time they stopped for gas at Fort Hancock, Darcy had been diverted enough to almost forget her troubles. Mr. Hernandez was 72, and most amazingly, lived near Alpine. He went to El Paso every month for some kind of experimental radiation treatment for cancer (he wasn't sure about the details). Normally his wife drove him, but she had been sick lately. The radiation made him sleepy, which was why he was glad to give Darcy a ride, and glad to have someone to talk to. He was also hoping Darcy would share the driving with him.

After Hernandez learned she was "Canadian," he took it upon himself to be her area guide, much as had the Delbosques. He had story after story about ranching (he was a rancher), the oil business (there was a well on his land), his wife's cooking (as Darcy gratefully demolished two of his wife's tasty bean burritos), the weather (they needed rain), plants and animals, Alpine politics, his grandparents in the Mexican Revolution, his early work experience in Cuba and on shrimp boats in the Gulf of Mexico, and, most exotically, local Mexican-American folklore.

The whole time Mr. Hernandez was talking, worry about the Border Patrol was never out of her mind, but the encounter happened as he said it would. The way the seat curved to the back wall of the cab, no one would ever think a person could hide behind it. The officers at the checkpoint waved him through and added a friendly greeting to the wave.

By the time they turned south at Van Horn, leaving the Interstate for US 90, he had explained the basics of driving to her, and at least partially assuaged her anxiety about being an inexperienced driver without a license. After all, they were on one of the loneliest roads in a state full of lonely roads, and it was dark. Hernandez was soon asleep. She held the truck to 60 mph out of plain fear. No car caught up with them, and only a few passed them the other way.

She was feeling a little more confident behind the wheel by the time she slowed to pass through Marfa. Hernandez roused himself, had her pull over, and took the driving duties back. "Who you gonna visit in Alpine?" he asked, once they were rolling again.

"An old friend," she said, thinking quickly. "A friend from college."

"Ah! Someone at the university, yes?"

"Yes, I think so. She used to be there. I hope she still is."

"Ees kind of late to go visiting, 'specially when they not expecting you...."

"It should be ok. She's a night person."

"Where does she live at the university? At the dormitory?"

"I think so," she said hopefully.

"Thass good. Thass near the entrance. We drive right by there. I drop you off."

## CHAPTER 11

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The campus late Sunday night was practically deserted. The only building with lights on turned out to be the residence hall. Off the lobby, a mixed group of young people were watching a basketball game and laughing. A young woman with pink hair and a ring through one eyebrow was sitting nearest the door working on her nails. Darcy asked her in a low voice if she knew what room Luisa Delbosque was in.

"You bet," she said, around the gum she was chewing. "She lives down the hall from me. I'll take you there."

They went up a flight of stairs and stopped before a door nearly covered with things taped to it, most notably a large picture of Albert Einstein, who Darcy recognized, and another of a tweedy-looking handsome man she didn't. There were also notes, signs, cartoons, and a set of photographs of people in various costumes standing on a stage. Her guide pushed the door open.

Luisa was sitting on the floor with her legs under her talking with another girl on her bed. She looked up, shrieked "Oh, my God!" and jumped up, hugged Darcy, and held her at arm's length. She hugged her another time and pushed her back again. Darcy's head swung forward and back with each push and pull. "You're all right!" she exclaimed. "My God, my God, we thought they'd grabbed you! Are you OK? What happened? Oh, my God!" The other girl was on her feet by now, staring at the Darcy and Luisa in wonder.

"I'm OK," was all Darcy could think to say.

"Did they take you away? Where? How'd you get away? Oh, my God!"

"They took me to some military base in El Paso," she answered, "but they didn't watch me very closely and I got away from them and got a ride back here. I didn't know where else to go."

"Oh, my gosh, I'm so glad to see you! Darcy! You look exhausted! Did they chase you?"

"I didn't see anyone after me. I don't think they know where I am. I didn't know what else to do."

The girl who had been sitting on Luisa's bed, a tall, lean muscular black woman, stepped forward. "Why did they want you, anyway?"

Luisa answered for her. "You remember all those helicopters, and those people asking questions? They were looking for Darcy!"

"Really? Why? What'd she do?"

"My parents figured it was because they were Immigration and Darcy's Canadian."

"Canadian?" the black girl snorted. "Me, I'm Barbadian and there ain't nobody chasing me. I wish there was!"

"They'd never catch you, the way you run. Actually, Immigration doesn't usually chase people with helicopters, especially not Canadians. Papa said they were soldiers, not La Migra. Did they ever tell you why they were after you, Darcy?"

"It must have had something to do with me going to see that astronomer. He must have called the soldiers. I was asking him about...about something I had seen in the sky in Canada, and he told me I was crazy and threw me out."

"That's nuts! Maybe you saw something you weren't supposed to see, like a secret government satellite or something?" Luisa looked at the pink-haired girl, still chewing her gum, who shrugged imperceptibly.

"Girl, you don't look so good," said the athlete. It was true: Darcy was unsteady on her feet, and her eyelids were drooping. "Here, sit down. You need something to drink?"

"No, thank you. I just need a place to sleep tonight, and tomorrow I'll find some place to go."

Luisa glanced at the black girl. "Cheryl, you don't have a roommate this semester, do you?"

"No, I don't. It's fine with me if Darcy wants to sleep in my room, long as she doesn't snore. I got class in the morning, so you can sleep late as you want. The housekeeper doesn't come until Wednesday. But you better not get caught by the RA!"

Darcy looked alarmed, but Luisa laughed. "Don't worry about that. I'm the RA. Just keep a low profile and we'll see what happens."

Cheryl chuckled. "Hoo, girl! You nearly out on yo' feet. Come with me. I'll tuck you in."

The meeting room in the federal office building in El Paso was crammed with FBI agents in suits and two female agents not in suits, but close to suits. The man at the head of the table, Special Agent Smelly, widely suspected of a lifelong pre-occupation with living down his name, had a sheaf of papers in front of him and an expression of studied concern on his face. He always had that expression, though, so no one could exactly say whether this time there was reason for it or not.

"All right, folks. Folks! Let's get down to business, please. This is an odd situation, as you'll see, but Washington is coming down hard on it and we're going to go all out until we wrap it up. This has to do with a suspected alien that was picked up near Fort Davis who escaped custody here in Fort Bliss and is still at large." He paused. "When I say 'alien,' I mean a person or being possibly not from here. From Earth, that is. Possibly not from Earth." You could have heard a pin drop.

Reynolds, an agent close enough to retirement to not care, said "I heard it was a little blonde girl, a kid who looked like a junior high student, who spoke perfect English and had the good sense to act scared. I can believe she was spacey, but why would Washington think she was a space alien?"

Special Agent Smelly did not bristle at this. He looked down at his papers. He told them about the descending blip that changed course, plotted by three different radars. He described the exhaustive search that turned up nothing except a couple of burned spots (one of which was determined to have been a hay bale) and an unidentified woman (apparently a woman, that is) making bizarre claims to the head astronomer of the McDonald Observatory. And he related the wild story she told while briefly (thanks to those Army goofballs) in custody, of being human, but from a different solar system, and of supposedly observing Earth from the moon, and the interplanetary crapola that she said would be headed their way. Or our way. Whatever. Then he added "And there's the clothing."

Again, silence. Finally one of the female agents ventured, "What about the clothing?"

"She was made to change into prison garb in detention at Fort Bliss. The clothing she took off has been preliminarily analyzed." He paused. "The lab hasn't been able to identify the fibers. There are no seams anywhere in either the top or the bottom. That is, each garment is a single piece of material. Both parts seal together perfectly when superimposed. There's an integral belt with a control



on it that expands or contracts the fibers, making the garment warmer or cooler. Yet there's no source of energy with it to make it do that." He sighed again. "Some bits of hair and epidermal cells were recovered. The DNA was typed. It's human DNA."

He let that sink in, and then went on. "They're sending us a shitload of extra agents, plus a bureau chief to oversee the entire investigation. We'll report to him. We're to go house by house, if necessary, around the base to pick up her trail. Another team will canvass in Fort Davis and Alpine, and enlist local law enforcement in the search there. Homeland Security has a poker up its ass about this, but they haven't condescended to tell me what they'll be doing, if anything—riding our ass, more than likely. Simpson and Brown," he pointed at the agents seated on either side of him, "will coordinate our El Paso and Fort Davis teams respectively. You'll both meet with Agent Aldridge when his plane gets in from Washington in about an hour. We have a secure room at the airport for the meeting. Brown, here's a roster of people for you. All of your team will go to the airport. As soon as the meeting's over, you're headed for Alpine.

"It's crunch time, guys, until we find that Tinkerbelle from outer space."

Darcy had no idea how long she had slept. The room was deserted and the blinds were closed. It was completely quiet in the dorm. She lay there in the dim light and focused on the ceiling.

Could she possibly have been more stupid? She didn't see how. Hleo had warned her, but did she listen? She did not. She acted just like she always had. She had been sent, as much as anything else, to get her out of the way, so she'd have to settle down. And it worked, for a while—until Hleo got a little too clever with his astronomy. Naturally, she had to scorch down here without thinking it through carefully and now she was marooned and in big, big trouble: no money, no plan, and likely to suffer the same fate as those poor saps who were going to be obliterated by streaking rocks from the sky. Whatever was she going to do now?

She was weeping in frustration. Why bother running? That was easy—because she was terrified, that's why. She'd never been so scared in her life. These people—some of them, at least—might be big and slow but they were also mean and brutal and wanted to lock her away and do things she couldn't bear to think about to her. She longed for the security of her lunar station. But it was useless to worry about that.

What did it matter, anyway?

If they caught her they'd just question her again. And again, and again. She was telling the truth. Surely, eventually they'd believe her. Someone would take

her seriously, wouldn't they? That's all she wanted. But then she considered the possibility that they might not—they might lock her away as some kind of "enemy combatant," without telling anyone, and forget about her. She couldn't stand being imprisoned. The possibility of torture made her shudder. There had to be some other way to make them understand. But what? And how?

All she could do was get through one day at a time.

On this day, at this time, she was starving. And with reason: yesterday she had been captured at gunpoint, tied up, imprisoned, stripped, interrogated by hostile men, run at a good pace for four hours, fought off two rapists, and cadged a long ride in an old truck, all on water and two bean burritos. Yesterday had not been a good day.

Cheryl's alarm clock said 1:35 pm. Had she slept for twelve hours? She cautiously opened the door and peeked out. The hall was deserted. She tiptoed down to the water fountain and drank for a long time. The bathroom opposite was her next stop, and then she tiptoed back to Cheryl's room and shut the door. Peering out the blinds she could see the dorm was on a hill that sloped down to the highway where Mr. Hernandez had let her out. In the distance were several motels, gas stations, and restaurants. Restaurants! Food! There were ten or twelve students walking here and there, one youngster on a bicycle, and a group of people standing around a motorcycle in the parking lot.

The mirror over the dresser revealed her hair badly needed a good washing. Her borrowed t-shirt and shorts did too. She needed some real clothes, in fact. She needed a lot of things.

An hour later, as she was skimming one of Cheryl's textbooks on exercise physiology, she heard laughter out in the hall and a door nearby open and close. A few seconds later, a key slid into Cheryl's door knob and Cheryl walked in, looking alert and full of energy. She dropped her backpack on her bed and looked at Darcy.

"How you doin', D?"

"OK. How are you? Thanks for the bed, by the way."

"You welcome. You really needed it! What you done today?"

"Nothing much. I just woke up. I haven't gone anywhere."

"That's probably for the best. I bet you hungry, right? Can you wait another couple hours to eat? I gotta go for a run, but when I get back, Lou and I will get some food and maybe we can figure out what to do next, OK? Will that work?"

"I guess. I'm hungry, but I can wait."

She looked so forlorn that Cheryl gave her two of her power bars she had stashed for emergencies. Cheryl put on running shorts and a halter top and sneakers and departed.

The power bars were dry and mealy, but Darcy ate them slowly and with great relish.

Still shiny from the shower, Cheryl led Darcy to Luisa's room, after checking to see the hall was empty. They decided to call out for pizza, which Darcy had seen in commercials for years. She had always wondered if it really tasted as good as it was made to seem. Now she was going to find out. They asked her what kind she liked. "Whatever you like," she said. "It makes no difference to me." They ordered two.

Luisa was relieved that Darcy had stayed in all day. She brought the ominous news that posters of the "missing person" kind had been put up in the student center and around campus, featuring a fairly decent picture of her, looking wan and dazed. Luisa had one of the posters with her that she had liberated from the theater building. Darcy recognized the booth in the interrogation room in El Paso where they had taken her fingerprints and other measurements. Her heart sank once again. These people badly wanted her back, and here she was, practically out in the open and ripe for the grabbing, in effect.

"Woo!" said Cheryl, impressed. "You famous, girl! What can we do, Lou?"

"I've been thinking about that," replied Luisa. "I have an idea. After we eat, let's call Mandy and see what we can come up with."

The pizza was stupendous, or maybe it was just her hunger, but Darcy couldn't remember eating with more pleasure. She had to restrain herself from eating more than her share, though Cheryl and Luisa cheerfully allowed her all she could eat. She was stuffed. She decided she loved mozzarella.

Luisa telephoned Mandy and asked her if she could help them on a "professional matter" requiring "some secrecy." In a few minutes, the pink-haired girl from the previous night appeared at the door, looking decidedly more interested than she had the night before. "What's up?" she asked.

"Hey," Luisa greeted her. "Did you see those posters about Darcy on campus today?" Mandy nodded, wide-eyed. "You didn't tell anyone you'd seen her, did you, like I asked you not to?" Mandy shook her head slowly. She loved secrets. A conspiracy was even better—a finger in someone's eye, no matter who, what could be better?

"OK, good," Luisa went on. "We need to disguise Darcy. Who better than you?" She turned to Darcy. "Mandy is a theater major like me. She does all our

stage makeup. She's an ace at it! She can make you into a little old lady, if that's what is needed!"

She looked out the blinds. "OK, it's pretty dark now. Let's ease over to the drama building and see what we can find in the costume room."

Two hours later, Darcy had been replaced by a young Hispanic girl with black braids and a darker, less angular face. She was equipped with a backpack, but instead of books it contained a small selection of skirts, pants, shirts, scarves, makeup, and selected accessories. Mandy made her practice walking more slowly and self-consciously. She already knew how to take in her surroundings without appearing to look in all directions.

The change felt remarkable. For the first time in days she almost felt at ease. As a test to give her a little confidence they walked to the student center and bought soft drinks and sat around a table with other students all around them. No one gave her a third glance, although a couple boys gave her a second glance.

"Woo-hoo!" exulted Cheryl when they got back to the room. "That was cool! Mandy, you really are a genius!" Mandy beamed. It was true.

Mandy regarded her work coolly. "I'll lend you a text book on stage makeup. You'll be able to change your appearance to suit yourself. You're the perfect person for it. You can be young, old, Hispanic, Caucasian, even male if you want." Darcy blushed under her new makeup. Mandy was buxom as a movie star, and Darcy was the opposite. She knew the culture she was in the middle of prized magnitude, pectorially speaking, and up to now she had imagined she was supposed to feel deficient in that area. But maybe instead she was fortunate. She smiled. A man! If it came to that, so be it. No one was looking for a man!

## CHAPTER 12

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The good news was that Agent Robert Aldridge wasn't as big an asshole as Special Agent Smelly had been expecting. Not only did he look like a prototypical FBI agent, trim, well-dressed, with short, neatly trimmed black hair, he even looked like a bureau chief, with a quiet, commanding air and a way of looking directly at people that seemed to penetrate layers deep. "Call me Bob," he had said when they met, but it came across as a no-nonsense gesture rather than an attempt at friendliness. He was clearly devoted to the FBI, and Special Agent Smelly allowed himself to hope that Aldridge might run a tight, efficient operation that would actually zero in on their little missing alien.

True, Aldridge was all the time dropping big names from the Bureau and Washington, and yes, he was a pit bull about their present case, but he had reason for his monomania, as he explained. According to him, most of the analysts at the Bureau were inclined to think that their missing woman was the real McCoy. There was no other way to explain the few incontrovertible facts they had. And given that, the CIA was trying to nose into the deal, the DIA was alarmed over the possible interplanetary aspects of the affair (the only time that had even happened), and word had even reached the President, whose demonstrable innocence of complex human affairs did not require breaching in order for him to realize that this was possibly an earthshaking case, pun not intended, Sir (as if you'd get a pun, Sir). That was the good news.

The bad news, at which Aldridge could only clench his jaw, was that there were no good leads in the case. The girl had disappeared, vanished, gone up in smoke. The attempts to trace the escapee had lead to thousands of tips, none of which fit together convincingly. The maps in the situation room were dense with

colored pins and lines which lead nowhere. Small blonde women and little blonde girls and the parents of little blonde girls had been annoyed by the hundreds. Some of them willingly allowed themselves to be fingerprinted, and some did not. Some threatened lawsuits. The old dodge about checking rumors of terrorists wasn't working. People were not willing to believe Barbie's little sister was a possible terrorist.

Traffic over the bridges from El Paso into Mexico had been slowed even more than usual, thanks to extra scrutiny from the Border Patrol. Reporters were beginning to sniff out a major story? scandal? or at least something juicy. Aldridge insisted the whole thing kept from the public. The first headline from a tabloid would screw things up royally. All they needed was a media circus. The only cover story they could come up with was a "kidnapped girl" alert and that gained them some traction, but not a lot.

Special Agent Smelly wondered what Aldridge was going to do. They couldn't take out an ad: "Dear Visitor From Outer Space: Please Call the FBI." They couldn't search the moon (though a few senior boffins at NASA were considering the possibilities). They couldn't unleash a bloodhound to follow the trail of slime—wrong kind of alien. If only!

Aldridge began by reviewing the case to date and grimly encouraging his agents to redouble their efforts, and wait for a break.

## CHAPTER 13

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Darcy couldn't believe how pleasant her days in Alpine had become once she wasn't worried every second about hulking, hostile men carrying her off to prison. Luisa helped her find another place to stay before the housekeeper discovered a freeloader in the dorm. She had done some volunteer work in her sophomore year with a woman who kept three or four foster children. She and her husband were happy to lend a cot to any friend of Luisa's, especially if that friend would help with the chores. The house, a rundown frame affair in desperate need of maintenance, was on a side street within walking distance of the campus.

Darcy soon developed a schedule. She had lived for decades by schedules. She would visit the university library in the mornings, help Mrs. Alvillar, the foster mother, prepare lunch, then on Tuesdays and Thursdays explore the town or go back to the library, and finally return to the house to help with supper and other chores and tutor the children with their schoolwork.

On Monday/Wednesday/Friday afternoons, she met Cheryl at the track and the two of them would go for a long run. Cheryl was tuning up for a big track meet of some kind, so Darcy let her set the pace and tagged along. Cheryl was one of the quicker, more graceful people Darcy had seen, and she enjoyed measuring her abilities against Cheryl's. She was not sure if it was because Cheryl was so much bigger than she was, but she never had any trouble staying with her.

She hadn't quite got over being startled whenever she saw a police car or one of "her" posters out in the open. However, frequent checks of her reflection in store windows reassured her that she did not, in fact, look much like that sad creature in the picture.

Having no money was an inconvenience. The whole society seemed to run on it. People who looked to have very little money lined up at fast food counters to buy meals. She couldn't do that, and she would have loved to. Everywhere she went in town, people were coming out of stores carrying bags of food or clothing, or backing a truck up to a doorway and loading furniture or appliances into it. At some point, she hoped to acquire a little money and then see what she could do with it. Mrs. Alvillar, fortunately, put plenty of basic, tasty food on the table.

She discovered a small amphitheater made out of concrete on the campus which looked almost like a miniature of the ancient Greek ones—curious indeed. There was a restaurant that looked like an aluminum railroad car: very strange, but attractive. There were beautiful animals in pens at the veterinary school. She watched them often. The colts were particularly graceful when they capered around.

But the library was her perfect haven. It was large, quiet, full of information she wanted, no one bothered her, and best of all, it was free. The librarians probably thought she was a student, especially since she generally carried her back pack with her. As long as she didn't try to check anything out, she didn't need identification. She spent a lot of time there.

Following the merciful conclusion of the livestock show, Matt was assigned a story that he almost welcomed. It would require a good deal of chair time for research but he'd be spared breathing show ring dust and daily sessions cleaning barnyard goop off his boots. Crusty told him that the state and the federal government were due to wrangle in court over local water rights, and this, unlike armed men in helicopters, was the kind of story that galvanized the more prominent members of the community. For that reason, the story also galvanized the editor of the *Avalanche*. But it was a terribly complex issue, with a long history of litigation and controversy, so his first task was to spend several days gathering background material.

This involved an entire day with the county tax records, which even Matt had to admit were pretty dry. Still, he accumulated some good notes as to who owned what land, and what water rights, and when. With that done he decided to review the last hundred years or so of the history of water use in the area. The library staff at the university was already used to his presence from time to time, and had been exceptionally helpful with some of the odd requests for information he had thrown at them in the past. That may have been because of the fresh sweet rolls he brought by on the mornings he camped out there. If he had wanted to kill an



entire library staff, he mused, spiked sweet rolls would have been a simple way to do it.

The smell of the fresh cinnamon buns in the box under his arm made him hungry all over again, even though he had had a modest breakfast. Inside the library entrance a poster for an upcoming concert first caught his eye, and next to it was a one bearing the legend "Missing." It was the same picture the sheriff had had them print last Tuesday, that blonde girl who'd been sought near Fort Davis, only this picture was about four times larger than the version he'd seen before. She was almost pretty except that she looked stressed, like someone dragged out of bed at three in the morning. Her eyes were large and set deep in the sockets; the expression on her face was strained. He'd seen similar faces painted on velvet and sold by the side of the road, solemn children's faces, often with a tear or two rolling down their cheeks. He knew enough about the case to realize that she wasn't 'missing' in any conventional sense, that she hadn't wandered away from a campsite, for example. But what in thunder could she have done to be hunted like that, he wondered. Even the sheriff hadn't known—he told Crusty the FBI had placed the notice, and they were not known for sharing details of their cases with small town law enforcement. Maybe it had been a kidnapping—he couldn't imagine anything classified or worthy of spying on at the observatory. He hoped he'd find out some day, and maybe get the story in the bargain. His reportorial career could use a good story.

The reference librarian was so delighted with the rolls she offered him a study room all to himself for the whole day. He spent an hour searching out books, newspapers, and ledgers, and piled them all on the table. Sliding out a legal size yellow pad, he sat down and lost himself in concentration.

Ninety minutes later he stood up, stretched, and ambled out of his room to search out a history of the El Paso Salt War. On his way back he paused to examine a map of Texas on the wall. As his attention wandered, he noticed an unusually large pile of books spread out on a nearby table. The one on top caught his eye. It was a volume about cuneiform, a writing system he remembered from a graduate course he had had years ago. Cuneiform dated to the fourth millennium B.C., he recalled. Judging by the title, this volume seemed to be in German—odd that a student at Sul Ross would be interested in that. He glanced at the titles of the other books in the pile that were visible. One was called *America Before Columbus*. Another was called Something or Other on Evolutionary Biology (the first words in the title were hidden by another book), and two or three others seemed to be on gnarly-sounding mathematics and physics, including a small one titled *The Derivation of Topological Structures*. Most curious! Whatever sort of

student would be interested in that bizarre combination of exotic topics? Maybe some professor had gathered them. Even so, it would be a fairly remarkable professor to be conversant with that variety of subjects.

He returned to his little room and skimmed the first chapter on the Salt War. Then, still bothered by those books, he got up and looked through the glass across the sunken reference area to the table where they were. He could see the top of a head, black hair, and that was all. He waited a long three or four minutes before deciding he needed a book, any book at all, from the shelf behind that very table. He was about to head over there when the person stood up, descended the steps into the reference area, and walked over to a large globe on a stand.

To his surprise, it was a woman, a girl, really. She had to stand on tiptoe to look at the globe. She was still a good ways from him and he couldn't make out many details, but she definitely wasn't a professor. She was dressed like a student, which is to say like a vagabond. Matt began to reproach himself as he had many times before. A more confident, secure male would simply walk up to her and say something brilliant and take it from there. He hesitated to do that—he'd always had a shyness problem, but curse himself as he would, he couldn't change it. Still, who was that woman?

Hold on! He reached down to his book bag and pulled out the *Avalanche's* third-best 35mm camera, the only one Crusty would let him touch. It had a nice, compact zoom lens! Standing discreetly inside the doorway to his little room, he snapped three shots of the girl as she stood studying the globe. Old Bosworth back at the paper would make him some nice blowups, and then maybe a librarian or a prof could tell him who the student was. Good thinking, Méndez! He made a note to award himself a large order of fries for that bit of cleverness.

She was still poring over her books when he quit for lunch. That was ok with him. His prize was in the can, and those french fries were calling him.

Still tasting his flame-broiled hamburger, Matt was easing his old Mitsubishi pickup into the parking lot by the library when he saw his mystery woman walking out. She had a light green book bag slung over one shoulder.

"Well, I am a reporter," he told himself, and he rolled on through the parking lot and back out on the street. She was headed down the hill, toward town. Matt followed, but got caught by a red light. While he sat there waiting, he kicked himself yet again. He didn't have to meet her as a single male—he could meet her as a reporter. He'd done that plenty of times. He'd just have to think of some pretext for a question that wouldn't make him look like an idiot. Surely he could do that, even if he really was an idiot.

The light changed, and he drove into town. The girl, walking with a quick, light step and a braid bouncing against her back, was moving along gracefully. Matt drove past her in traffic, turned right at the next corner, and pulled into an empty space in front of a savings and loan office. He got out of the truck and was about to walk back and follow her when he saw her cross the street and turn right, walking in his direction but on the opposite side of the street. Perfect!

He crossed the street where the alley intersected it and waited for her to walk up. It didn't take long. "Miss," he said. "Excuse me, please. May I ask you a couple questions?"

She had come to a halt as soon as he opened his mouth. When he finished the word "questions," her eyes widened in panic, and then she simply disappeared. It was the last thing he expected, but as he thought it over afterwards he realized she had not exactly disappeared. No, she had to have turned and run down the alley away from him. But the time lag between his word "questions" and her achieving warp speed couldn't have been over a third of a second. She had not tensed; she had not crouched; he didn't even see her change direction. One instant she was frozen staring at him in terror and the next she was halfway down the alley and shrinking fast. For a minute Matt was too stunned to move. He had had occasional migraine headaches and they were often accompanied by strange symptoms, but he focused on a lamp post and determined he had no swimming or blurred vision. He shook his head: the alley was empty. There was no sign of her.

He looked down the alley again, and up and down the street. She was gone! Finally he walked back to his truck. He turned the key and started the engine but sat there another minute. What the blazes happened? Who was that girl? How did she do that? And why?

Then it dawned on him what to do next. It was still early enough in the day for Bosworth to be sober. He'd take that film to him and see what developed.

## CHAPTER 14

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Darcy crouched between a low stone wall and a tree at the edge of the campus, trembling uncontrollably, breathing in ragged sobs. She had run almost a half mile in near panic. No one had followed her as far as she could tell. “Why, why, why did I get into this?” she moaned to herself, wiping away tears with the back of her wrist. The feeling of panic which she had put away in recent days came flooding back in a rush. She had had a decent life up to now—there had been dangers, yes, but she’d more or less been able to handle them. Now she was utterly and completely alone, more so than she had been on the moon. She knew so little about her surroundings, whole teams of soldiers with endless resources were chasing her, and she had no idea how to make people understand the threat they faced. Why bother, anyway?

Her tears were making little mud drops in the soft dirt. She shivered remembering the horrible, helpless feeling of fainting when all those armed men had surrounded her. She couldn’t stand being caught again. She wouldn’t be caught! Or if she was, she wouldn’t be held. She wondered if she would have the courage to end her own life—that would be the honorable thing to do, even though her people would never know about it. They were no help at all.

She sniffled and wiped her eyes, her hand still shaking. She wasn’t too far from Mrs. Alvillar’s house. She would hide there until dark and try to calm herself down.

Across the campus, Luisa was taking advantage of the sunny weather to study behind the dorm on a cement patio bench. When Cheryl Ford walked by, Luisa checked her watch. “Aren’t you supposed to be running about now?”

"Yeah, but I'm layin' out today. I pulled a muscle yesterday and I want to let it heal before I stress it too much. I shoulda known better—done something stupid."

"I thought you were the smartest, faster runner we ever had here. That's what the coach said."

"Well, I ain't the smartest, and I may not be the fastest either. But don't tell anybody."

"What do you mean? What happened?"

"You know how, three days a week, your little friend Darcy goes running with me? Only we agreed to call her Ana now she's a former blonde?"

"I thought you liked her."

"I do like her. She's sweet. I just can't outrun her. She said she didn't want to interfere with my routine, so she'd just tag along with me, take the pace off of me. So I went on a good run, ran seven miles, and she right there, stuck to me, hardly breathing. I think 'Ok, girl, we pick it up a little bit,' and I do three more miles. She still there, and that kinda bug me. I mean, I'm not no marathoner, but I can do long distances. So I push it up some more, and now I running too fast for a marathon pace, really, but I can do it another mile or two. And when I finally stop, guess who still there like my shadow? I pulled something, and I'm sore today, man."

"For real, Cheryl? I mean, you're going to that big NCAA meet next month. Everyone figures you'll win it. How can a little bitty Canadian stay up with you?"

"Girl, I don't know. But I'm glad she ain't no student here. I don't need her at that track meet!"

Luisa was still mulling over that bit of odd information later that evening in her room. Her desk was cluttered with folders and cut-out bits of pictures, advertisements, and headlines, as she glued up a couple of signs for the hallway. She always left her door ajar during her "office hours" and kept the music low so she could hear the general energy level of the girls on that floor. One time, she had heard a puppy being kept in one girl's room. Without looking up, she suddenly became aware that someone was standing behind her—it was Darcy, who had come in without making a sound. She had an empty look in her eyes and she was hugging her back pack as if she was cold.

"Darcy? What's the matter? Did something happen?"

"They nearly caught me."

"Who nearly caught you?"

"I don't know—the people who are chasing me. One of them found me, I don't know how, and tried to get close to me. I ran."

"Are you all right? Who was it? What did he look like?"

"I'm ok. But he scared me."

She looked so forlorn Luisa hugged her. "Sit down. Tell me what happened."

"I was walking downtown, and a man asked me if he could ask me some questions."

"And what happened then?"

"Nothing. I ran away."

"Did he chase you?"

"I don't think so. I didn't see him if he did."

"What did he look like?"

"Well, he was taller than you...but not as tall as Cheryl. He wasn't fat. He wasn't skinny. He had black hair...."

"Did he have a beard? What about his clothes?"

"No beard, no mustache. He had khaki pants, and I think a blue shirt."

"No coat? No tie? No uniform?"

"No."

"Did he have a car?"

"Yes," she nodded imperceptibly. "It was a pickup, a small one. It was red. Oh, and it had big gray spots on it."

"Are you sure? Was it a faded red?"

"Yes."

"I think I know who that was! He's a reporter for the *Avalanche*! I know him!"

"You do? Is he a bad man?"

"No, he's not a bad guy. He's a pretty good guy. I went out with him a couple times."

"Really?"

"Yeah. It just didn't work out. Darcy, I don't think he was trying to capture you. I admit I have no idea why he would want to ask you anything, but I'm sure there's a good explanation. Tell you what: give me a couple days to find him and see if I can learn what he was up to. In the meantime, don't worry about it too much. Just keep laying low and I'm sure you'll be fine. OK?"

"OK. If you say so. Thanks, Lou."

She looked so fragile that Luisa almost hugged her again, but she let her walk out. She was thinking about Matt Méndez. How odd that it should have been Matt to have so frightened poor Darcy! She knew Matt fairly well, and she liked him. He wasn't like most of the younger single men in Alpine, obsessed with trucks, cowboy activities, drinking, and sports. She'd literally bumped into him at a play, *The Heidi Chronicles*, for heaven's sake, which he'd actually read some-

where. His questions about the play turned into a discussion which turned into their first date...but it was not to be. Her mother felt he was too old for her, and maybe she was right. But he was a decent guy, not the sort to hassle an attractive young woman.

Why would he single out a young, anonymous girl to ask questions of? He was a little awkward around women, but not that clumsy, not really. She'd have to think of a way to find out without spilling Darcy's secret, if she could. Matt was smart enough but he could be flustered. Come to think of it, maybe putting him on the spot was how to handle him....

## CHAPTER 15

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Luisa waited in her car half a block from the newspaper office for nearly 45 minutes. Finally, about a quarter after one, Matt's Mitsubishi pickup pulled into the employee's tiny lot. She got out and timed her approach to his so she could "just happen" to run into him as he was nearing the steps to the entrance. He looked crisp and handsome as ever. He saw her and smiled.

"Hey there, Lou! What's going on?"

"Hi, Matt. Not much. I'm bringing an item about a reader's theater for the "County Compass."

They looked at each other.

"So, how you doing?"

"I'm fine. Trying to stay up with my classes and also get a show going. You know; the same old stuff."

"Tell me about it. Crisis management. Story of my life. Hey!" he almost shouted.

"What?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I just thought of something I need to ask you. I took a picture of a student on campus yesterday and I need to identify her. Maybe you can save me some trouble. C'mon inside. It's on my desk. You have time?"

"Uh, well, yes, I guess I do. Sure."

They walked up the stairs together, Luisa's mind racing. The "student" had to be Darcy. But she said she ran away from him, so how did he get a picture? Why did he approach her in the first place? And what should she tell him about her?

"Why do you need a student identified?" she asked. "Couldn't you just talk to her?"



"Oh, yeah, well, that's a funny thing," he replied, lowering his voice as they walked past the secretary to his desk in the back. "I noticed her in the library yesterday. She looks barely old enough to be a freshman, but she was reading all sorts of scientific and technical books, the kind of stuff that mainly grad students and professors would read, you know? Except the books were in three or four completely different areas, like biology and mathematics, even linguistics. One of them was in German! And she wasn't just skimming, either—she was totally absorbed in them. So I wondered who she is and what she was doing, that's all."

"So why didn't you just ask her?"

Matt blushed, which meant, in his case, that his ears turned slightly red. Luisa knew the signs well. "See, I was going to, but I couldn't think of a good way to do it. You know I'm kind of shy around women sometimes. But I saw her in town after lunch, and decided to stop and ask her then."

"Wait—so you're not doing a story? You just want me to help you get introduced to some student?"

"No, no, I haven't got to the really strange part yet. Get this: when I walked up to her to ask her why she was studying all that deep stuff, she disappeared! Well, she sort of disappeared... That is, she turned and ran away...."

"Matt, I'm not following you very well. Maybe she was just overwhelmed by your virile macho presence, and couldn't stand to be near you."

"Hey, I'm serious, no joke. She didn't really disappear, but that's how it seemed. I mean, she must have turned and run down the alley instantly. Like that!" He snapped his fingers. "I never saw anyone move so fast—one moment she was standing there and the next she was a hundred feet down the alley. It was like in one of those roadrunner cartoons. I thought I was seeing things, but it really happened, Lou. That's not normal! I gotta talk to her, if I can find her again. I have to know what the deal is with her."

"I don't know, Matt. That's pretty bizarre. Show me the picture."

"Oh yeah. It's right here." He pulled out a manila folder and handed Luisa an 8 x 10 glossy print.

It wasn't a bad shot of Darcy at all, staring fixedly at a globe in the library. It was a little fuzzy, but it was clearly her, or maybe clearly "Ana." Luisa could easily see the similarity to the little blonde girl in the wanted posters about town. She prayed Matt hadn't made the connection.

"Hmmm," she mused out loud. "She looks familiar. I think I've seen her around campus. But she doesn't live in the dorm, I'm sure of that. Can I have this picture, or maybe a smaller one? I'll ask around. I bet I'll find out who she is in a day or two."

“You’re an angel, Lou,” Matt smiled. “I knew I could count on you. You might be careful approaching her—she might go up in smoke.”

“Oh, Matt. I’m sure there’s a simple explanation for all this. Let me check around. I’ll let you know what I find.”

In reality, she had no idea what she was going to do. Darcy was now being investigated by a local reporter, and not too bad a one, either. He would persist until he found her eventually. And she, Louisa, knew both the investigator and his target. Matt hadn’t been wrong about her life being a case of crisis management. She needed some time to think.

## CHAPTER 16

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Lisa Pérez was an excellent coach. She knew it and was proud of it. Despite her career having got off to a late start, she had more than made up for it. She was one of the first women to coach in west Texas on the university level, one of the first Hispanic coaches, and she knew personally the pioneers who preceded her at the big universities. If she was a little older than average, so what? She had built a solid program from nothing, and a big part of the reason (aside from a little help from Title IX), was that she took good care of her athletes. She paid close attention to them—some of them even called her “Mom,” and not always in jest, though joking around was one reason they liked her. After all, how could you not like someone who bragged, with reason, that she was so massively buff she could eat ding-dongs and not gain weight?

So when Cheryl Ford wanted to talk, Lisa was ready to listen. Cheryl was her big star this year, and her best hope to qualify for the Olympics in the summer. If she won a medal, even running for her native country of Barbados, that would be a terrific shot in the arm for local recruiting, fund raising, and the school’s athletic program in general. Lisa had studied the qualification process and the legalities, and a good part of her time with Cheryl lately had been spent over just such matters. Cheryl wanted it as badly as she did.

Lisa’s warm, round face lit up when Cheryl came in and sat down. “How’s that leg today, Cher?” she asked.

“Better, thanks. I’m taking it easy, and the trainer worked on it yesterday and today. Tomorrow I’ll do a light workout and I think it’ll be totally ok in a couple more days.”

“Excellent; just what I want to hear. Is that what’s on your mind?”

"No, this is about something else. I got an odd problem, and maybe you could give me some advice. Actually, I got a friend with an odd problem...."

"Sure, Cher. If I can help, I will. Tell me about it."

Cheryl told her about "Ana," her friend and running companion on the track, about her friend's compact size and her quick, light stride, and how "Ana" would just tag along with her, copying Cheryl's pace, so as not to slow her down. She told her about "Ana" running the same fifteen miles at a speed that had nearly lamed and winded Cheryl, but that left "Ana" barely breathing hard. She told Lisa about seeing "Ana" running the track alone one night, jumping hurdles, which came up to her shoulders, like they weren't there.

Cheryl added, unnecessarily, "I mean, if she ran me into the ground, but didn't want to slow me up, jes' how fast can she run, anyway? I've never known anybody that could do that!"

Lisa understood that Cheryl was a good judge of such matters. Way down deep, she began to feel a tinge of excitement. "So what's the problem?"

"See, she's not a student. But I'm almost sure that if she was, and if she went to the Olympic trials, she'd qualify. She might win something. Wouldn't that be cool?"

"Yes it would. It would be very cool." Lisa was thinking how it would feel to have two Olympic medalists from the same tiny program. One would be great, but two would put them on the map. "Tell me about this Ana. Is she a high school student or what?"

"No, she's not. I don't know how old she is, but she don't seem much older'n me. She's not a student here. She just lives here for now. I don't know where she comes from." Cheryl was thinking she'd better not say that "Ana" was really a Canadian in the country illegally and in disguise to boot.

"Why don't you talk to her?" said Lisa. "Ask her if she'd be interested in running competitively. You could point out that oftentimes it's a great career move, whatever her career might end up being. If she is interested, tell her a simple try-out to qualify for the team could earn her a scholarship. She could enroll this summer and make the Olympic trials, perhaps. You think she might go for that?"

"I don't know. She might. She kind of a funny person—plenty nice, though, not a nut. I'll ask her next time I see her and see what she says. Maybe I'll bring her by to talk to you."

"Terrific, Cheryl! Your friend obviously has a lot of ability—shame to let it go to waste. I hope we get to find out just how much ability she has." Cheryl stood

up. "And in the meantime, take it easy on that leg, will you, please? Right now your ability is the main thing."

"I will," Cheryl promised. "Don't need to worry about me. Long as I got that trainer, I'm gonna be fine."

Once Darcy sat down, Luisa got up and shut her door quietly. Darcy still looked withdrawn, but at least she wasn't shivering any more.

"I found out what the deal was, Darcy."

Darcy looked up. "What?"

"It's nothing bad. It's just awkward. Matt is a nice guy, but he's shy around women, single women, anyway. I'll tell you sometime how I met him. It was an accident, really—he never would have spoken to me otherwise. Anyway, yesterday he was in the library and he noticed the books you were looking at. He was curious to see who would be interested in all those subjects."

"Oh," sighed Darcy. "I wondered about that. Sometimes the librarians would look at me funny when I asked for something. They never refused to get a book for me, but they seemed to think I was weird, for some reason."

"Well, I don't know about them, but Matt got really curious. He wondered why one person would be interested in all those different topics, and when he saw it was you, because you look so young, he really got interested. But he was too timid to walk right up and ask you. Believe it or not, he's shy around women, even though he's a reporter. Later, when he saw you in town, he finally got the nerve. When you ran off, that clinched it. He had to find out more about you. I didn't tell him a thing. I only said I'd try to find you, whoever you were. But I kind of need to tell him something, so...what do you want me to tell him?"

Darcy sighed.

"I don't know. I've been thinking about that, a lot. I told you I found something in the sky that was important. You see, well, one of my hobbies is astronomy. I discovered two meteoroids whose fragments are almost certain to collide into Earth in the near future and probably do a lot of damage. I tried to convince Dr. Harcroft at the observatory, but he didn't believe me. I think he thought I was out of my mind. But I'm not! I told the people who captured me too, before I got away from them, and they didn't believe me either. But it's true, Luisa! There are ways to stop it from happening, if someone will just go to work on it!"

She looked down at her hands. "Maybe I ought to try again to talk with someone, like Matt. He might be able to talk to Dr. Harcroft or somebody else and convince them where I couldn't. This whole thing is too important for me to

keep hiding indefinitely. If they throw me in prison, then at least I'll have tried. What do you think, Luisa?"

Luisa clasped her hands between her knees. "Golly, I had no idea. I thought you were just a Canadian on the run. I never dreamed it was more serious."

"It is. It's more serious and more complicated than I've let on. I was scared. I'm sorry."

Luisa moved to the bed and sat next to Darcy and put her arm around her and hugged her. "I'm totally out of my depth, Darcy. I don't know what the best thing to do would be. But like I said, Matt is a good guy, and he's been around a bit. He knows all kinds of people. Plus you can trust him, or I have been able to. If you make him promise not to turn what you tell him into a newspaper story, he won't. It'd be a place to start. Do you want me to set up a meeting?"

"I guess so," she said. She stared blankly at the opposite side of the room. She couldn't think of anything better herself. She was tired of running—maybe it was time for her to do something on her own again, right or wrong.

The next afternoon, a bit more cautiously than usual, Darcy crept out to the track where she and Cheryl usually began their runs. There didn't seem to be any reporters lurking behind trees, or old faded red pickups parked in sight. Cheryl was there, wearing jeans, sandals, and some kind of long, flowing top that Darcy didn't know the name of.

"You're not going to run?" Darcy asked.

"Naw. I pulled something, and the trainer wants me to take it easy for a few days." She didn't mention that she'd got the pull from trying to stay ahead of Darcy.

"Hey, Ana, I spoke to Coach Pérez about you."

"You did? About me? Why?"

"I told her you 'bout the best runner I ever saw, for a white girl. I told her I thought you could compete, if you wanted. And you could win, too, I do believe. Coach said you could come by for a tryout, and if you make the team, which you would, easy, she could give you a scholarship so you could go to school free. Then you could go to the same meets I'm going to, maybe even try out for the Olympics. I didn't tell her your name, just that I'd talk to you. So what do you think?"

"Compete? Me, compete?"

"Yeah, you! Compete!"

"But why would I do that?"

“Well, I know you layin’ low right now, but nobody know you when you ‘Ana,’ so you’d be safe enough. You’d compete because you’d win! You want to win, don’t you?”

She thought a minute. She hated to lose—maybe that meant she wanted to win.

“I guess. Maybe. I don’t know. Can you make money if you compete?”

“Oh, that’s right. You flat broke. Well, no, you can’t make money in track, least not while you’re in school. Maybe after. If you get famous, you can make money other ways. Bein’ famous means havin’ a bunch of ways to make money. You know that, right?”

“I do?” she said. She hadn’t known that, but it might be something to consider.

“Yeah. See, if I win a medal at the Olympics, then people will notice me. I could probably get a job as a coach, or a trainer. That’s the whole reason I’m doing this. You could, too, maybe!”

“I don’t know, Cheryl. Let me think about it. I wouldn’t mind having a little money, but I don’t know if I want to be famous or not. Can I tell you later?”

“You got the rest of the semester, Darce.” Cheryl looked out over the field. Darcy did too, and also up and down the street behind them. “You go ahead and run now and think about being a winner. You might like it!”

## CHAPTER 17

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Luisa enjoyed being the intermediary between Matt and Darcy. Matt was elated Luisa had found his mystery person, and further intrigued when she refused to tell him who the girl was, which was all he had hoped to learn. That she was willing to meet with him was more than he expected, and really aroused his curiosity. He readily promised Luisa that he wouldn't write anything about it until the mystery girl okayed it, even though he hadn't dreamed there might be a story there. What would it be? "Smart Girl Reads Books, Runs Fast?" At least he'd get to meet an attractive young woman under controlled circumstances—as convenient for him as for her—nothing wrong with that!

Next, Luisa took the news that Matt promised to hold the story to Darcy. The two of them decided that Mrs. Alvillar's kitchen would be a suitable place to meet, since Mrs. Alvillar would be gone until early afternoon to her teacher aide job at the elementary school. Luisa agreed to leave them alone while they talked, and carried that information back to Matt, feeling pleased with herself.

The next morning, Darcy was sitting at the kitchen table staring into the backyard, barely noticing its falling-down dog house and tattered chain link fence, when she heard two vehicles pull up out front. From the front window, she saw Luisa get out of the first, and a man who had to be Matt Méndez getting out of the faded red pickup she remembered all too well. He was youngish, with squared shoulders and an erect posture, and he smiled at Luisa as she ushered him up the walk. Darcy returned to her chair at the table.

Luisa and Matt came through the front door a little before 9:00 o'clock. Matt, wearing pressed charcoal slacks and a maroon dress shirt, carried a box under his arm. Luisa said simply, "Darcy, this is Matt Méndez. Matt, this is Ana Darcy."



She looked from one to the other, and added, "Well, I'll leave you to it. See y'all later," and left.

She was clearly the person in his photo. She was smaller than he remembered, and better looking. Sitting at the kitchen table, she acknowledged him briefly with a glance and then looked away, as if she didn't want to meet him or she was nervous for some reason. She was wearing a dark blue track suit and sneakers, and her black hair was pulled back into a pony tail rather than the braid he had seen before. She wore no jewelry or makeup, and her nails were short.

Matt felt his old shyness coming on again, but he summoned up his reporter persona and smiled and said, "Luisa says you like to be called Darcy, right?"

"Yes."

"How about a sweet roll? These are fresh."

"OK, in a minute, thanks."

"I'll have one now, if you don't mind," said Matt. "This is my breakfast."

She gave him a half smile.

He looked around. "How about some water?" He got two glasses from the cupboard, filled them from the sink, and set one in front of her and the other opposite her.

"Thanks."

"I'm sorry if I upset you the other day. Sometimes I'm awful clumsy, you know? I didn't mean to come on too strong." He took a chair on the opposite side of the table.

"That's all right. I was startled, that's all. I just reacted."

Boy, did you ever! "See, the whole thing started when I happened to notice the books you were reading in the library. They were in three or four very advanced subject areas. I figured whoever would be interested in all that must be an unusual person, you know? And, and then when I saw *you* sit down and start reading them, that was even more of a surprise, because, well, because you...." His voice tapered off as Darcy looked straight at him for the first time. There was no longer any trace of nervousness. Matt felt something change between them, but he had no idea what.

The poor man was flustered! She took that as a good sign. He wasn't rude and confrontational like the uniformed men had been. Clearly, he had no idea who she was. His reason for seeking her out seemed believable. And yet he worked for a newspaper. Well, she had already decided to talk to him. She couldn't continue as she had—she had to do something. If another disaster came from it, then so be it.

“Yes, I can imagine why you were surprised. I will tell you why I was interested in those books. But that’s only a small part. Why don’t I start from the beginning? I’ll try to make it concise.”

He didn’t know why he was surprised, but she had a soft alto voice, and just the hint of an accent he couldn’t place. “Sure, that’s fine. Start wherever you want.”

“I’m not sure—we’re not sure,” she said, “but it started maybe three to five thousand years ago. There were some sophisticated civilizations then, like in Egypt and China, but most people on Earth were living in tribes, in small nomadic communities.”

Matt’s sweet roll stopped midway to his mouth. He hadn’t been expecting a lecture in cultural anthropology. “Yes?” he said, hopefully.

“We think Earth was visited by beings of some sort. We don’t know anything about them. We call them The Others. They were not malicious. They took a tribe of people to another planet, very similar to Earth, and helped them create their own civilization. All we remember of them is what is in our creation myths.”

Matt nearly choked on his bite of sweet roll. He stared at her. “You said ‘we.’ ‘We?’ ‘*Our* creation myths?’ You mean, you...you...?” he stammered. What was she saying?

“Those people were my ancestors. Our home, my home, is a planet many light years from here. We always believed we originated somewhere else, but our history, the collective memory of our people, is hazy. We were pre-literate at the time. Once we developed the technology of space travel, we set ourselves to looking for it. I believe I have found it. I believe Earth was our original home. That’s what I was doing with those books—looking for supporting evidence, more or less. I was sent with enough equipment to set up a base on the moon and study Earth and its people, to make sure. I’ve been studying this planet a long time. I’m pretty sure, now. Earth is our home.” She looked evenly at him.

Matt had totally forgotten his sweet rolls. He was feeling as disoriented as he had when Darcy vanished before his eyes three days before. She couldn’t be serious. Had he heard her correctly? “You mean...you mean, you come from...another planet?”

“Yes.”

“But...but...you’re human, just like us!”

“Pretty much, yes. I’m your distant cousin, if you like.”

What am I missing? he thought. She’s just sitting there, not even fidgeting. But delusional people can be quite serious. Well, the first thing a reporter does is let the other person talk. “‘Pretty much?’ What do you mean by that?”

"I'm human like you are, but our culture has developed in many fields of science well beyond what exists on Earth. I read, for instance, that some of your medical researchers are working on germline therapy."

"On what?"

"Germline therapy is the name your scientists have given the technique of modifying the genetic character of cells from which people grow. That is, it can shape heredity, improve it."

"It can? It is? I never heard of that!"

"There's no reason you should have. It's in the earliest stages here on Earth. But I, for example, have had some of my genes altered just after I was conceived. For one thing, I have many more fast-twitch muscle cells than you do. I'm not quite as strong as a comparable native of Earth, but I can move considerably faster."

Tell me about it, he thought. He shook his head slowly, "I'm sorry. This is so, so, well, I don't mean to be rude, but is there some way you can actually prove you are from another planet?"

"Maybe. There might be. Do you have a coin?"

"Huh? A coin?" He reached in a pocket. "Yeah, here's a quarter."

"Hold it over the table and drop it. Don't let me know when you're going to let go."

She positioned his hand about a foot over the table. Her fingers were cool and steady and he felt his ears begin to get warm. She laid her forearms flat on the surface, closing her hands into fists, about a foot either side of where the coin would fall.

"Any time you're ready," she said.

Being careful not to flinch and give it away, he slowly relaxed his fingers so the coin would drop suddenly, without his moving at all. Just as it slid from between his fingers, there was a blur and it disappeared in midair when it should have clunked on the table. Darcy's hands were exactly where she had left them.

"Which hand?" she said.

"I have no idea."

She opened her left hand and there was the quarter. "Try it again?"

This time he held his hand only eight inches over the table. The result was the same. He heard a slight whiff. The coin vanished. It was in her right hand. She had moved so fast his brain hadn't registered it until it was over.

"See?" she said. "Much faster than the average person. You saw me run the other day...."

"My gosh, I never saw anyone move so fast."

"There might be other ways to prove it too. For example, my station on the moon is maintained by a human intelligence programmed into, basically, a computer. He was a real person, and his name is Hleo. Before he died, of old age, his brain was, I guess you would say, backed up into the computer with his permission. If I could get the communication equipment, he might talk to me."

"Might? You mean, he might not?"

"Yes. I was operating under strict instructions from my people to observe Earth only and not interpose myself or let anyone know I was present. I disobeyed those orders and probably will now be banned from the tribe for life. Hleo is a loyal soldier, and might refuse to have anything to do with me now. He warned me not to come down here, but I disregarded him." Her voice faded to a whisper. "I was stupid."

Matt shook his head again. This was getting way too weird. "I'm sorry, Darcy. I'm having trouble understanding all this. But I'm trying! If you weren't supposed to come down here, then why did you?"

"Hleo figured out that two meteoroids, now approaching the sun, would collide in several years and break apart. Earth would pass right through the densest part of the debris field. The crashing fragments would create tidal waves, nuclear-like explosions, and dust clouds, enough havoc to threaten all the life on Earth. I couldn't stand to see that happen. I came here to warn people, and to help make sure action was taken to avoid that collision entirely, if possible. But no one believes me, and hundreds of soldiers are hunting me like an animal."

Matt's eyes grew as big as saucers. He leaned forward. "You...you!...you're *her*! You're that missing girl in the poster! I knew there was something familiar about you! You've dyed your hair and painted on some eyebrows but that's who you are! Aren't you?"

"Yes." She put both hands to her head, peeled off her wig, and shook out her honey-colored hair.

Matt fell back in the chair. "Oh, my God, oh, jeez! Oh, holy Pete!" He massaged his temples with his fingers. "Oh, jeez! Oh, me! Ay yi yi! I promised Luisa no story! Oh, dang! Man! You think you're stupid? How about ME?"

He couldn't stand it. He jumped to his feet and paced the small kitchen, finally going to the sink and splashing cold water on his face. The story of the century, of the millennium, hell, of ever! Earth visited by a creature from another solar system—and she turns out to be human! A photogenic human! A literate, lightning-fast human! And he, Matt Méndez, had the exclusive...except that he had promised that human he'd sit on it! Was there ever a bigger dumbass? Oh, jeeez!

He kept shaking his head and trying to catch his breath until he noticed Darcy staring at him, arms and legs braced and wide-eyed, evidently ready to zip out the back door if he barked or tried to grab her. Whoa; keep your head, Matt, he thought. This won't do. You're scaring her. Calm yourself. Don't let her run off on you twice! He sat back down and shook his head again, trying to catch his breath. "I'm sorry." Think, man!

If she was the reason for the excitement at the observatory, then she ought to know some of the details he'd wondered about at the time. Finally he asked "How did they know you were here? How did they know to chase you?"

"Apparently, radar tracked my vehicle. They were surprised it made course changes instead of just crashing or burning up like a meteorite. They sent searchers in helicopters, but they didn't know what they were looking for until they questioned that astronomer, Dr. Harcroft. He gave them my description. After that, they found me in just a day."

"They found you? But you got away? How?"

"They thought I was a child, and probably insane as well, babbling about meteoroids and coming from another planet. They didn't realize I could get over a twelve foot fence, or run past the El Paso city limits in a couple hours. But I could. I came back here because Luisa was the only person I knew who might help me." She looked at her hands on the table top. "I didn't know what else to do. I was stupid, so stupid."

She looked away. "Why are you telling me this?" Matt asked quietly.

She sniffled. "It isn't important what happens to me. What's important is to convince the right people to check Hleo's orbital data, and if it's accurate, which I'm sure it is, to devise a way to move one or both of those meteoroids into another orbit. There's not a lot of time to spare. I tried to deliver the warning, but I messed up, badly. I'm not from this culture and I don't understand how to manipulate it to make that happen. I need someone who does. Maybe that person is you, or if not, maybe you can find such a person. Many lives depend on it. Could you help? Please?" Again she looked straight at him with those deepset eyes. But this time, instead of a starving waif, he saw utter seriousness. She looked a little like a hawk.

He struggled to comprehend. It was the wildest tale he'd ever heard. But if it were true, then her actions did make a kind of sense. He'd been expecting an egg-head student with peculiar reading habits. But a human from another planet? Meteors headed for earth? His poor brain was reeling. She was still looking steadily at him, waiting for a response. He shook his head. "Oh, jeez. Yeah, I'll try to help, of course. Just promise me: I get the story before anyone else does,

please?” He leaned back in his chair again. “I don’t know. I’ll think of something. We’ll think of something. Oh, jeez.” They looked at each other in silence.

## CHAPTER 18

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There was no way Matt could sleep. As soon as he got home, he sat down with a yellow pad and began making notes as rapidly as he could. When he finally went to bed, lying there only made him think of more things to write down. Could she really be from another planet? What was the real evidence? She seemed perfectly human, except for being quick as lightning. There was no denying the government was after her—he had seen the helicopters and talked to the people the soldiers had annoyed. Could he, Matt Méndez of Alpine, America, have lucked into the first interview with such a person? What were the odds? She didn't seem crazy...but then, crazy people didn't always seem so. Still, what was in it for her, if she were not on the level? Why go to all the trouble she had, and why take all those risks? Those soldiers were sure chasing someone, or something. What a story! Talk about a career-maker! OK, OK, he'd promised Luisa and Darcy he'd hold off on printing it. But he could start writing it, by George! He lost count of the times he turned on the light, jotted down notes and questions, paced, jotted down more notes, and went back to bed. Finally, after four am, he dozed off.

He awoke groggy and disoriented about eight. When it came back to him what he had been up to, a surge of adrenalin had him up and pacing the cold floor in his bare feet. What had he been thinking about as he awoke? It was about the Darcy situation—thank heavens she had agreed to meet him again! But that wasn't it...Aha! How to help her! An idea! He had an idea where to start! He could do that today! But first he needed a hot shower and some food....

Darcy was jittery that morning too. She had once again put her fate in the hands of others. She had no control over what would happen next. She had to

give Matt credit for fortitude. After all, her own people knew there were other humans out there somewhere. Matt had had no idea. At least he hadn't accused her of being crazy. He seemed to be trying to believe her...but could he be trusted? Was there a reward for turning her in? Would he call those soldiers? Or would he try to help figure out some way to get her data to the right people—and if he did, would his help actually be helpful?

For the moment, there wasn't a thing she could do about it. Once Mrs. Alvil-lar's tortillas and scrambled eggs finally settled in her stomach, some exercise might be restorative. She would go out for a run.

Matt drove his old Mitsubishi out to the city limits and turned onto a new boulevard curving up a low mountain where upscale houses were scattered down from the top. Alpine was getting to be a city where people wanted splashy homes, both newcomers, who were increasingly numerous, and home-grown old money going modern. A good view was expensive even in west Texas, but Matt had to admit this one was lovely. The Davis Mountains loomed solidly across the horizon to the north in the morning light, set off by a deep blue sky and row upon row of brilliant white clouds. Matt imagined a capsule streaking down out of the sky to land somewhere up there.

He recognized the brick column holding the mailbox from his last visit to the house, several months ago. Dr. William Sledd was a notorious local personality. Retired from a lifetime of professoring somewhere on the east coast, he had moved to Alpine for no reason anyone could guess. He seemed to have plenty of money and a prickly personality to go along with it. He was famous for not suffering fools, and he evidently put most of his fellow citizens in that category. He once said as much in an article he wrote, setting off a firestorm of controversy in the local coffee shops, restaurants, gathering places, and of course, in the *Avalanche*. It even made the state and national news, briefly. Matt remembered that besides being a language expert, he had worked for the government in some capacity. From his one interview with him, he had impressed Matt as a worldly and savvy old codger, not one to be swayed by conventional ideas. And Matt had an extremely unconventional idea to present to him.

Dr. Sledd didn't seem overjoyed to see Matt at his door, but at least he didn't bark at him and order him off his property. If Santa Claus needed a crotchety, beardless, brother, Matt knew where one candidate could be found. Sledd led him to a den in the back of the house where the mountains, thirty miles away, could be seen speckled with cloud shadows. He pointed to an old swivel chair in the middle of the room (the hot seat? wondered Matt) and sat himself at a large



desk covered with papers and books. "You were here some time ago, were you not, young man?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, I was," Matt replied. "I interviewed you during that dustup over Alpine's schools."

"Yes, you did. You wrote a decent article about that, I thought. I wouldn't have said it like you did, but then you didn't want to get lynched, did you?"

"No, sir." Was that high praise or faint praise?

"What's on your mind this time, Mr. Méndez?"

"Well, sir, it's kind of a strange thing, a very delicate matter, really. Before I can go into it, I'd like to ask you to keep it just to yourself for now."

Dr. Sledd raised his bristly white eyebrows over his glasses and glared at Matt. "I'll promise no such thing, Mr. Méndez."

"Yes, sir, I realize it's an imposition to ask, and I'm sorry." He decided to throw out a little bait. "Do you remember that hullabaloo two weeks ago up near the observatory, with government helicopters searching for something?"

"Of course. I believe you wrote an article about it. Nothing much turned up, did it?" His eyebrows went up another fraction.

"Actually, sir, something did turn up. They captured an alien, but that wasn't made public. There were no press releases or statements at all after that. But, you see, the alien got away from them somehow, and they're still searching."

"Oh?"

"Yes, sir. I shouldn't say any more just now, sir. I remember you worked for the government in some capacity...."

"Aha, I see. Let me guess. You know something about this alien. Maybe you even know where he is. You thought of me because I'm supposed to be some kind of expert with languages. But you're worried that I'll tell the feds you've got him. Is that about it, Mr. Méndez?"

"Yes, sir, that's about it."

"All right. Now, the language can't be Spanish because every Tomás, Dick, and Harry around here speaks that. So I'll tell you I know next to nothing about exotic foreign languages—a little Russian and a few others, but no Arabic, no Chechen, no Swahili or Chamorro, nothing like that. Second, my work for the government had to do with my skills in cryptography, and I'll say no more about that. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir. Translation is not the issue. English is all we need."

"Very well. Then I will tell you, and you will just have to believe me, that I have no love for federal law enforcement, nor for state or local law enforcement either, necessary as they may be. I do, however, hold this poor, benighted nation

in some regard, and I would not be willing to allow it to suffer by my silence. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir. Actually, this does involve a matter of national security, but you may decide what to do about that. In fact, that is what I want to ask you about. I just don't want the alien turned over to the law because of me, or anyone to find out that the, uh, possible alien is anywhere around here. Sir."

"You intrigue me, Mr. Méndez. If it will suit you, I will promise at least not to mention that you may know something about this alien—reporter's confidential sources and all that, as long as the national interest is not harmed. Pray proceed."

"Thank you, sir. I wonder, Dr. Sledd, if you have noticed those "missing" posters all over town, with the picture of the young blonde woman on them...." As the white eyebrows headed up toward the white hair again, Matt summarized what Darcy had told him the day before, leaving out any mention of her present appearance or whereabouts or predicament. As he spoke, Dr. Sledd stared more and more intently at him, his fingers interlaced over his paunch. Finally, Matt stopped. "Sir?" he asked the motionless figure.

"Extraordinary, Mr. Méndez! Absolutely extraordinary! If true, of course. I am sure you have considered whether your 'alien' may be perpetrating a monstrous hoax, have you not? What are your reportorial instincts telling you, I wonder?"

"I've thought about it, sir. Yes, of course I have. If she wanted to create a hoax, this is an odd one to perpetrate. I can't think of any reason for her to do so. There seems to be nothing for her to gain from it. I can't be completely certain she's from another planet, but I saw her run, and I saw her snatch those coins. No normal person could have done either of those things. She seems completely serious to me. And I know the government went to a lot of trouble and expense to locate and capture her—there's no doubting they were convinced. Incredible as it seems, I think it may actually be true."

"Unbelievable! And what did you say that lab assistant of hers was named, the one on the moon?"

"She said something like Leo, or Heo, or maybe Ha-leo, sir."

"Yes! Let's see...." He got up, went over to a wall of books, searched a minute, and pulled one down. He riffled through the pages. "Ah, I thought so. Here it is. This is a dictionary of Anglo-Saxon, or Old English. It's the language of Beowulf, roughly 1000 years old. Look at this."

Matt got up to look. There it was: "Hleo: shelter, protector." Whoa! Matt had to sit down again. Sledd, on the other hand, began pacing.

"This could be stupendous, Mr. Méndez! That is, if it's only true. Imagine what she could tell students of history, of language, of culture. Who could have

imagined such an eventuality in their wildest dreams? A whole tribe, an entire society, an ancient culture, lost from our planet to another solar system! It would be a whole new chapter in the history of civilization! Why, scientists and the medical community alone would give their eye teeth to study her! ‘Germline therapy,’ you said?”

“Yes sir.”

“Absolutely extraordinary. I’ve run out of superlatives. Mr. Méndez, I must meet this young woman some time. Soon, if possible! But...” and he returned to his own chair, “...you said you needed my advice in some regard. I must now repeat, with considerably more interest, my opening statement to you: what is on your mind, Mr. Méndez?”

Matt described Darcy’s quandary: her discovery of the imminent danger to the planet posed by the meteoroids, her hasty trip from the moon to the McDonald Observatory, the way she had been disbelieved, and the unceasing hunt for her since her escape. “The government probably thinks she’s some exotic threat, sir. But if she’s right, we are all in great danger. Yet if she speaks out publicly, she’ll be arrested and imprisoned. Neither of us can think of a way out, sir. We hoped someone, perhaps you, might know what to suggest, so her warning would be taken seriously. Sir.”

“Fame.”

“Sir?”

“Fame, Mr. Méndez. Fame, celebrity, national and even international renown! That’s the answer! If she’s who she says she is, she’ll be the biggest thing to happen to this world since Jesus! First, establish her identity! Then, let her speak!” His face was alight, and, for the first time in two meetings with him, he actually smiled at Matt.

## CHAPTER 19

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Since they had felt comfortable there, Matt and Darcy met again in Mrs. Alvil-lar's kitchen. After leaving Dr. Sledd's house, he had swung by his own house to pick up his notes and then made a brief detour to pick up an order of Chinese takeout. Darcy had to be shown how to eat some of it, but once she caught on she dug in with relish. For a small person she can sure eat, he thought. She ate more than he did, not that he minded. He enjoyed just watching her. He'd never seen anyone actually pay such close attention to their food.

"That was delicious!" she said. "Thanks!"

Immoderately pleased, Matt beamed back at her.

"What was that yellow stuff?"

"You mean that stuff there? That's Chinese mustard."

"It's incredible! It's hot like chilis, but it's different too. It makes my nose and my tongue burn. Chili only burns my tongue, not my nose."

"You're right," Matt said after a moment of reflection. "I never realized that."

"We don't have hot peppers back home. They're amazing!"

He gathered up the wrappers and napkins and tossed them away. "That makes me wonder—how have you found your former home, earth? I mean, do you like anything here?"

"Oh, certainly! Of course, I do! Remember, I've watched and listened to you all for a long time. I love your music, or at least a lot of it. I love your fiction. I have to admit, I don't understand a lot of the poetry. Your history and political systems are troubling, though. Your public health system is primitive. You've had some terrible, terrible wars. And many, many people here are selfish and worship money. But not everyone, of course."

“Well, what about since you’ve been here in person—what kinds of things surprised you?”

“Oh!” Her smile was radiant. “The air! The weather here—it’s so wonderful and alive! The plants! The animals! So beautiful up close! The smells! The roses by the library are sooo delicate and sweet! The smell of horses! Juniper needles! And there’s the food! I can’t believe all the amazing flavors! Like that mustard, there, and pizza, and salsa, and carne guisada. Lemons! Oranges! Peppermint! Oh, Matt, you don’t know how lucky you are to have flavors like that!”

“I guess I don’t—too bad, really.”

“I’m sure there are other things here I would enjoy. It’s...it’s just that I’ve been scared silly ever since I landed. I’m not a brave person, Matt, and I’m not comfortable around strangers. I know that very smart people are trying to capture me, and I’m terrified of what they might do to me. It’s hard to separate reality from all the movies I’ve seen.” She began folding down the edge of her Styrofoam cup.

“So...you’ve seen a lot of television and movies, huh? Is that how you learned English?”

“Well, yes, basically. Hleo and I taught each other. We’ve been working on learning several languages, actually. Hleo keeps good notes.”

“Yeah, Hleo. I’m still wondering how you could live all that time by yourself, even with that Hleo guy there too. How could they send just one person on this assignment? And why you?”

“I guess it’s an odd situation. The mission was incredibly expensive, and our whole society contributed to it. I’m in command of the station, or I was, before I left. I am a tribal chief’s daughter, and it takes someone with at least that much standing to be in charge. It’s sort of like I understand officers are in your military. But Hleo is the really important one. He can run the mission by himself, without me. If I were to get sick and die, for example, or do something really stupid like disobey orders and go to the planet we’re studying, our mission will continue just the same.”

She paused and pressed her lips together. Matt was beginning to relax. It was fun talking to Darcy once he realized she wasn’t going to sprout claws and fangs and tear him to shreds. He’d seen a few movies himself. She really did seem like a normal person—a small, normal person. A small, intelligent normal person. OK, then, a small, intelligent, scared, very attractive normal person with a sense of humor who happened to be from another planet. He was beginning to like her.

“Uh, Darcy, if you don’t mind, can I ask how old you are?”

"I don't mind. But I'm afraid I can't give you an answer that will mean much to you."

"Why not?"

She licked a finger and pressed it against some fortune cookie crumbs and stuck the finger in her mouth. "Well, consider: you measure your own age by the number of trips around the sun you have made. I have made a number of those too, about seventy, but I was alive a good while before I came to your sun. We have our own sun, but our year is a different length. And then, I've spent some time in what you could call hibernation, in transit here from there. At the same time, the vessel accelerated to nearly the speed of light, at which time slows down. You may remember your Albert Einstein said it would. So time for people here marched right along, but time for me passed much more slowly. I left my home planet before you were born! And then once we set up the station, I hibernated off and on in between observation periods. Usually, Hleo would wake me up every seven or eight years for a period of a year or less. That would slow down time for me even more. Do you see? I might have been born 100 earth years ago, but from my point of view, I'm not nearly that old. It's almost impossible for me to answer your simple question."

"Every time you say something like that, it makes my head spin. But I guess I see why you can't answer it. It's just that you don't look old enough to buy beer. But I guess you're actually fairly old, right? Older than me, for example? I'm 34."

She smiled. "Yes, I suppose I'm older than you."

"What about your normal life span?"

"That's another tough question. Our normal life span is longer than yours, by a fair percentage, but once again, my case is unique. We don't actually know what effect hibernation will have on our life span. It might lengthen it or shorten it, or it may not change at all. I guess I'm a test case."

"What about Earth diseases? You haven't been vaccinated against any of them, have you?"

"No, I haven't. But on the other hand, my immune system—adrenal glands and all the rest—is genetically tuned up and I should be able to handle most infectious agents. I could be wrong, of course. That's another thing I'll just have to find out."

Matt shook his head. "So, you said you've been on the moon for seventy years?"

"Yes. From our home we detected what turned out to be early radio transmissions, and we marked them as one of several areas to investigate. It took many years of travel to get here, though. I sent back reports of what I found, but they

too will take many years to get there. You can forget about ever meeting any of our people.”

“Golly, if you’ve been gone for such a long time, will you ever see your family again?”

She frowned and looked at her crumpled cup. “No, I won’t, not my immediate family, anyway. Theoretically I might see my family’s descendants, but I told you, I’ll almost certainly be banned from the tribe. Anyway all the ones I knew have to be gone by now.”

“That’s so sad!” He almost reached out to touch her hand. Instead, he said “I made a note last night to ask you about that tribe thing. What’s a tribe, exactly? I mean, I know, sort of, but in your case, I mean.”

“Some day maybe I can tell you about our social structure. I don’t want to take the time now, but basically our society is a larger, more complex version of early nomadic societies on Earth, as best I can determine. We live in groups of families, those groups are affiliated with other similar groups, and all are hierarchically arranged under a “lord,” or king, if you like, and sub-lords, not unlike some of your Indian nations historically or even Celtic or other Proto-Indo-European peoples. Power flows up as well as down, so there’s an element of democracy with us. But there are also elements of aristocracy. I’m sorry if I sound like a book. It doesn’t really matter to us now. We have more important things to worry about.”

“Yeah, we do” Matt glanced at his watch. “Golly! I had no idea it was getting so late! I also want to ask you about your planet and where it is, and about your language, and two dozen other things. But we can wait on those.”

She interrupted him. “You haven’t told me anything about yourself, either, you know. It’s only fair, Matt. Would you do that another time, when we have time? Please?”

“Oy, ah, well, I’m not a very interesting person, Darcy. But sure, I’d love to talk some more whenever we can. For now, I imagine you want to know what I’ve come up with in the way of a plan, right?”

“Yes! Did you think of something?”

“Sort of. I have to confess, Darcy—my first thought was that I wasn’t smart enough to deal with this. I needed help. I needed the smartest person I know. So I went to see him. His name is Dr. William Sledd.”

Darcy’s brow wrinkled. “I think I’ve heard of him!”

“You have? Are you sure?”

"No, I'm not sure, but I read several papers on the internet by a William Sledd on the subject of Germanic to English grammatical shifts. I told you I was looking for connections to my own culture...."

"It has to be the same guy. That seems to be one of his areas of expertise." Matt summarized his conversation with Dr. Sledd, finally saying "You'd never guess what he suggested. I know I never would have thought of it."

"What? What??" said Darcy, her eyes bright.

"Fame."

"Fame?"

"Yup. He said fame. What he meant, I think, is that the people who want to lock you away won't be able to if you are well known. You'd be too famous, don't you see? They wouldn't dare to touch you! Popular opinion would be against them! He might be right, too. A lot of famous people seem to do whatever they want, no matter what the rules are. They can get away with almost anything...not that you would, of course. I just mean that that might give you an opportunity to deliver your warning before anyone can stop you. What do you think?"

She looked out the back door. "Fame...fame. That's an interesting idea. Let me think about it." She looked back at Matt. "I might want to get a second opinion."



## CHAPTER 20

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Cheryl and Darcy had concluded an easy run and were sitting on a stone fence in the sun at the edge of the campus. Cheryl was making grooves in the dirt with the toes of her running shoes. Darcy's heels didn't reach that far, but she was lightly tapping them against the wall.

"That muscle feels a lot better. In another day or two, I think it'll be back to normal."

"That's good news."

"Yeah, man! Hey, Darce, you thought any more about trying out for the team?"

"And competing, you mean?"

"Yeah. You'd be a natural."

"Yes, I've thought about it. I might be interested in competition, I think. But I don't know if I want to enroll for school. I already have a degree."

"Oh, I didn't know that." She drew some more grooves with her toes. "But actually, you don't have to be a student to try out for the Olympics. I have a meeting in a few days with a guy from Barbados who gonna help me get things arranged to run for them. That's where I'm from, you know. You don't have to be from there to run for them. Why don't you come with me and talk to him? If you win a medal for Barbados, they be happy to pay your training expenses!"

"They would? Really? How can they pay ahead of time for something that might not happen?"

"Because I'd vouch for you! I just know you'd win some kind of medal. I know this gent from way back. He's why I got this far. Him and me, we pals."

"Hmmm. And you're meeting him soon?"

"Yeah, get this: he a lawyer, some kind of import-export lawyer with a big law firm in Miami. That's in Florida. The whole law firm sponsoring me. They gonna send a plane to pick me up and take me to Miami for the meeting! Plenty of room on that plane, Darse. Just let me tell him I got another hot prospect for an Olympic medal. What it gonna cost them to talk to you? Nothin', that's what. C'mon, Darse! Let's fly to Miami!"

"That's tempting, Cheryl, very tempting. You mean, if you win a medal at the Olympics, you'll be famous?"

"Yeah! Well, not like a rock star or the Pope, but famous enough to get hired somewhere, or make guest appearances, like that. C'mon with me to Miami! You gotta do it, girl! You'll like this guy. His name Hartley Braithwaite" (she pronounced it "Braffit"), "and he ain't no rich lawyer like most of them. He put himself through school by workin' in the cane fields and he really respect hard work and ability, no lie. He a big lawyer now, but man, he can still cuss like a cane cutter!"

"Next week, huh? Well, I don't have much else to do. Sure, why not! OK, Cheryl, I'll go with you, if he'll have me."

"All right girl! I call him tonight. You'll see! Good things gonna happen!"

After calling ahead, Matt drove Darcy up the mountain to Dr. Sledd's house. He rang the bell while Darcy took in the view from the hill top, spinning around when Dr. Sledd opened the door. He was wearing a tweed coat, a clean white shirt, and house shoes. "Good morning, Mr. Méndez," he said, almost cordially, "and to you too, miss. Won't you come in?" He stepped back to allow them to enter.

"Dr. Sledd, this is Darcy."

"Very pleased to meet you, Darcy, very pleased indeed." They shook hands lightly.

"Thank you, sir."

"Please come have a seat in my study." He led the way, adding "Is Darcy your first name or last name?"

"It's my family name, sir, or close to it."

"And how do you pronounce it exactly, if you please?" They all sat down.

Darcy uttered something Matt recognized as similar to "Darcy," but with some guttural, back-of-the-throat sounds added in. It sounded to Matt like "darshell."

Dr. Sledd turned his ear to her and said "Again, please?"

She repeated her name, and he reached for a pencil. "I think I have it. One more time, if you don't mind?"

She complied, and then he looked up and pronounced her name, gutturals included. "Is that close?"

"Yes!" she said. "Close enough."

He scribbled for a second or two.

"I studied phonology, eons ago," he said. He handed the slip of paper to her. "This is my transcription in the International Phonetic Alphabet. Does the name have any particular meaning?"

"Yes, sir. In English, the closest word I know of is 'rainbow.' It's my family's totem: 'from the rainbow.'"

"Aaaah!" he said, and sat back in his chair. Damn, I wish I'd asked her that, thought Matt.

"Interesting!" Sledd exclaimed, finally. "The French word for rainbow is 'arc-en-ciel,' did you know? In Spanish, it's 'arco iris,' and in Latin, their parent language, it's 'arco pluvius.' Your name may derive from something like 'd'arc ciel,' or 'from the rainbow.' Evidently, there is some affinity to the French form. Oh, my dear," he exclaimed, "this is fascinating!"

"I'm glad you think so, sir," replied Darcy. "I read your paper on the Germanic precursors to the Great English Vowel Shift on the internet, and found it very intriguing."

"Did you indeed?" said Sledd, positively glowing. "Did you happen to be on the moon at the time?"

"Yes sir, I was," she answered.

"Unbelievable, the power of technology," he mused. "I have managed to learn to use email, myself, with some difficulty. It has been invaluable to my more scholarly pursuits, but I had no idea that any of my publications were available on the internet. I shall have to investigate that—but at another time, another time. Ms. Darcy, could you allow me a few questions on the verb structure of your native language?" The two of them launched into an involved discussion that Matt could not follow, punctuated by scribbling, questions back and forth, and foreign words pronounced over and over by one then the other.

While they talked, a sleek, yellow and white cat appeared from behind a couch and hopped into Darcy's lap and began purring. She scratched its head absently. "Look at that!" said Sledd. "That's Grendel. He's named for the monster in *Beowulf*, because that's what he is. He usually hates guests, even attacks them sometimes...but he doesn't seem to hate you!"

"He's beautiful, Dr. Sledd."

"Oh, my goodness, this is fun," added Sledd. "Mr. Méndez, I'm sorry I'm not a better host but I must thank you from the bottom of my heart for bringing Ms. Darcy by. I agree with you, by the way. I think she's the genuine article. I'd love to go on like this for days—for weeks!"

"I would too, Dr. Sledd," said Darcy, "but I'm afraid it will have to be continued another time. I should have thanked you earlier for your advice—about fame, that is. I believe you may be right. Very soon I am going to look into it."

"One can hardly be sure about such a unique situation, my dear, but it has been my experience that the old saying about how one can lead a horse to water but not make him drink is false. If you lock up the horse a few days without water, he will drink, and gladly, I should think. He merely needs to have his attention focused for him."

"I understand, Dr. Sledd. I may have to leave for a while, but when time permits I hope you will allow me to return to your lovely study and continue our explorations."

"There is nothing I would like better, my dear. I am yours to command. In the meantime I wish you all success in the future!"

When they left, Dr. Sledd actually kissed Darcy's hand. Darcy smiled all the way to the car.

## CHAPTER 21

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“You sure did handle Dr. Sledd smooth,” said Matt, as they drove down the mountain. “I was always afraid he was going to bite me, but he kissed you.” Matt was actually a little jealous.

Darcy smiled. “I come from a tribal culture. We are very conscious of status and etiquette. Dr. Sledd would have been a high status person back home. He’s a very learned man. But I wasn’t playing up to him—I thought he truly was interesting. I would really love to compare ideas with him and see what we could figure out. I’m as interested in our history as he is. I’m glad you found him.”

Matt felt a glow of pleasure, but then he remembered something else. “I didn’t know you were making plans to go somewhere else. Was that true?”

“Yes, Matt, it’s true. You know Cheryl Ford, Luisa’s runner friend? She thinks I could compete in athletics, and she wants to introduce me to the man who helps arrange her meets. I only decided last night. If things work out, I might try a meet or two. It might be a way to attract some notice, after all. I don’t know. I can only try.”

“Aww,” said Matt. He felt like he was about to lose something—something he hadn’t known he had. He had come to enjoy Darcy’s company. To his surprise, he wasn’t so worried about missing part of his hoped-for exclusive story. He couldn’t remember having had such stimulating conversations before. “Well, I guess you do have to try. Like you said, there’s not a lot of time to spare, and an awful lot to lose.”

“That’s right. I worry about that. I worry a lot about that.”

Agent Aldridge would never get used to the sequence of bad day after bad day. How could he, when he had to report each one to the Bureau? Still, most of the Bureau's best cases had been tough to crack. He was nothing if not dogged. Now, finally, they might have got a break.

A tip had reached the task force. Someone in local law enforcement had spotted a person resembling "BX," their code name for the "Barbie Alien." The Bureau loved code names, couldn't think up enough of them. The tipster had sent a grainy picture of a smallish woman jogging down a street, obviously taken from a car window. The lab guys, with their measuring tools and calipers, concluded that they couldn't rule out that it wasn't actually their elusive BX. She did indeed bear some basic resemblance to the pictures the bumbler at Fort Bliss had taken when they had her in custody. And, oddly enough, the picture had been taken in Alpine, not El Paso. They'd been concentrating on El Paso, since that was where she disappeared. But Alpine was close to the observatory. Maybe BX had "returned to the scene of the crime." Stranger things had happened.

Beggars could not be choosers. Best to put on a game face and send an interdiction team to Alpine, just in case. Aldridge would send sixteen men...correction; he would send sixteen agents, fourteen men and two women, immediately. He called the crew at the airport to have them prep the plane.

Cheryl was ecstatic. "Darse! He say come ahead! You in, girl, you in!"

"That's wonderful, Cheryl. But I still don't understand how you can be so sure they'll have me."

"I told you. He know me! I bragged on you, girl! Oh, sure, the law firm will probably have you go down to a track with a coach and a stopwatch, but that's no big deal. You just run like you run with me and you got it made!"

"So it's sort of a tryout, then?"

"Yeah, but listen, we gonna have a good time. We gonna go first class. He sending a plane, and not just any plane. The law firm have a cool little jet. He comes out here every year to hunt birds at the Bar-S ranch, between here and Fort Davis. They have their own landing strip! We gonna meet the plane there and fly to Miami, girl! I'll take you to a Barbadian restaurant! Hoo-boy!"

Cheryl hugged Darcy so hard she lifted her off the ground.

Their farewell dinner was a poignant affair for Matt. Darcy didn't want to be seen in a public eatery, so Matt frantically straightened up his house and cooked the best dinner he could. He charcoaled a couple steaks on his back porch, boiled

up two ears of imported corn on the cob, and sautéed some asparagus spears in garlic and olive oil.

It was all new to Darcy. He had to demonstrate how to hold corn on the cob and nibble off two or three rows of kernels at a time, moving from one end to the other. When he licked the butter off his finger that he had wiped off Darcy's hand, he felt his ears heat up, but she didn't notice. She was laughing at the novelty of the experience, getting more proficient with each row, nipping off the kernels faster and faster with her front teeth. He kicked himself that he hadn't got her two ears of corn. It was a hoot to watch her eat.

He was proudest of the way the asparagus turned out, tender but still crisp. "It actually tastes green!" she marveled, adopting his practice of picking each spear up with her fingers and biting it down to the end.

Once again, she ate like a trouper. Where does she put it, he wondered, as he watched her slender fingers mop steak juice from her plate with a piece of tortilla.

She had a thing for desserts. "You mean you've never had chocolate ice cream?" he asked in amazement.

"Never. Not only do we not have desserts, we don't have chocolate. I read that it came from the Aztecs, didn't it? I think they called it 'chocolatl.' Well, we didn't have any Aztecs. It's a shame—we didn't have tortillas, either. You're fortunate, Matt."

Not so fortunate, he thought. You're leaving and I'll probably never see you again. I'm pretty damn unfortunate, but what do you care about that? he thought, feeling sorry for himself.

"This was wonderful, Matt. Thank you. Did it cost a lot of money?"

"Huh? Oh. You're welcome. No, not much. About twelve dollars. Why do you ask?"

"I don't know anything about your money. I've never had any. I've never bought anything! I just know it's important. I wondered, that's all."

"Aww...." Of course she had no money! That had never occurred to him. How long could he have existed, flat broke? Not long, for sure. He didn't have much money, heaven knew, but next to someone who had none, he was practically rich. That was terrible! He started to feel badly for her. She must have sensed his discomfort, because she added, "But never mind. Maybe we ought to make a few arrangements for tomorrow, do you think?"

Darcy wanted to thank Luisa's parents for their kindness to her before she left. Luisa was going to take her when she drove to Fort Davis in the late afternoon as school let out. But Luisa wanted to remain over the weekend, so Darcy needed a ride back to the ranch where she would meet the plane.

“I know it’s a lot of trouble for you, Matt, but would you possibly be able to bring this back pack and pick me up at the Delbosque’s house about 6 and drop me off at the Bar-S ranch?”

Matt felt his heart turn inside out. “Trouble? No trouble at all, absolutely none. I’d be happy to take you to the plane.”



## CHAPTER 22

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Once again, Musi, the disappearing cat, showed up to hang around Darcy. She slipped inside when the door was opened for someone else and settled against her leg on the couch, looking at the people around her with half-open eyes. The children were excited to hear that Darcy was going to try out for the Olympics. Jerry asked “Will you be on television? Will we see you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. I hope so,” Darcy told him.

She was signing Clara’s and Maria’s scrapbooks when suddenly the cat stood up, arched her back, hissed, and slunk behind the couch. In the ensuing silence, several dogs could be heard barking frantically. “Ranch security,” said Gus, and went out on the front porch. Darcy must have looked nonplussed, because Mrs. Delbosque laughed.

“Those dogs, they bark all the time, at anything, ’specially if people watching them. ‘Ranch security’ ees just a joke, mija.”

But Gus came back inside with a serious look on his face. “Four cars, coming this way,” he said. “Looks like la Migra otra vez. Pinche cabrones! Everybody back to the bedrooms. I handle this. Silencio, todos!”

Agent Foster briefed the people in the other cars over the secure frequency as they drove from Alpine up into the mountains.

“OK, listen up, people. She’s in a house behind a dude ranch halfway up a canyon. The only approach is from the front, so first thing, I want Team A and Team B to deploy around the back of the house, to keep anyone from getting away. Check in when you’re in position, but I don’t want it to take more than two minutes, got that? Team C, as soon as everyone else is in position, take two

cars and set up roadblocks above and below the dude ranch. Don't let anyone through until I give the word. Team D, we'll take the front of the house. I don't expect any resistance, but keep alert. Get those vests on. One way or the other we'll get everyone out of the house.

"Now, as to the people. With apologies to Agent Palacio, you know how these Mexican families are. There'll be the husband and wife, a passel of children, and maybe aunts, uncles, grandparents, and who knows who else. We'll hold them all out front until the situation clears. I remind you, the little blonde girl we're looking for may have black hair now, so keep especially alert with respect to any medium size children. Any questions?"

The four cars turned off the highway onto the dude ranch driveway and sped past the "big house," past the barns and corrals, and swung around to the smaller house and outbuildings behind. Sixteen doors opened more or less simultaneously and then agents began running all over the place, getting into position. Two of the cars, with two agents in each, backed up and returned to the highway.

After all teams had checked in via his earpiece, Agent Foster judged the moment was right. In the stillness, he mounted the porch and rapped on the door. "Federal agents! Open up!"

The four agents of Team D, standing in front of the house with weapons drawn, waited. Nothing happened. Agent Foster knocked again. "Federal Agents! Open up, or we'll break down the door!"

They saw him begin talking, evidently to someone inside the closed door, but they couldn't hear the words. It didn't take long. After a couple minutes, the door opened slowly and a paunchy Hispanic man walked out, his hands in the air. Behind him followed a stout Hispanic woman, and a small crowd of scared-looking children and young people, the smallest being held protectively close by an old woman. Agent Hamilton took a look at all of them and shook his head at Agent Foster, who stepped to the door and shouted commandingly, "We know you're in there, miss. Come out with your hands up. No one wants to hurt you."

Nothing happened. Using hand signals, Foster summoned one member of Teams D, A, and B, and went into the house. The three remaining members of Team D stood around the shivering family members and waited.

A few minutes of silence were abruptly interrupted by an inhuman, high-pitched screech followed by a man's bellow of pain. Every member of Team D jumped and pointed their weapons at the house. Out the door, like a streak, came a cat, running so fast they could hear its claws scrabbling on the hard dirt in the driveway. It skidded into a panic turn and disappeared in the undergrowth to

their left, scattering pebbles behind it. All three took deep breaths and lowered their weapons.

Foster and the others emerged, one agent pressing a blood-spotted handkerchief to his hand. They consulted in low voices, and then he sent the three agents back inside for a more thorough search. He walked to the group out front.

"Do we have any little blondes here?" he asked, rhetorically. "Let's take a good look." One by one, each was examined and eliminated. He had a female agent look closely at Luisa, Clara, and Maria. The two little ones whimpered piteously. When he turned to the boy, Foster suddenly stood up straight. "Where's the grandmother?" he asked. "Goddammit, wasn't there an old woman here? Where the hell is she? Guys?"

There was no grandmother. The agents looked at each other and then at Agent Foster. Finally, Agent Palacio stated the obvious: "She was here, all right. I swear, we never took our eyes off this bunch, sir. But she's not here now. What the hell happened to her?"

As Matt neared the dude ranch, he came upon a car parked sideways across the road, with one man standing behind it and another in front. The one in front was waving at him to stop. He complied and stuck his head out the window.

"What's going on?" he shouted.

"This road is closed for about a half hour, sir. You'll have to come back later." The fellow had sunglasses on, even though the canyon was completely in the shade of the early evening. He had a black jacket on with the letters "FBI" prominently on the left breast.

"Closed? What for? Was there an accident?"

"Federal matter, sir. Please turn around and try again later."

"Federal matter? What federal matter? I'm a newspaper reporter! That's my press pass on the mirror. I have the right to be anywhere!"

"Not here, you don't, sir. For the last time, please reverse your vehicle and come back later. That's an order sir." And he pulled back his jacket to rest his hand on a pistol in a holster.

"Well, crap," said Matt. "Someone will hear about this!" He shifted into reverse, backed around, shifted into drive, and eased back down the highway, rolling his window up.

Back up to speed, and after rounding several curves, he spoke out loud: "Well, wasn't I lucky that I was flagged down by a hitchhiker two curves before I got to that idiot FBI agent! I bet that guy missed something real newsworthy!"

From behind his seat came a quavery woman's voice: "Yes, he did, but don't slow down—we've got to be there in fifteen minutes!"

"You mind telling me what happened back there?"

"It was more people after me. They almost caught me—they must have been watching the Delbosque's house. It was horrible! I was sooo scared! I rubbed some refried beans on my face and wrapped a shawl over my head and tried to act like an old woman. When the cat bit the agent, all the agents jumped, and I ran for the trees. They didn't see me."

"How well I know! I'd have given anything to have seen that! Like we Hispanics say, *tú te has hecho humo*—'you turned into smoke,' poof, like that! ¡Corriste a quemaropas! ('You ran so fast your clothes were on fire!') But why did you tell me to drive up to the roadblock before turning around?"

"It might have looked funny if you'd turned around before you reached it. Now, they won't suspect you knew anything."

"How true that is," Matt observed.

In less than ten minutes they had left the mountains behind and headed down the long straightaway that descended into Alpine. About midway between the mountains and the town, he turned left at the fancy wrought iron gate to the Bar-S ranch. From his study of the local water situation he knew the ranch occupied many square miles. The main house was barely visible from the highway. This land could only be good for cattle and oil, he figured. There was hardly a tree on the place, or even a hill.

His heart was in his throat all over again as he drove up to a sleek little corporate jet waiting on the end of the runway behind the Bar-S ranch house. Cheryl was there waiting with Coach Pérez and a tall woman wearing pressed jeans and a western shirt. Cheryl gave Darcy another of her huge hugs. "All right, girl! Here we go!"

She stepped back and looked at Darcy. "You a mess, girl! What happen to yo' face?"

"Oh, nothing. I got splashed with dirt, that's all. It'll wash off."

"OK, no big. Let's get going, huh? Woo-hoo!" She climbed up the narrow stairs into the plane.

Coach Pérez stepped over to shake her hand. "Hi, Ana. This is Rhoda Williams," she said, indicating the woman at her side. "This is her ranch."

Darcy shook the woman's hand. "How do you do, Mrs. Williams. I'm pleased to meet you. Thank you for letting us use your landing strip."

Mrs. Williams, her splashy jewelry sparkling in the sun, smiled down at her. "I'm delighted to help, Ms. Darcy. Coach Perez told me you and Cheryl have a good chance at a medal in the Olympic Games. I wish you all the best, you hear?"

"Thank you, ma'am."

Coach Perez pointed at the modest back pack at Darcy's feet. "Is that all you've packed?" she said.

"Yes, ma'am. That's it. Everything I own is in there."

"Bless you, Darcy. I hope it all goes very, very well. I want to hear all about it eventually, you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am. You will." She picked up her back pack and turned toward the plane and there was Matt, with a funny expression on his face.

"Goodbye, Darcy." There seemed to be something wrong with his voice. "Good luck. I'll be thinking about you. If there's anything I can do, please ask, any time."

"I will, Matt. Thanks for your help. You've been a good friend. I'll see you again, some day." She leaned forward on tiptoes and kissed him lightly on the cheek. He wrapped his arms around her and hugged her like Cheryl did. She seemed small and fragile in his arms.

"Here," he said, handing her an envelope. "Open this in the air. I'm gonna miss you," he whispered hoarsely. Then he let her go.

In five minutes the plane was just a blinking light in the fast-fading eastern sky.

It was fortunate that the plane had left from the Bar-S ranch. Fifteen miles later, on the outskirts of Alpine, Matt had to stop at another roadblock, this time manned by local cops he knew. Even so, they made him get out of the truck so they could poke through it. He remembered to gripe about the feds back in the mountains and asked again what was going on. All he received in reply was a couple of shrugs. That reminded him how lucky Darcy had been, and that made his heart squeeze up one more time.

## CHAPTER 23

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Chuck Henneke looked like what he was: a tough former athlete with a good head on his thick neck. He was a legend among college scouts, one who, if he bothered to collect trophies for the college athletes he turned up, would have a whole den full of them. He was just the man that Benning, Bynum, Caxton, Braithwaite was looking for. His services didn't come cheap, but they weren't worried. If it turned out that he helped the firm in its pro bono altruism to enable several deserving young athletes to earn an Olympic medal, then it would be worth the cost to the firm, easily.

Accordingly, three of the partners (Bynum was in Washington on a trade negotiation) were assembled in their walnut paneled meeting room to hear Coach Henneke's report on the athletes he'd spent most of the day with: Gary Lollar, a swimmer from Arkansas, sponsored by Caxton, Cheryl Ford, the runner that Braithwaite knew, and an unknown quantity named Darcy something or other that Cheryl Ford insisted Braithwaite look at. Braithwaite was the newest partner and a productive one, so if he wanted a walk-on checked out, they would gladly humor him.

Henneke was right on time. He took a chair at the table with grace and firmness, laying a notepad out in front of himself. After the necessary chatter about local teams they got down to business. "Gentlemen," he began, looking at each of them in turn, "this has been a most interesting day. Let me cover the easy parts first, if I may. The swimmer, Mr. Lollar, and the runner, Ms. Ford, I think are both excellent medal prospects. Both have a shot at several medals, in my opinion, particularly Mr. Lollar, though that may be as much due to the nature of the organization of the swimming events as to his own talent. His talent is consider-

able, however, and his present training level is good. I think the Olympic coaches will be able to work well with him.

"The same goes for Ms. Ford, basically. Her strongest event would seem to be the 10,000 meters, but she might also do well in the 5,000 meters. Her present training level is excellent, and I have talked to her coach and confirmed her hardiness and motivation. She has timed better than her likely competitors by convincing margins, repeatedly. You can never predict Olympic outcomes accurately, but I would think she is almost a shoo-in for some kind of medal in at least one event, possibly gold."

He paused to flip open his notebook. "The third candidate was unknown to me before today. She calls herself Darcy, but says that is her last name, and if a first name is needed, it would be Ana. She says she's Canadian, but she's hazy on just where in Canada. She said her age was 28, but she had to think about it before saying so. When I asked her what her event was, or events were, she just said she runs, and added she might 'do some other stuff too.' She's five feet two inches tall, weighs 103 pounds, and is lean and lightly muscled.

"As you might imagine, I wasn't expecting much from her." He glanced at his notepad. "I asked her to run four laps around the track at her best pace." He looked up from his notes, his face more solemn than ever. "Her best pace turned out to be nineteen seconds under the world record for the mile—the men's mile, not the women's mile. And yes, I said nineteen seconds."

He paused and glanced at the partners, who were looking slightly confused. "I thought my stopwatch had malfunctioned. It seemed impossible. She didn't even seem to be breathing that hard. So I asked her to run four more laps at the same pace, but I used the stopwatch on my wrist watch. That time she beat the world record by fifteen seconds. The exertion didn't seem to affect her."

Braithwaite's brows furrowed as if the numbers were finally beginning to register. "Go on," he said in a low voice.

"I asked her how long she could keep that pace up. She said she didn't know, that she'd always run behind Cheryl Ford, and held her pace to Cheryl's. So I timed her at the 100 meters. Her technique's terrible, but she came within a half second of the world record, twice. I set up the hurdles. She's small for a hurdler, but she sailed over them like she had wings. I asked her if she could high jump. We started at five feet, and in six jumps she was clearing nearly six and a half feet. Again, her technique is awful. Most high jumpers are tall and lean. This woman is short and lean. I have no idea how she generated the necessary vertical momentum. We went to the long jump pit. I won't bother you with the distance she

jumped...but if it had been properly judged, there would be a new world record right now.

"I asked her if she could swim. She said yes, and that she really used to like diving. When I asked if she could do a few dives for me, she said she didn't have a swim suit! By the way, the shoes she ran in looked like they came from Good Will. They're practically children's sneakers—not proper footwear for a serious runner."

He flipped his notepad closed, sighed, and looked at each of the partners in turn. "Bottom line in the case of Ms. Ana Darcy: I have never seen an athlete like her in my life, nor have I ever heard of one. I am still having trouble believing what my own eyes told me all afternoon. She needs to be put through more trials over a variety of events. She needs to be drug tested thoroughly. If she's clean, believe me, you want to sponsor her. See that she gets proper equipment and top-flight training. For God's sake, get her a swim suit and see if she can swim and dive anything like she can run. She needs to be tested at marathon distances. If you would like me to continue tomorrow, I can adjust my schedule. I won't even charge you for my time.

"I have no idea what events Ana Darcy might end up in, but the medals could be the least of it. This young woman is likely to make athletic history. She already has, as far as I'm concerned."

After Henneke had departed the partners sat in stunned silence a long minute. Finally, Jack Benning cleared his throat. "Well, gentlemen, maybe our first venture into sports public relations is going to work out after all."

Hartley Braithwaite was shaking his head back and forth slowly. "We hoped one of our athletes would get a medal, any medal. It would appear those odds just improved."

Dick Caxton, the firm's contract man, spoke next. "It does look very, very promising. But I'm wondering about that Darcy woman. She was pretty fuzzy about her background, according to Henneke. We better put someone on checking that out—maybe you, Hartley, since your Caribbean Initiative case doesn't start for two months. This was all your idea in the first place. What do you know about sports law?"

"Not a lot," he admitted. He continued in his low rumble, "but I can find out. Let me talk to the athletes and get the contracts moving. I'll see what can be found out about Ms. Ana Darcy."

Benning, the chief partner, peered over his glasses at Braithwaite. "Yeah. You do that."



## CHAPTER 24

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While Darcy was going through a second day of testing Cheryl had had the time of her life visiting people in the Barbadian neighborhoods of Miami. Barbados is a small island nation, and if everyone doesn't know everyone else, everyone at least knows someone who knows everyone else. There, six degrees of separation are more like two degrees. Everywhere she went she ran into people who knew her family, knew neighbors, or were schoolmates of friends. A daunting number of them had crowded into a Barbadian-themed restaurant for lunch and filled up on flying fish, soursop punch, and those funny peas that were always a tradition at Christmas. They kidded her about talking like an American, but she gave it right back to them. Barbadians were great kidders, but also big-hearted and generous. They loved athletics, and athletes.

She'd agreed to meet Darcy in their hotel room before supper. When she walked in, Darcy was reading through a sheaf of pamphlets at the round table by the window. One cheek was bulged out from something in her mouth.

"Hoo, Darse! Look at you, girl! Where'd you get the fancy clothes?"

"Mr. Henneke took me to a mall this morning and helped me buy all sorts of stuff. There was an athletic store where he just went crazy. I'll never fit all these things into my back pack, Cheryl. We need to shop for a bigger one."

"No, girl, you need a suitcase! We'll get you one, don't worry about that. What's all that mess on the table?"

"Huh? Oh, candy wrappers. Matt gave me a nice card, with some money in it! Wasn't that sweet? I had a great time shopping for candy in the gift shop downstairs! Would you like a chocolate drop?"

"No, thanks, but hooray for Matt. So, how'd you do today?"

"OK, I guess. I ran and swam and dived and jumped and did all sorts of tricks for Mr. Henneke."

"So, what'd he say?"

"Not much. He'd just grunt and write stuff down and then he'd have me do something else. I couldn't tell if he thought I was any good or not, really."

"He liked you, girl, he had to. Why else he buy you all those clothes? You think they gonna fit you out, then kick you out? No, way, Darse. I told you, you in like Flynn! You'll see!"

"He did say we have a meeting in the morning with Mr. Braithwaite."

"That's good, but what about now? That candy ruin your appetite? Could you eat?"

"I'm starving!"

"All right! I'm gonna show you a Caribbean restaurant that will knock yo' eyes outta yo' head! We gonna party like rock stars! Get your key! Let's go!"

Hartley Braithwaite decided Chuck Henneke was the kind of self-made person he respected. Henneke had used his considerable athletic abilities to carry him from Kentucky coal mines through college and on into professional football, after which he became one of the most successful athletic scouts in the country. Braithwaite, though never an athlete despite being even larger a man than the brick-like Henneke, similarly started in a tiny wooden house in St. Lucy parish in Barbados and put himself through law school by means of prodigious labors in the sugar cane fields. His desire to never do that kind of work again propelled him to the top of his law class.

After several years of practice in Barbados, he jumped at the chance to leave behind the white wigs and black robes of Barbadian advocates to practice trade law with the up and coming Miami firm of Benning, Bynum, Caxton. He was used to proving himself on a daily basis, so being the only non-American and only black lawyer at the firm was no hardship—quite the contrary. His Caribbean contacts brought many clients to the firm, with the result that he was made a full partner in only three years. Successful as he was, he never forgot where he came from, and despite a gruff exterior and carefully cultivated formality he was always looking to encourage young people, especially Barbadians, to excel. Cheryl Ford was only his latest project. Her friend Ana Darcy might qualify as another, if she worked out. He couldn't determine whether her beginnings had been humble or not, but she was certainly humble at the moment. Cheryl told him she carried everything she owned in one backpack. He loved pluckiness and he loved an underdog.

Braithwaite and Henneke stopped chatting and stood together as Cheryl and Darcy entered the firm's smaller meeting room. Darcy saw Henneke's note pad on the table along with several other neat piles of paper. Braithwaite had a welcoming expression on his face. Henneke had no expression, as usual.

"I hope you are both well this morning," Braithwaite began.

"We are, thank you, sir," said Darcy. "And thank you for the lovely hotel room, the wonderful food, and all my clothes!"

"You are very welcome, young lady," said Braithwaite. "We'll get to the matter of those clothes and your situation shortly, but if I may I'd like to begin with Ms. Ford. If you will allow me?"

Darcy allowed, and Braithwaite and Henneke and Cheryl began going over the arrangements the firm would make for her. It sounded as if they were going to pay for all her transportation, her training at an American Olympic training facility, and handle all legal and financial matters that pertained to the Olympics as well—provided she qualified at the trials, of course. What they asked in return seemed quite modest to Darcy, amounting to endorsements and the use of her name and images. It looked as if Cheryl would have all her expenses paid for the next four or five months.

A secretary was called in to witness Cheryl's and Mr. Braithwaite's signatures. As the secretary left to make copies, Braithwaite turned to Darcy.

"Now, Ms. Darcy. May I call you Ana?" He looked at his papers. "Mr. Henneke thinks you have great potential as an Olympic athlete." Henneke continued to look like a statue. "He recommends that we sponsor you, if possible." Darcy held her breath. "I agree, based on what he told me, and I will recommend that to the partners—provided we can iron out a few details."

She realized she was staring at him. She looked down at the table top. Finally, Braithwaite continued. "You have indicated to Ms. Ford that you would be willing to be a member of the Barbadian team. Is that correct?"

Darcy nodded. "Yes, sir. I would."

"All right. Then that brings us to the question of your citizenship. What is your citizenship? That is, where were you born?"

Darcy cleared her throat, inaudibly, she hoped. "Uh, it's Canadian. I mean, I think it's Canadian."

"I see. Canadian. That's fine. So, somewhere in Canada, there is a record of your birth?"

"I don't know," she said softly. She shot a glance at Cheryl. "You see, I'm an orphan, sir. My parents are no longer living."

"Hmmm." Braithwaite paused. "I'm sorry." He looked down as Darcy's heart sank.

"Well then, we may have to resort to a certain legal nicety. I happen to be Barbadian, Ms. Darcy. I am quite familiar with Barbadian naturalization law. If the Barbadian government were to agree, you could become a citizen of Barbados after six months' residence on the island, and, assuming you qualify, take part in the Olympics as a Barbadian citizen. Would you be willing to do that?"

Darcy's eyes widened. "Yes, sir! I would! But..."

"Yes...?"

"Don't the Olympics occur in four months, four and a half months?"

"Yes, they do. That should be no problem. I will apply to the government on your behalf for a waiver of the six month residency period, and I expect it will be granted. The ministers involved are all old acquaintances of mine. But you will have to do your training there, of course, as a part of your residency. Will that be a problem for you?"

"No, sir! Thank you sir!"

"Excellent! That pleases me immensely, Ms. Darcy! Now let us discuss the details of our proposal to you..."

Cheryl clasped Darcy's hand below the table top and squeezed it hard with both of her own. "All riight!" she whispered.

The next morning Darcy waited with Cheryl in the lobby of the hotel for the taxi to take her to the flight back to Texas.

Back in the room, she only needed fifteen minutes to pack her new clothes into her new suitcase and return to the lobby to meet a second cab. The little jet would take her, Chuck Henneke, and Hartley Braithwaite to Barbados to meet with the Barbadian Olympic committee, file a petition for naturalized citizenship, and get her training regime established.

She was dragging her suitcase from the elevator to the lobby—not because it was that heavy but because she wasn't tall enough to hold it off the floor—when a handsome young bellhop rushed over.

"Miss! Miss! Please! Allow me!" he said with a smile.

She had watched the people in the lobby earlier, while she kept Cheryl company, and knew she was expected to tip the young man for his help. Fortunately, she still had some bills left from Matt's gift. She handed a couple to the man with a smile. "Thank you."

“Thank you, Miss!” the bellhop said. “I heard you are going to be in the Olympics! I bet you win a medal! Would you give me your signature, perhaps, please?”

He produced a half sheet of raffle tickets and a ball point, and handed them to her. “Make it ‘To Mario,’” he requested.

To that she added “Thanks for your help,” and signed “Ana Darcy,” giving the sheet and pen back to him with a smile.

“Mil gracias, señorita! Good luck to you in the Olympics!” he gushed, and bowed, his hand over his heart.

I guess that’s my first experience with fame, she thought—if only Mario won’t have forgotten her completely a few months from now.

## CHAPTER 25



# MAY

Darcy was stunned by the beauty of Barbados. It was just right: not too mountainous and not too jungly. From almost any point she was generally within sight of the ocean. The weather was perfect and the people welcoming. The typical greeting upon walking past a stranger was “OK,” which she soon understood to be the answer to the unasked question, “How are you?”

She eventually stopped worrying about being hunted. In Miami she and Cheryl had augmented her theatrical makeup with a latex overlay that removed the slight bend in her nose, changing her profile completely. She’d have to see if athletics affected it, but so far it worked fine. Cheryl had also approved a pair of breathable wigs that gave Darcy brownish, short curly hair. She judged Darcy now had a slightly mulatto, or maybe “third world” appearance, and it must have been true, since a clerk in a grocery store in Bridgetown, the capitol, had asked her whether she was “from India, or Trinidad?” It was silly not to simply cut her hair short and dye it, but back home that would have been unthinkable. Despite her rebelliousness of late, she still couldn’t violate that taboo.

After several days getting settled, she felt comfortably oriented in the island’s social structure. As a minor celebrity, she occasionally hobnobbed with the big shots, but she also met many ordinary people, athletes and others. She had no trouble sensing the proper way to behave. It wasn’t that different back home, where she had been a chief’s daughter and privileges were balanced with responsibilities, and order reigned.

The Barbadian Olympic committee was composed of a number of prominent gentlemen and one woman, all business people or politicians. The chairman was a distinguished and unpretentious man named Lisle Hedley, a senator and owner of one of the island's biggest rum distilleries. He put the entire first floor of his large plantation house on the north end of the island at her disposal. (He lived on the second floor, which had the better view.) The staff included a driver, a custodian, and a man whose English Darcy could barely understand who would bring her fresh coconuts cut from the trees, or other goodies from the garden. His name sounded like "Lossie," but it turned out it was spelled "Lacey."

It took a week to decide her training schedule. She had to perform yet again for Mr. Henneke, who was accompanied this time by the coach of the Barbadian team, an American named Dick Haskin, and several of his assistants. Barbados would enter wrestlers, weightlifters, bicyclists, swimmers, and a few others, and it took three or four people to train them all. Haskin was the opposite of Henneke: a florid, emotional man, he was prone to whoop and holler whenever Darcy would do something that pleased him, which seemed to be all the time. She hoped that meant she was doing well, but she wasn't sure. Strong emotions were not something she was good at reading—or showing, for that matter.

A meeting at the end of the first week nailed everything down. The big problem had been choosing her events. There were three variables: her abilities, the type of event, and the Olympic schedule itself. She would not enter any strength events—that was not her forte. Team events were out too, except for bicycling. The coaches thought her exceptional endurance and quickness would work to her advantage in the road race. Barbadians were great bicyclists, and they figured to have a strong team anyway. Darcy might be their secret weapon, but at a minimum would not be a drag on the team.

The third variable, the Olympic schedule, was the biggest problem. An event with a lot of preliminary heats might conflict with another event, especially if it had many heats as well. Henneke and Haskin had tried to measure her recovery time, though she told them it didn't matter, that she could perform in several events on the same day if she had enough to eat. They finally got a master schedule for the games and overlaid all the heats on a sheet of graph paper. They decided she could theoretically try, besides the road race, the marathon, which came at the end anyway and had no heats, the high jump, the long jump, the 100 meter race, and the 10 meter platform diving event. In most of the events that had heats, the top one or two finishers in any heat automatically qualified for the final. If Darcy were to be one of those, there would be that many fewer prelimi-

nary heats for her to participate in. When she asked if they thought she might actually do that, Henneke glanced at Haskin, who grinned from ear to ear.

Coach Haskin took her aside after one late-afternoon planning session and spoke to her in an uncharacteristically low voice. "Darcy, I don't want you to worry about this, OK? You're entering quite a few events, and quite a few totally different types of events, but that's really just to reserve a place for you later if you want it, you see? I don't want you to stress about this. If any event or events isn't working out for you, let me know. We'll get you out of it, OK?"

"I understand, Mr. Haskin. It shouldn't be a problem, but if it is I'll let you know. Thanks."

It was all very complicated, but once things were sorted out, her training schedule was enjoyable. There was lots of variety, many things to learn and think about, and she was always being driven somewhere to do something fun. She took a lot of showers and ate lots of terrific food. The team included a chef, too.

She became an island celebrity. Thanks to pictures in the local paper, the *Advocate*, most people recognized her as she ran or bicycled on the roads that wound through the cane fields and along the coasts. Typically, they would laugh and wave and greet her by name. All the athletes were reported in fulsome detail, but none more so than the "Canadian" who was going to become a Barbadian. "Dossy" was almost an institution.



## CHAPTER 26

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Not one of the four partners of B, B, C, & B complained about having a meeting late on a Friday evening. Jack Benning had even stiffed the Governor to be there. Politics could wait. This was sports! This was the law firm he founded, maybe making the world scene in sports! It was better than sex, much better. All the partners had been athletes in college, which Benning felt made them more competitive in the courtroom and the board room as well. To whatever degree that was true, it was certainly true that they all enjoyed sports.

They stopped chattering instantly when they heard the speakerphone on the table make the connection. A distorted voice boomed out, "Hello? This is Dick Haskin! Can you hear me?" Hartley Braithwaite leaned forward and turned down the volume while Al Bynum, who was so unhappy he'd missed the meeting with the athletes that he'd actually griped to Benning about it, said "Yes, Dick. We're all here. How are you?"

"I'm fine," the voice replied. "But enough small talk. I guess you want to know how your little athlete is doing after two weeks, right?"

"Indeed we do," purred Braithwaite. "How's she doing?"

"She's unbelievable!" he shouted. "Where did you find her? Does she have any brothers or sisters? Find them! Sign them up! I want to coach them! I want to adopt them! I want to give them scholarships!"

"We get the idea, Dick," said Braithwaite. "Can you give us any particulars?"

"Particulars?" he hollered. "Yeah, I can give you particulars! A coach can only dream of an athlete like her! She's going to make us famous! No one has ever heard of her, she loves being coached, she works like a horse, and her performance is off the charts! She's the quickest kid any of us have ever seen! And dive?

When she dives she hits the water like you dropped a yardstick into the pool. We can't understand how she does it, but please, find her a husband! I want to coach her children! I want...."

"Thank you, Dick," interrupted Braithwaite. "We'll be in touch. Great work. Keep it up! We may even fly down for a visit. Take care, now." He turned the volume down to barely audible and sat back and looked at his partners. His partners looked at him. They were all thinking the same thing. A couple days in Barbados—what could it hurt?

But the following week the news wasn't as good. Coach Haskin, who spent at least an hour a day pouring over printouts of performance data, was alarmed to see that in the timed events Darcy's times were decreasing consistently. By the end of the week her times were merely competitive, not unbeatable. Darcy said she felt fine, that she hadn't noticed any diminution of energy, but it was undeniably happening. The figures didn't lie.

The week after that, with the downward trend of Darcy's numbers unchanged, Haskin thought she seemed different too, a crucial bit less sharp. The team had a local physician, a prominent doctor with some sports medicine experience, on retainer, and Haskin called him. They had to get to the bottom of this, and soon.

Matt's coworkers on the paper ("cow orkers," as he called them) were relieved to see Cheryl Ford bounce into the office and drag Matt out for lunch. He had seemed preoccupied lately, but had given no indication as to what had been bothering him. They all knew the bubbly and gung-ho Cheryl and they needed nothing more than glances and eyebrows to ask each other: could there be something here? Will Cheryl bring some light to Matt's life?

But Cheryl had other things on her mind. As they sat in Matt's pickup outside the Sonic Drive-In, mashing fries in ketchup and trying not to drip it on their clothes, she finally got to the point.

"Have you heard anything from Darcy?" she asked.

"Not a word. It's like she disappeared. You?"

"No, nothing. But I 'magine she training real hard. She probably busy all day long."

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Listen, Matt. I worried 'bout her. The big lawyer at the law office that's sponsoring us called me this morning."

"Yeah? What about?"

“‘Bout Darcy. He worried too. He says her training started real good, but now it’s pretty bad. He said they’d had doctors lookin’ at her; they even flew in a big guy from the states. They can’t figure anything out.”

“Poor Darcy!” Matt swallowed and shook his head. “That’s terrible!”

Cheryl continued: “He asked me if I could use a little vacation in Barbados, maybe talk to her, see if something’s botherin’ her. Man, I can always use a little vacation in Barbados, ‘specially if someone else pays for it! I’d be gone prob’ly tree, four days. I been thinkin’, though. Me and you and Luisa is practically the only friends Darcy has, far as we know. Why don’t you come with me? You can talk to her too, maybe help cheer her up!”

Matt sat back quickly and a glob of ketchup fell into his lap. “Golly! That’d be great! But...but I can’t afford it. If I use my credit card, I’d be two years paying it off.”

“No, you doofus! I’ll call Mr. Braithwaite and tell him you’ll go with me and that it’ll help Darcy. He’ll go for your ticket too, I’m sure. Them lawyers got money they don’t know what to do with! You got a passport?”

“Um, I think so. From my grad student days. I don’t think it’s expired. I’ll check!”

Matt prayed Cheryl was right, that they could at least cheer Darcy up. For sure, he knew it would cheer *him* up.

To a west Texan like Matt, Barbados seemed like paradise. The taxi drive from the airport in the south to the opposite end of the island was a sequence of amazing and picturesque impressions: lush greenery right up to the curbs, impossibly narrow roads full of tiny zooming cars and giant lumbering buses, people walking or bicycling everywhere, cute wooden shacks that were stores, bars, or homes, gorgeous trees covered with orange flowers, quick views of a cricket ground, a harbor, a fort, and policemen wearing uniforms out of an old British movie, right down to the helmets. He nearly had a heart attack at least four times—they drove on the wrong side of the road! Every time the cab turned at an intersection and headed down the “wrong” side of the street, he was sure he was going to die.

The cab dropped Cheryl off halfway up the island at Speightstown to see her parents. The rest of the drive was faster and not so congested, and he was almost calm when the cab turned off the scenic coastal road and swayed up a steep hill to turn onto a driveway lined with poinsettias. And there she was: Darcy was sitting in the shade on the wide gallery of a magnificent house, palm trees framing the sparkling ocean behind her. As he walked up to the brightly tiled porch, a radiant smile lit up her face. She took his breath away.

"Hey."

"Matt! Hi! What are you doing here? I'm so glad to see you!" Her hug gave him chills.

Trying not to shiver visibly, he took a step back. "You look different!"

"Oh, that. Well, a lot of people seemed to be after me. I hoped this would throw them off, maybe."

"I hope so too. I wasn't sure you'd be here. I thought you might be training somewhere."

"I'm taking a day off, maybe two days. Coach wanted me to."

"How you doing?"

"I'm fine! I'm doing well. I never expected to see you here! Are you just passing through?"

"Huh? Oh, that's a joke! No—I came to see you! I came with Cheryl...we came together. She's saying hello to her parents. She'll be here in a little bit." Matt was aware that he wasn't communicating well, but he couldn't help himself. He felt his ears begin to get warm.

"Cheryl's here too? That's terrific! I can't wait to see her!"

"She'll be here before long. We dropped her off at her parents' house. Man, this is a pretty place," he added, taking in the palm trees, the sugar cane fields beyond them, and the ocean all across the horizon.

"Isn't it, though? It reminds me of home...my home, if you know what I mean." She looked up at the second floor of the house.

"It must be gorgeous," Matt said.

"It really is. Let me show you around! Do you know about coconuts, Matt? Look up there! See those? There's a man here who climbs up there and cuts one down for me whenever I want one! They're hard to open but he does it with one whack of a big knife! They're full of milk and the meat is white and sweet and delicious!"

"I know about coconuts, but I've never see them on the tree. Cool!"

"And there are two kinds of wonderful bananas growing over there, big ones and delicious little ones they call figs, and lots more stuff I'll show you later. Come inside, Matt. Just look at this house the senator let me use!"

She didn't seem to be ailing to Matt, though she may have been a little less light on her feet than before. He wasn't sure. Her face looked a bit more serious, and she might have put on a couple pounds since he'd seen her last. He finally brought it up after their tour, as they sat on the gallery sipping some exotic fruit drink out of tall glasses, without ice.

"It's so good to see you! Why in the world did you come all this way?"

"Cheryl told me she's worried about you."

"She is?"

"Yeah. She didn't go into it, but I gathered that maybe your training hasn't been going that well lately."

She looked down at her hands clasped in her lap. "Yes. Well, I guess that's true. My coach says my times are not as good as they were when I started, weeks ago. They've checked everything they can think of. There's nothing wrong with me. I'm not sick. I feel fine. I'm just not running and moving like I did. I thought I was going to win a medal, maybe, but now I'm not sure that'll happen." She looked at him quickly and then out at the ocean.

Matt didn't know what to say.

Finally she continued. "There's only one thing I can think of to do."

"What?" whispered Matt.

"Ask Hleo."

"Hleo?"

She nodded.

"You mean, you mean, that, that..."

"...the station manager, where I came from," she said, looking around the gallery.

"I thought he wouldn't talk to you. Didn't you tell me that he sort of divorced himself from you when you left?"

"Yes, he did. He still might not talk to me, but it's the only thing I can think of to try. He's one of the best doctors we have. All our people's medical data is programmed into him, including mine. This problem must have something to do with the environment here, with my coming here. Hleo might be able to compare or sort the data and figure out what it is. He's very good at that. I can't think of anything else to do."

"But, um," Matt looked around the gallery himself, "he's a long way away! How are you going to contact him?"

"Maybe you can help with that," she said, and then hesitated. "But it'll have to be later. We have another visitor."

A tiny white car was driving up the driveway. Behind the steering wheel (on the wrong side of the car) they could see Cheryl's broad smile. The horn tooted a couple pitiful beeps, the car stopped, and Cheryl jumped out and ran to hug them both.

They spent the rest of the afternoon walking around the plantation house and out buildings, looking at the poinciana trees, flowers, and vegetable garden, and sitting on the gallery. The senator had a green monkey in a cage behind the house

that Darcy fed bananas to. Cheryl couldn't make enough jokes about the exalted levels of island society Darcy had attained. When the topic moved to athletics, Darcy remained vague about her condition, but Matt didn't dare press her in front of Cheryl, who still believed her friend was some kind of Canadian run-away.

Darcy had an idea: "I have some training to do in the morning, Cheryl, but the afternoon is free. Why don't you drive us all to the other side of the island so we can show Matt how beautiful it is?"

Matt was confused—hadn't Darcy just told him she had a couple days off? When he started to say something, Darcy cut him off with a glance before he'd finished saying "But...." Cheryl interrupted anyway: "Oh, yeah! That's a great idea! That's where all we Bajans go on holiday, for picnics 'n' stuff. Let's do that! You'll love it, Matt."

At that moment Cheryl spied a pair of akee trees at the edge of a cane field. "Hey, look at those trees! They akee trees! All us school kids used to gather the fruit under them on the way home. It's not worth anything, but they delicious. Let me get you some!"

As she was searching around underneath them, collecting the hard little globes, Darcy leaned over to Matt. "I need your help in the morning. I'll send the driver for you."

## CHAPTER 27



On the flight from Barbados back to Houston Matt had plenty of time to reflect. His seatmate Cheryl seemed lost in her headphones, watching *Catwoman* on the dropdown video screen. Cheryl and Catwoman shared quite a few characteristics, Matt realized. It would be a bad idea to get in the way of either one....

He would never forget the morning he helped Darcy try to contact her station manager. She had been quite matter-of-fact about the whole business, seemingly no more troubled than if she were planning a vacation. Evidently, though, she had sorted out a large number of variables and come up with a plan that actually hadn't been too hard to carry out. Before they started, she had filled him in on what she wanted done to help things go more smoothly, and to keep him from asking so many questions.

Darcy explained that Hleo kept up a fairly regular broad-band scan of electronic signals from earth, including from the internet. But he had no need for email, since he—they, really—were forbidden to communicate with anyone on the planet. Still, if he could be given an email address and log on to some server, there was no reason other than that prohibition that he could not email himself silly. He just needed to know what email address to use, which meant that Darcy had to tell him. And in order to tell him, she had to send a signal to him that the station would detect.

It so happened that Senator Hedley's house had a transmitter that should be able to send such a signal: the satellite internet dish mounted on his second floor gallery. It was presently pointed at some particular geostationary satellite, but if the antenna could be re-aimed at the moon, and if Darcy could send a message

when it was pointed correctly, the moon station's antennas should receive it with no trouble.

The Senator was always in town during the day, but he had invited Darcy to use his computer whenever she wanted. She knew the moon was passing through the morning sky on the days Matt and Cheryl were visiting. The procedure would require two people, one to aim the antenna and one to operate the computer. Because Cheryl still thought Darcy was a Canadian, Matt was elected to be her assistant. That was more than fine with him.

Darcy sent him to the garage where the car was kept to borrow a crescent wrench and some pliers. Out on the gallery, she used a pencil to mark the mounting bracket for the antenna so they could point it exactly back at the satellite when they finished. At the computer in the Senator's study, Darcy typed in the address of one of the free email providers, opened the account she'd initiated the previous evening, and quickly typed a message. Then Matt loosened the bolts on the mounting bracket and slid the dish as best he could until it pointed more or less at the moon. Darcy sent the message. The computer gave her an "address not found" screen, but she cancelled it and had Matt point the antenna again. She sent the message a second time. Then, just to be sure, she had Matt send the message while she aimed the antenna. She had no idea what the beam width of the signal would be at the distance of the moon, but it had to be plenty wide enough. It didn't help that the moon kept moving steadily across the sky, so she repeated the procedure three times.

When they were finished, Matt carefully slid the antenna mounting back to the original pencil marks and tightened it down. Darcy then sent an email message to herself and checked to make sure she received it. Once she did, then everything was back like it was. If Hleo got the signal, he would have Darcy's new email address. If he would email that address, she should hear from him. The whole process took a little over an hour.

Sitting at the table in the house's large, and largely unused, kitchen. "Will that work, you think?" Matt asked.

She shrugged. "I hope so."

"What about that 'address not found' message?"

"That's probably because there was no server on the receiving end to return a receipt. But this antenna should still have sent the message."

"What was the message, anyway? It looked like numbers and letters to me."

"It's a simple code in Luvit, our language. I used that just to reassure Hleo that the message came from me. No one else would know that."



“Yeah, but what did you tell Hleo to get him to answer? If I’m not asking too much, that is.”

“No, that’s fine. I told him three things. First, I told him I knew he didn’t want to watch an entire planet be destroyed before his eyes. Second, I told him if he refused to help, I would probably die along with everyone else. Part of his orders were to protect me.” She rolled the pencil between her fingers and added, “Finally, I told him that, since we were all but sure that we had found our original planet, if he allowed it to be destroyed without doing anything to prevent it, the Tribal Council would never forgive him. His inaction would cut our people off from our descendants forever. The Council would revoke his license and that would be the end of Hleo. His name would become a synonym for disgrace. Disgrace would be—how do you say it? the clincher?—to Hleo. He was always a loyal servant.”

Matt had had little to say to that except to utter the wish that it would all work. The next day, before their departure, he had got his second kiss and another hug from Darcy when he said goodbye. It didn’t embarrass him to realize he was keeping track: two kisses and three hugs...and counting.

He and Cheryl were driven back to the airport where they boarded their plane and took to the skies. While Cheryl watched the movie he lost himself in thought. When Darcy had flown out of the Bar-S ranch, he had been sure he would never see her again. But miraculously, he had, and even better, she seemed to be nearly as glad to see him. The glow that feeling gave him was similar to the good feeling of knowing he had a draft of a terrific news article filed away back home. A promise was a promise, but a story was a story.

He wouldn’t see her again until after the Olympics—if then, *if* things worked out, *if* he was very, very lucky. He remembered vividly how frail her shoulders felt in his arms. He couldn’t stop thinking about her, but there was nothing he could do to help. The opening ceremony was in three weeks.

## CHAPTER 28

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### JUNE

Two weeks later Matt was still thinking. Fortunately, he had the ideal spot for it: the empty highway from El Paso to Alpine. He hadn't driven this stretch of highway for several years, but now he was getting paid to do it. Not well paid, of course.

Olympic fever finally motivated Crusty to send Matt to the Olympic training center near San Diego, California, where Cheryl was in training with a crowd of other track and field athletes. Once Cheryl officially made the Barbadian team, Coach Pérez had spread the news around town, making a splash on the campus and pleasing some of the more important alumni and backers of the athletic program. Crusty was only too happy to oblige them and have Matt write a piece about it.

Matt proposed driving to El Paso and hopping a plane to San Diego, where he could stay with an aunt and uncle, sparing the newspaper the high cost of lodging and even some meals. Crusty accepted, as long as Matt also took plenty of pictures (to save the cost of a photographer). He added, "Don't get any ideas about going to Ireland, though. We'll use pool coverage for that."

Matt went to El Paso a day early so he could drive on through to Las Cruces, New Mexico, fifty miles beyond El Paso, and visit his aging grandmother Reyes Méndez. Nearing 80, she lived by herself in a modest house along the banks of the Rio Grande, among the onion and chili fields. Sitting on her back porch looking across the river to the sandy foothills of the desert and the stark moun-

tains beyond brought back images of his childhood. She was aging gracefully, but she badly needed someone to help out around the place. When he left, she gave him a bag of fresh chilis to take to her son and daughter in law in San Diego.

There still had been no news of Darcy. He had no idea if her station manager had answered her greeting, if he had been able to help diagnose her condition, or if her performance times had got better or worse. And he'd been too addled when he was there to ask Darcy for her email address. That was one thing he planned to ask Cheryl about.

Cheryl was happy to see him, even though she was preoccupied with her vigorous training and her athletic companions. She met him for dinner at one of the nicer chain restaurants off campus from the training center. They found a quiet table in a corner of the patio, with a busy street a few yards away and low hills dotted with palm trees in the near distance. Cheryl seemed to be in top shape, her taut chocolate skin radiating energy, her shoes rocking on the toes under the table.

She had filled Matt in on her training activities and life in the "village" as they walked to the restaurant. After they had ordered their food, Matt asked her about the upcoming trip to Ireland.

"Most all of us are leaving at the end of next week," she replied. "It'll take a day to get there, and then we supposed to take a day or two to get settled in the Olympic village outside Dublin and get over the jet lag. We'll be on a light training schedule after that—don't wanna overdo it!"

"No, I guess not," Matt replied, knowing nothing at all about world class athletic training. He looked at a group of people two tables over, chatting happily while the sunlight filtered through the green plastic roof over their heads, making them look like sickly zombies in a 1950s movie. "Have you heard anything from Darcy?"

"No, I haven't, and I don't like that. I still worried about her. When we were there I thought she looked off her game a little, you know? You notice that?"

"Maybe. She did look different, but it could have been her hair."

She snorted. "Matt, you a guy, that's all. You probably not notice if she missing a leg. I jes' had a feeling that she not right, somehow. But she wouldn't say nothing about it."

"What about your parents? Or your friends on the island? Hasn't anybody said anything?"

"Oh, yeah. The team lookin' good, they say. But that's because the papers say that. They always say that. I asked Mr. Braithwaite specifically 'bout Darcy. He just say she fine and they expect her to do well, that's all."

"Well...you'll be joining the Barbadian team when you get to Ireland, right?"

"Yeah, that's right. I'll see her then, see if she still look down or maybe she better then."

"Hey, will you have email?"

"Now you know, that a funny thing. They tell us that we gonna be in the Olympic village and we supposed to stay in the Olympic village, 'less we go somewhere in a group. Apparently that because all kind of low-life people want to talk to us, you know, like, maybe, reporters?" She looked sideways at him. "And maybe gamblers, or maybe just plain kooks. And they don't want us disturbed. We supposed to concentrate on what we doing. So they say no email, and not hardly no telephone. We can write letters, that's 'bout all."

She paused while a waiter delivered their plates.

"But I tell you," she leaned toward him and lowered her voice. "They a couple athletes here been to several Olympics before this. And they say they know ways 'round stuff like that. They call their families and everything."

She began cutting her chicken into bites. "So how 'bout this? You give me your phone number, and if I get the chance, maybe I can call you, probably collect. But you gotta promise not to blab that you been talking to Cheryl Ford, you hear?"

"I promise," Matt had said. He was already sitting uncomfortably on the really big story. What was one more smaller story?

He slowed his truck slightly as he rolled through the tiny whistle stop of Valentine, famous every February. No doubt about it, he was coming down with a case of Olympic fever. Heretofore, he'd only cared about football and soccer, but now track and field were occupying his thoughts more and more. To be sure, it was because he cared about two of the athletes. He found he cared a lot. Worrying about one of them was keeping him awake nights. But the only thing he could think of to do was to call the cable TV company in town and have them hook him up. He'd figure out how to pay for it later.

## CHAPTER 29



# JULY

Hartley Braithwaite's collateral duty as a sports impresario was getting off to a mixed start. On the one hand, things looked promising for their swimmer, Lol-lar, and the runner Cheryl Ford. On the other hand, he'd had conflicting and none too good news about Ana Darcy, the law firm's wild card for their medal hopes. The partners had been telling those who asked that they were pleased with the athletes they were sponsoring and expected they would have a good chance of success, which was true enough as far as it went. They stressed that the bottom line was promoting excellence and good will in the world, and that was true too. But that by itself wasn't "sufficient," to Braithwaite's legal mind. Good will had its place, but for the investment his law firm was making, and for his involvement in that investment on behalf of his partners, he deeply wanted a more tangible return.

"Dr. Hashmi, the nationally-known sports physician, has said he can find nothing organically wrong with Ms. Darcy," he reported to them. "He told me she had requested some dietary supplements—enzymes, herbs, or similar substances which he deemed harmless—and that he was fortunately able to obtain these for her speedily. He would not vouch for their efficacy. However, the fact that Ms. Darcy seemed grateful may be return enough on their modest cost."

Coach Haskin told him she was training harder than ever, and was in good spirits. There was nothing more to be asked, and, after all, Braithwaite was not

one to butt in. Realistically, all he could do was watch, wait, and hope for the best, along with the other partners.

Fifteen hundred miles to the southeast, Darcy was trying her best to appear optimistic, but inwardly she was churning. She was in a dilemma. If she performed poorly she would be forgotten immediately and her whole mission would be in jeopardy, since it would take considerable lead time to mount an operation to divert one or both meteoroids. On the other hand, if she performed well enough to attract notice, what would she do then? Nor was she looking forward to the crowds that other athletes welcomed to spur their performances. So far, her track record with large groups of people had been anything but happy.

At least Hleo had come through. After his brief acknowledgement of her first message, she had emailed him the data the doctors had collected on her. Twenty four hours later he had sent a reply mentioning synapses, energy conversion, and other abstruse things that she could barely follow. He recommended that she ingest several enzymes, and described their molecular structure. Dr. Hashmi, the sports doctor, seemed dubious about her request for them, claiming rather haughtily never to have heard of nutritional supplements like that. Darcy was inclined by nature and recent experience to maintain a low profile, but this time she made the biggest scene of which she was capable, throwing a regular hissy fit. The doctor finally said he'd consult with some pharmacologists and see what could be arranged.

Two days later he presented her with an express package containing several preparations which were as close to the compounds she had requested as could be found. He said he couldn't speak for what they might do for her or to her, but he was sure they were not the kinds of things that would present problems on drug tests. Just in case, there would be time to confirm that in the week or so before Darcy left with the team for Ireland. Using Hleo's recommendations for dosage, she began taking the enzymes.

She was not sleeping well. It would have helped if only she had someone nearby she trusted and could confide in—and who could keep an eye on her in return. It was a novel feeling. She had lived a long, long time with no friends at all and no particular need of any. But given her current predicament in this unfamiliar, dangerous world, a friend to share her burden would have been a great comfort. Life here was so complicated! Cheryl qualified—Cheryl missed nothing and never failed to say what she thought—but she was far away, and involved in her own training program. Matt had so far proven trustworthy and willing to help every time she had asked, but he too was far away and involved in his own

affairs. She had no choice but to struggle along by herself for now, even as it was dawning on her that her life would be more pleasant and possibly more fruitful if she could share some of her precious independence with a true friend.

Matt had been surprised at the number of townspeople who had read and remembered the piece he had written about Cheryl Ford and her training in California. Some of that had to do with civic pride, he figured, and some was a result of the increasing media coverage during the runup to the games themselves. National magazines and television programs were running more and more “what to look for at the Olympics” pieces, and favored athletes from all over the world were coming into their fifteen minutes of fame. Matt had even seen Cheryl Ford mentioned several times in the national media, though Darcy remained totally below the radar, understandably enough.

He hadn’t expected to hear from Cheryl, but nevertheless, her silence made him even more nervous for Darcy. He was not particularly religious and he didn’t consider himself superstitious, but just in case, he put a votive candle on top of his television and lit it every night, in front of one of Darcy’s wanted posters.

He continued to do a little basic background investigating, just to keep his eventual blockbuster article up to date. He looked in on several people who knew Cheryl. There was Coach Pérez, who became visibly excited talking about Cheryl and her competitors. Next Matt filled Dr. Sledd in on how Darcy was planning put his advice into action. The professor vowed to finally hook up his videocassette recorder and figure out how to use it before the Olympics started. Matt also dropped in on the Delbosques, who were great fans of Cheryl, their big sister’s good friend. They hadn’t known what had happened to Darcy after the last raid, and were amazed to hear she not only had escaped but would be in the Olympics. The children promised to watch all the broadcast coverage they possibly could in hopes of seeing both of their friends.

“She looks different now,” Matt warned them. “Her hair is short and brown and her nose looks straighter. That’s so those men won’t recognize her, you know?”

“Un disfraz,” muttered Gus. “Buena idea. Pendejos, La Migra” (“A disguise—good idea. The sorry bastards”).

The cable guy, actually a rangy young woman, came to hook up Matt’s TV approximately on time. She ogled Matt shamelessly, and ordinarily Matt might have been interested...but not now, not with Darcy on his mind day and night.

Once he had bought a six pack of videocassettes, he figured he was as ready as he could be. So why could he not settle down? And would Cheryl ever call?



## CHAPTER 30

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# AUGUST

Darcy didn't get to see much of Ireland on the bus from the airport to the Olympic village. The crowds, noise, buildings, vehicles, television lights, flash cameras, and general hullabaloo nearly caused her sensory overload. She had always paid careful attention to her surroundings, but there had been so much input in that brief three hours that she found it hard to register anything properly, and even to speak coherently if spoken to. Fortunately, everyone around her was so excited that no one noticed her silently gripping her seat almost in shock.

It was better once the team finally reached its suite of rooms in their dorm in the village. The twenty team members had been assigned the entire end of one floor. Despite the unsettling scent of fresh paint in the air, the rooms were cool and welcoming—Darcy's especially, since Cheryl was there waiting for her with a big smile on her face.

There was no time to talk, what with all the whooping and horseplay up and down the hall, but once the team had unpacked, the group went for a walk around the village as night fell. When Cheryl finally got a chance to ask how she was doing, Darcy simply said she felt fine. She did look all right to Cheryl, though maybe a little reserved. Cheryl sympathized. She felt the same tension, though her response was to become even more outgoing than usual. This was not an option for Darcy, a total stranger to competitive athletics, after all, not to mention the object of some kind of man hunt. Cheryl stayed as close to Darcy as she could the first few days, keeping an arm draped around her shoulders and

peppering her with helpful hints and wisecracks. Darcy responded as best she could. Cheryl detected she still had a sense of humor, even if she was scared out of her wits. She also was honest enough to be thankful she and Darcy wouldn't be competing against each other in any event. She loved her odd little friend dearly, and she really didn't want to know which of them might best the other.

The schedule for the next day included an orientation meeting, a team meeting, and a publicity tour of the Dublin area. The day after that there was only one event: the opening ceremony.

The Delbosque family, with the exception of Gus, who was on the back porch applying saddle soap to a saddle mounted on a saw horse, gathered for the broadcast of the Olympic opening ceremony. The whole family loved a spectacle, and those who designed this one had outdone themselves. There were fireworks, bands, flag corps, video clips of memorable Olympic performances, the lighting of the Olympic flame, and not too many speeches—a good two hours of solid entertainment (punctuated by commercials).

When the parade of athletes began Maria and Clara and Jerry ran to fetch their father, who cared little for colorful symbolism but who was eager to see the actual people who might become familiar in the following two weeks. The procession was led as always by Greece, but Barbados was not far behind. As the blue and yellow Barbadian flag with its trident came into camera range, held proudly by a radiant, muscular young man, Maria and Clara began screaming, "There's Barbados! There's Barbados!" Then Cheryl Ford appeared, tall and smiling and waving, striding jauntily along. Jerry clapped and Luisa hugged him close.

"Where's...?" Clara wondered, as Maria interrupted: "There she is! There she is!" And there was Darcy, in the middle of the small troupe of athletes, looking, Luisa thought, very hesitant indeed, glancing from side to side, almost smiling, scanning the stands constantly, only occasionally giving a half wave to the crowd. She did look different, dusky, almost, no longer pale, still small.

And then they were gone, their place taken in succession by Belarus, Belgium, and Belize. Enraptured at the spectacle, the children clapped for each team's entry. Gus stood up. Rather than stay for Bolivia, Botswana, Chile, and a hundred others, he decided to go wipe off the saddle soap he had applied. It would be quite a while until the United States of America marched into view.

Matt was having a damnable time catching the broadcasts of events having to do with Cheryl and Darcy. He left his videocassette recorder taping while he was working, but he'd never thought to look for the broadcast schedule. Relying on

what the announcers and commentators were saying about what was coming up was driving him crazy. He'd bought another six pack of cassettes, and spent hours each evening rewinding what he'd already recorded and watching it on fast forward. There had to be a better way, dammit!

His quality of life made a quantum improvement once he realized he could print out the schedule of events online at a computer at the newspaper office. He made a mental note to buy his own computer, adding a mental asterisk to find a way to pay for it.

The printout, done at Crusty's expense, took eight pages—so many events! He'd never realized! With its help he saw immediately that the ones he was most interested in did not take place in the first few days. Thus he was able to save some videotape, just catching the barest glimpse of badminton, shooting, and handball, worthy as he was sure those were.

He managed to see Cheryl's qualifying heat for the 10,000 meters, which she won handily, finishing with her characteristic exuberance, waving to the crowd and hugging the other runners. But then, while fast forwarding through some late-night taping, he thought he saw Darcy standing by some starting blocks. He stopped the tape and backed up. Sure enough, there she was, standing calmly among six or seven taller women, most of them nervously jumping up and down or shaking their limbs. As he watched, the runners set themselves in the blocks and took off down the track. Darcy, her legs a blur, won by a foot or two. It was a 100 meter race! Whoa! He thought Cheryl had said Darcy was a distance runner! What the hell?

The schedule told him when the events would be, but it didn't list the athletes participating in a given event. He had no idea what events Darcy was in.

He made it a point to drop by the university and ask Coach Pérez the next morning. "Good question," she nodded, and turned to her computer. After a few minutes of clicking away, she sat back and said "Hmmm. This can't be right."

"What can't be right?"

"I dialed up the official Olympic website and searched for her name. She's shown as a member of the Barbadian team. So I searched for all events with Barbadians in them and then searched those hits just for Darcy. Look at this! It shows she's in six different events! How can that be?"

"Is that unusual?" asked Matt.

"No, not always. Not for some athletes and some events. Swimmers, for example. They often swim in lots of events. Remember Mark Spitz, who won what, six or seven medals? But those were all in the pool. Darcy's shown here in six totally

different events, or at least three or four different types of events. Look: the 100 meters, which is an all-out sprint, the marathon and the bicycle road race, both endurance events, the high jump and long jump, and then platform diving, for heaven's sake. No one has ever competed in all those different kinds of events, not that I'm aware of. This schedule must be incorrect!"

"I was going to ask you about that next," said Matt. He handed Coach Pérez the videotape he'd made. "Take a look at this. I taped it two nights ago."

They watched Darcy run her 100 meter sprint again. "Look at that!" said the coach. "Her form really isn't that good. She doesn't have the musculature of the typical sprinter, not at all. You can see she's hardly down in the starting blocks, though she gets an excellent start, right at the gun, a half step ahead of everyone else. She doesn't have the thighs to really rip out of the blocks, but once she gets moving she picks up speed quickly and stays right with the leader until the last twenty meters, when she barely pulls ahead. Amazing!"

"Let the tape keep going," said Matt. "Listen to the announcers."

There were two, a regular sports announcer and a color guy. When Coach Pérez pressed play again, the main announcer was saying, "...on the Barbadian team. We don't know a lot about her, I don't think. What's her story, Howard?"

Howard, the color commentator, took his turn: "You're right, Don, we don't. We know she's down for quite a number of events, including, if you can believe it, the marathon, the long jump, and 10 meter platform diving. The Barbadian coach told me she'll take part in all of them, but you have to wonder. She couldn't possibly be competitive in all those events. Maybe it's part of the team strategy, or maybe it has something to do with local politics—we just don't know. But we do know one thing, Don: she can run the 100 meters with the best of them."

Coach Pérez pressed the stop button and looked at Matt. "Well, I gotta agree with ole Howard, I think. I can't imagine that one person could be a contender in all those types of events. But unlike Howard, I have seen her run with my own eyes. I've never seen an athlete quite like her."

"I haven't either," said Matt. "Uh, coach? Would you mind printing me a copy of Darcy's event schedule?"

"I'd be happy to," she replied. "I'll print one for me too!"

## CHAPTER 31

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The next day, Matt was ready at his television. Just before breakfast, Alpine time, he watched Darcy win the second preliminary heat of the 100 meter race. It went much like the first, with one of the same two announcers from before observing, “In just three hours, Ms. Darcy is scheduled to ride in the bicycle road race, Art. You have to wonder if she’ll actually show up, and if she does, whether she’ll be able to keep up. So far no one’s talking about the strategy of Team Barbados.” Matt was wondering that too.

She did show up. Matt stared in total absorption, forgetful of his lunch of hamburger and fries congealing on the table in front of him, as Darcy wheeled out into the Irish countryside along with innumerable fellow racers. In fifteen minutes, the peloton, or pack of riders, had spread out into a long procession with Darcy among the half dozen leaders. He had never seen her on a bicycle before—didn’t even know she could ride—but she was easy to follow, astride what looked to be a small frame bicycle and wearing a bright blue and yellow racing suit with a yellow helmet, like her other team members.

The race progressed up and down hills, down long stretches of straight road and around mountainous curves with drop-offs that looked lethal to anyone who couldn’t stay on the road. Other team Barbados members, similarly clad, surged up to the leaders or fell back in turn, evidently out of some kind of strategy Matt could not follow, but Darcy remained up front with the other four or five leaders.

The race took hours. Matt could hardly stand to take a bathroom break, but he had to, twice, hastening back to the television as soon as possible. The aerial shots from a helicopter were beautiful—the Irish countryside was spectacularly gorgeous. Occasionally a television camera mounted on a car driving perilously

close to the riders would show Darcy close up. He recognized the familiar shape of her face, her feet pedaling swiftly and steadily, seemingly as untiring as any of the other riders. How could anyone do that that long, he wondered.

The announcers, a different pair this time, a regular TV sports person and a former woman bicycle racer, began speculating what would happen when the group reached the last major challenge of the race, one of the more formidable hills on the course. Their astonishing consensus was that the hill would determine who would win the race. Duh! thought Matt.

He couldn't judge the steepness of the climb from the television picture. The pace had evidently slowed, because several of the spectators were able to run alongside some riders briefly and cheer them on. No one was running next to Darcy, but she was moving up on the rider in front of her. She passed that woman and gained on the next. The announcers found this significant. She passed another, and they found that exciting. She passed a third as the motorized camera zoomed in on her, and both announcers thought this stupendous. The female commentator pointed out that only three hours earlier Darcy had qualified for the 100 meter finals and no one expected her to be competitive in the bicycle race as a result, but "obviously, she had a different idea." She was pedaling just as steadily as she had all along, and with the same serious expression on her face. The camera showed the last rider in front of Darcy looking back over her shoulder and then lowering her head and pumping so hard her bicycle swayed from side to side.

Slowly, steadily, Darcy gained on her; she pulled even with her; she had passed her. For the first time in three hours of riding she was in the lead. The announcers were shouting as though the finish were just ahead instead of another three miles away. Darcy didn't look back or to either side: she kept pedaling and lengthening her lead.

When she crossed the finish line, the woman Darcy had passed had fallen back to fifth place, apparently exhausted. The woman in second place was a half mile behind Darcy. The announcers were beside themselves. Matt stood up so fast he knocked his soda over. He hollered "All riight!" but the crowd at the finish line seemed stunned. The favored team, whose supporters were crowded around the finish line, had come in a distant second, and the winning team had come, it seemed, out of nowhere.

The medal ceremony followed within the hour. The Barbadian team members on the highest platform in the center were almost delirious with joy. Matt imagined that Darcy was hugged and kissed more than she had ever been in her entire life. They finally calmed down for the playing of the Barbadian national anthem,

but as soon as the last notes died away, the celebration resumed. Matt could tell, even at his distance, that Darcy was at a loss about what to do next.

## CHAPTER 32

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Benning, Bynum, Caxton, Braithwaite were collectively filled with great joy, and not a little relief, none more so than Hartley Braithwaite. They were in their own meeting room in their own building, and by golly, if they wanted to smoke cigars they would smoke cigars. Bynum and Caxton actually lit up—Benning and Braithwaite merely smiled and acquiesced, out of expansive good humor. Gary Lollar had won a silver medal in an individual swimming event and a gold in a relay, Cheryl Ford had just won the gold medal for the 10,000 meters, and their long shot Ana Darcy had snagged a cycling gold medal out of the blue for Barbados. Benning, Bynum, Caxton, Braithwaite's athletes were four for three. Life was good!

Like much of the rest of the world, however, they were curious about what the enigmatic Ms. Darcy would do next. The morning after the bicycle race she was scheduled to run in the 100 meter finals, and that afternoon the high jump event began. The day after that she was to start the long jump, and the day after that, although it seemed impossible, she was scheduled for the preliminaries of the 10 meter diving event. The announcers at the affected venues were beginning to take increasing notice.

The next morning all four partners showed up without complaint at the unlawyerly hour of 7:30 am to gather before the television cart in their meeting room. Mrs. Anderson, the secretary, had splurged on a catered breakfast without even asking Jack Benning if he wanted it. She hovered in the background with an eye on the screen, where a 400 meter women's semifinal heat was taking place. As it ended and cut to a commercial break, the commentators dropped a teaser: "When we come back, we'll go to the finals of the women's 100 meter race in



Dublin's Olympic stadium. We'll see if the favored American, DeShawn Williams, and the other favorite, Miriam Mkeba from Kenya, can be challenged by the Barbadian Ana Darcy, who just won gold in the cycling road race. It seems unlikely that a cyclist could stay in there with the fastest women in the world, especially after her grueling victory, but we'll soon find out. First, these messages...."

The partners hastened to pour their coffee and select some food before the commercials ended. Mrs. Anderson had never seen lawyers this nervous before. "Cool" was their normal professional demeanor. But now, they were not cool.

When the commercials ended, all talk in the room ceased. The screen showed the eight runners, Darcy in a middle lane, by far the shortest and lightest. The banner with her four digit number on it wrapped so far around her chest that only three numbers could be seen at a time. The camera panned across the group slowly as the announcers identified the runners and provided a couple details about each for the audience. Darcy's team gold medal of the previous day was mentioned, the color commentator adding, "Darcy's favored position in one of the middle lanes was earned from her fast time in the qualifying heat, but that was run before the bicycle race. It remains to be seen if she has anything left for this all-out sprint. And now, the runners get set...."

At some signal inaudible to the partners in the room, the runners stopped jumping and quivering and began to set themselves in their starting blocks, placing their hands with exaggerated care on the track. Darcy backed into her blocks and kneeled with little fuss, setting her spread fingers down easily. Another inaudible signal, and all the women raised up off their knees, put their rears in the air, and their heads down. Then there was a sharp crack, and they took off—except Darcy, who stood up calmly and glanced to one side.

Before anyone could register surprise there was another bang and the runners broke stride and slowed to a stop. "A false start!" hollered the announcer. "One of the runners left too soon! But Ana Darcy, in lane 4, didn't leave the blocks at all, Art! Let's see the slow motion replay of that. Yes, there it is—the Kenyan, Miriam Mkeba, in lane 5, left a fraction of a second too soon. But note that Darcy, next to her, never left the blocks at all. She stood up just as the starting gun went off. Does that mean that she wasn't going to try to run, that she used up everything she had on the bicycle? Or maybe she has a pulled muscle...she's looking very serious right now. Maybe she's hurt. We'll have to see if she takes her place for the restart of this race, or if she simply leaves the track."

The runners repeated their elaborate positioning and tensed for the gun once again. When it went off, everyone shot out of the blocks, Darcy included. At the

ten meter point she was a step ahead of the American next to her. At twenty five meters she was two steps ahead and visibly accelerating. At the finish line she was a good eight meters ahead of the second place American, her legs a blur.

The race clock showed a time of 9.6 seconds. At first, the crowd and even the announcers sat in stunned silence. They had just seen a new world record set by a full six tenths of a second, an unbelievably huge margin in such a short race. Darcy was congratulating the American silver medalist and the other runners around her, but as the magnitude of what they had seen sank in, the crowd finally began shouting and applauding.

The announcers were shouting too, to be heard over the crowd. "That's amazing, Art! Let's see that again, with the clock superimposed." They ran the tape of the race again, in slow motion, twice, from different angles. When they finished the crowd was still standing and applauding. Someone pressed a Barbadian flag into Darcy's hands. She looked as though she didn't know what to do with it. The American runner pushed her into a victory lap and accompanied her all the way around the track.

Benning, Bynum, Caxton, Braithwaite looked at each other with solemn faces, then back at the screen, as if that might explain something. Finally, Jack Benning stood up. After about ten seconds, he sat back down. He swiveled his chair to face the plate glass overlooking the bay. Then he swiveled to face the table. Bynum was looking at his coffee, Caxton at the television. Only Braithwaite met Benning's gaze. "What the hell was that, Hartley?" he said. Braithwaite's face didn't change.

Coach Pérez couldn't stop thinking about the images of Darcy winning both the bicycle race and the 100 meter race. It defied logic. Yet it had happened and she had seen it. She had no explanation. She realized even though she had seen Darcy had run many a lap around the school track, she didn't know a thing about her. That Matt Méndez guy had been the one to ask her about Darcy in the first place. He was a reporter—he must have had his reasons. She'd put him on the spot.

She left a message for him at the newspaper, and he showed up at her office right about the time she had asked him to, in the middle of the afternoon.

"Hi! What's up?" he asked.

"I'll get to that in a minute," she replied. "Let's watch this, now."

On the TV screen, two commentators in sport coats and ties were talking, the red oval of the field and the stands visible behind them. When Coach Pérez turned up the volume, one of them was saying "...is the favorite, from Belarus.

Also, we shouldn't rule out the American jumper Cindy Clinton, from Texas, who jumped near record distances in the trials last month. And everyone's waiting to see perhaps the oddest long jumper we've seen in a while, Ana Darcy, from Barbados. Her team won the gold medal in the cycling road race, and only this morning she won the gold in the 100 meters, setting a world record that is likely to stand for a long time. That record would have been remarkable by itself, but combined with the road race, it makes for a sensational athletic achievement. Now she's entered in the women's long jump, and Sandra Ascot is down on the field with her. Sandra?"

Matt straddled a chair and stared at the screen. Sandra was wearing a green blazer and black slacks, standing in front of the high jump pit where a tall brunette jumper could be seen in the background, rocking back and forth on her feet and getting ready to launch herself down the runway. Next to Sandra was Darcy, on a bench, wearing a warm-up jacket and pants and tugging at the laces on her shoes.

"Right, Kurt. I'm here with Ana Darcy." Sandra sat on the bench. "Ana, those were two unbelievable performances on two successive days. No one has ever medaled in both those events before! How do you think you will do in this third event?"

"OK, I hope," Darcy murmured.

"You're scheduled for several more grueling events. Do you have anything left for them?"

"I don't know. I hope so." Darcy was concentrating on her laces.

"To what do you attribute your extraordinary performances?" Sandra asked, hopefully.

"Coach Haskin," she said. "He's the best coach I ever had."

"Well, there it is. We'll let you get ready for your first jump. Good luck!" Sandra said, standing and facing the camera again. "You heard it, Paul. She gives all the credit to her coach. We'll see how she does in this first heat of the long jump. Back to you, Paul."

Matt and Coach Pérez watched Darcy walk to the landing pit, unzipping her jacket. She dropped it on the ground and stepped out of the warm-up pants. She was wearing a snazzy blue and yellow two piece track suit. Matt's heart thumped—the uniform designer for Team Barbados needed a medal too, in his opinion.

She studied the pit for several seconds and then walked down to the starting pad, where she squatted on one leg and then the other, stretching the tendons in her legs. Then she stepped onto the pad and looked at something off screen,

apparently at a judge or a light or a flag or something, Matt figured. Finally, she looked down at the track in front of her, took a couple breaths, and began running.

She accelerated rapidly, taking long, quick steps, reached the takeoff area, and launched herself, pedaling a couple times in midair and landing with her legs under her, her momentum carrying her forward as the judges marked the landing spot.

The announcer, who had been talking right up to the moment Darcy stepped onto the runway, started in again: "That was a good jump, Gary! A great jump! There's no red light, no foul. There's the distance: 7.3 meters, just one tenth short of an Olympic record! That one jump will all but certainly put her in the finals, Gary! It looks like after those other two events, this athlete still has something left!"

The slow motion replay showed Darcy's foot touching down a good third of a meter short of the foul line.

Coach Pérez turned the volume down on the television and looked at Matt. She shook her head. "I'm having trouble believing what I'm seeing, Matt. I've seen all kinds of athletes over the years, and worked with some of the best. But I've never seen anything like this. I'd have said it wasn't possible, except that we've just seen it done. You've written several stories about Cheryl Ford. Why not one about Darcy? I mean, you know her. What's the deal with her? How about it, Matt?"

"Umm, well," stammered Matt. He needed to be careful. "You remember several months ago when there was all that ruckus up around Fort Davis with federal agents chasing some alien on the loose?"

Coach Pérez nodded slowly.

"You remember the 'missing' posters of the woman that were put up around town?"

Another nod, and then her mouth literally dropped open. "Are you telling me...? You mean...?"

It was Matt's turn to nod. "Yeah. It was Darcy. She hid out from them for a while, disguised herself, came to Alpine. I sort of helped her hide. She and Cheryl Ford met while they were running on the track."

"Wait. I still don't get it. Who is she? How come she can run like that? And jump?"

"I don't know," Matt replied. "I'm as amazed as you are. But they're still looking for her, so I don't think a big article in the newspaper would be a good idea right now."

“I’ve never heard of a little blonde alien before, Matt. We don’t get many like that around here. My grandmother was an alien, and she didn’t look anything like Darcy. Why were they after her, Matt? Really?”

Matt shrugged and shook his head. He didn’t dare say anything.

Coach Pérez continued: “Maybe she’s a clone or a mutant who escaped from a lab somewhere. Illegal aliens don’t normally take multiple gold medals in the Olympics. This is spooky, Matt. What’s the deal?”

Matt shrugged again. “I can’t say.” That, at least, was the truth.

## CHAPTER 33



None of the partners of Benning, Bynum, Caxton, Braithwaite had proved smart enough to follow the all-Olympics, all-the-time broadcast schedule the cable channel was providing. Once Gary Lollar and Cheryl Ford finished competition, all that remained was to see how their fascinating long shot, Ana Darcy, would fare. This turned out not to be a simple matter at all. She was in so many events, and the events had so many preliminary heats at odd times, that it seemed they were being televised around the clock. The partners grumbled bitterly all day long, until Mrs. Anderson rescued them with a brilliant idea: put an intern in charge of taping everything that had anything to do with Darcy, and show the tape in the evening, before they headed home. It became a tradition from the first night they tried it.

The intern couldn't believe he was actually getting paid to do this.

On the second evening, as they were assembling and pouring their drinks, Jack Benning, the lead partner, had been talking about the odd atmosphere taking over the Olympics. "Late last night I caught a little of what we're going to see now, at that reception at the Mayor's house. They weren't talking politics for once. Everyone there was talking about Ana Darcy. His honor wanted to know how our firm had found her. I told him to ask you, Hartley, but to wait until it was over. We really don't know squat about her, do we, Hartley?"

"Well, we know she's Barbadian. We know she has a small collection of gold."

"Yeah, that's what I mean: we know doodly. But anyway, I was going to say, after Anita and I got home from the mayor's party we watched a little of the diving prelims. Anita's caught up in it too. She says there's just something about that

kid that gets to her. She feels drawn to her. The stands over there were jammed with people, all wanting to see if this tiny, shy young woman could also dive. I mean, we felt the excitement through the screen. We'll all see it here in a minute." He paused to swirl his scotch, and then looked at Braithwaite over his half-glasses.

"I won't spoil it for you, except to mention that my gut is telling me this Darcy thing might be really, really big. I don't know exactly in what way, but my sense is that it'll involve this firm and, probably, money. Lots and lots of money." He paused again. No one swirled anything.

"It might behoove us to get a jump on it. Henneke and Haskin said Ana Darcy was from nowhere, made no calls, owned nothing, had no money. That is almost certainly going to change, for her and us too, come to that. Hartley, why don't you and Dick do some preliminary heats of your own and set up some contracts and accounts so we'll be ready to move if and when the time comes?"

Caxton, the contract man, glanced at Braithwaite. "Good idea. You bet; we can do that."

"Good," said Benning. "Now let's watch some sports."

It took only fifteen minutes for the partners to see Darcy easily qualify in a high jump preliminary heat, and then, several hours later but only a minute on their tape, win a gold medal on another part of the field with a long jump of 7.8 meters, another world record. The announcer explained, for the benefit of backward Americans, that that was "almost two feet" beyond the old record. The people in the stands were going crazy: the security team around the track were clearly nervous that there would be a stampede onto the field. But that didn't happen. Darcy was escorted off immediately. The field announcer said she was headed to the swimming and diving venue, where the women's 10 meter platform event was about to start. The anchorman added that she would be returning to the track again immediately after the diving—the finals of the high jump were in the late afternoon. He recommended everyone stay tuned.

The intern looked at a note pad and began fast forwarding.

"That's three," said Bill Braxton. There was a pause. Two partners looked at him. Benning was pouring himself some more scotch. "Three gold medals," he added, helpfully.

The intern pressed play and the screen revealed an impossibly lofty, cold looking concrete structure with several platforms on it projecting over a crystal blue pool. Another shot, evidently taken earlier, showed what the water below looked like from the top platform. Braithwaite heard one of the partners mutter "Jesus Christ!" The next screen showed a roster of divers, and that dissolved to one of a

lean, muscular Asian woman standing at the back of the top platform. The camera was at pool level, and her body was foreshortened, but her concentration was obvious. She looked to the end of the platform, came to attention, and then began running forward swinging her arms stiffly at her sides, palms straight. She leaped into the air, did something utterly impossible in the blink of an eye, and splashed into the pool. An underwater camera showed her pushing off the bottom, and the next shot showed her climbing out of the pool and drying herself off.

Benning whispered, "I love diving."

The announcers were full of consolation for the woman and her apparently disappointing dive—she looked at the water too soon, she started her spin late, the splash was too big...it was all complicated for mere lawyers, even with the slow motion replay. Finally her points came up and that was also complicated. The dive had been worth some number of points, which had been multiplied by numbers for her performance from a panel of judges, some numbers had been thrown out and the rest averaged, and the result was...well, it was complicated. But it hadn't been the best of dives.

By that time, another woman was on the top platform, a strong, healthy-looking Latvian blonde. She was also concentrating at the back of the platform. Bynum whispered to Benning, "I do too."

The intern cleared his throat diplomatically. "Do you want me to fast forward to our diver?" he said. Benning liked that: "Our diver!" All the partners spoke as one, rather more curtly than necessary, "No!"

So, diver followed diver. Finally, Darcy's turn came. The camera showed her standing on the little elevator being lifted to the top platform, as the announcers summarized her earlier medal performances. Both had been divers at one time, and the man, a pudgy, balding, bespectacled fellow named Hal, pointed out "Ms. Darcy wasn't here for the practice diving session earlier, with the other divers. She apparently felt it was more important to win the gold medal in the long jump, and no one would disagree with that, I'm sure, eh, Donna? As far as we know, no one in the natatorium right now has ever seen Ms. Darcy dive, with the exception of her coach, of course. So we're all looking forward to seeing if she can dive anything like she can run and jump and cycle." Hal reminded everyone that the divers, Darcy included, began with the simpler dives ("Christ!" thought Caxton, again) and moved to the more complicated ones as they warmed up.



Like the others, Darcy stood at the back of the platform. She was wearing a sleek, shiny one piece blue suit with yellow lightning-like streaks that made her look like a fish of some kind, given her size, maybe a minnow. The chrome railing around the back end of the platform came up almost to her shoulders. She looked, Braithwaite thought, like a lost child. But he changed his mind when another camera focused tightly on her face. She was absorbed in concentration, her head slightly down, breathing deeply and slowly, her eyes staring directly into the camera (which must have been at the opposite end of the pool), her jaw clenched, her whole being motionless, deadly serious. Braithwaite felt a thrill run down his back. It was so silent in the natatorium that the sound of the water jet spraying on the surface, to show the divers the water level, was audible. Darcy's head moved, signaling a shift in her weight, and another camera showed her run to the end of the platform and her jump into the air over the pool. Like the others, she performed several hard-to-identify maneuvers on the way down and disappeared into the water.

The woman announcer hollered along with the rest of the crowd, as though some unrealized universal tension had been released. It had been "a great dive," she shouted, "an excellent dive." She explained the details as the slow motion replay started, but the only thing the partners really understood was the clean entry into the water. She had somehow gone straight in, making a splash no bigger than a cup of water behind her, and that immediately over the entry point. Braithwaite gathered that this was one of the goals of a diver. The announcer, Donna someone, mentioned her score as well, but this meant less to Braithwaite.

As the same cycle of divers came around again for a second dive (each would perform a half dozen dives in turn), the partners wordlessly agreed it was time for another drink. They watched dive after dive after dive, finally beginning to make a little sense out of what the women were doing, although it remained incredible. All but one of Darcy's dives were high scorers, and that one, which she "went a little over on," according to Donna, produced a splash the size of two cups of water, which nevertheless fell back within the radius of a dinner plate. The keen-eyed and analytical Donna pointed out that Darcy was doing something with her hands at the instant they hit the water, which might account for the small splash ("punching a hole in the water" was how Donna explained it), but even the slow motion camera couldn't show it clearly.

By the time the preliminary heat was over and the announcers had previewed the diving semifinals to take place the next day, Jack Benning had lost track of how much scotch he had drunk. Darcy was leading by a large margin, and they saw her escorted out of the pool area to head back to the track. By the time she

had won the gold medal in the high jump, gliding nearly weightlessly over the bar and setting another world record, Dick Caxton had also lost track of the scotch he had drunk. Bynum wasn't feeling too steady either.

Mrs. Anderson began calling taxis, and guiding her bosses to them.

## CHAPTER 34

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Matt had been sleeping just fine. It was getting to sleep that was giving him trouble. Everywhere he went people were talking about the little Barbadian who had been tearing up the Olympics. Few seemed to realize that she had any connection with Alpine, no one except Coach Pérez and the DelBosques. He hadn't seen Dr. Sledd anywhere, but Dr. Sledd stayed to himself anyway. That was probably best for everyone in town.

When he researched a story about cattle eating rotted, poisonous hay he overheard the cowboys at the ranch arguing about whether the Olympic events were fixed. One of them insisted that Darcy's jumping had been created by a special effects team, just to sell more beer. A group of junior high girls at the next table at the Whataburger where he grabbed lunch were rooting for Darcy to win the diving event. He couldn't get away from it, and he couldn't get it out of his mind. Still, Darcy mania notwithstanding, he felt sorry for her. He had only begun to know her, and despite what looked like steady concentration on the TV screen, he was certain she was terrified. How could she not be?

He found himself oddly drawn to Coach Pérez. She was only a little younger than his mother, but he had shared a few confidences with her and found she was quite happy to discuss her own insights with him. For one thing, she actually had insights. She was the only expert on athletic performance that he knew. She had invited him to drop by her apartment that evening and join several other college athletes to watch the prime-time coverage of the day's Olympic events, and he accepted gladly. Watching by himself at home was becoming a lonely, nerve-wracking ordeal.

On the short walk from the parking lot to her apartment, he could hear the Olympic theme song playing behind at least three doors, maybe more. The pizza he was carrying earned him a warm welcome, and he seated himself with Coach Pérez, a compact Hispanic wrestler who looked like an extra in a bad gang movie, and a burr-headed farm boy who had the university's best pitching arm.

On the screen, one of the network's headline announcers, a white-haired, jowly fellow in a coat and tie, was interviewing two sisters, Canadian volleyball players, sitting in overstuffed easy chairs. The set around them was a combination of high-tech machinery and windows through which could be seen the Olympic stadium with its rows of flags on flagpoles and the Olympic flame at one end in a giant saucer. As the interview was finished and the broadcast went to a commercial, everyone dug into the pizza. Darcy's name came up between bites, and Matt was silently grateful to Coach Pérez that she refrained from mentioning that she knew her, or that her athlete-guests had almost certainly seen her running on campus.

The wrestler and the pitcher were starting their third slice of pizza when the commercials ended and the anchorman appeared. He recapped the fifteen or twenty medals awarded that day, showed video clips of some, and then cut to a lengthy feature about an Indian soccer player who had overcome childhood hardships to become a standout goalie. Then there was another string of commercials. Matt reached for his second slice of the nearly-consumed pizza, and reflected they would never, ever have such a feature about Darcy—not unless he produced it! Now, there was an idea!

The main announcer was back on the screen, talking about Darcy. Interestingly, Coach Pérez and both athletes stopped chatting and turned to the screen. The announcer reviewed her four gold medals and ran clips of each performance. Then he mentioned athletes from history who had medaled in different sports—there weren't that many, and they seemed to generally perform in no more than two different types of events. The announcer noted that they hadn't been able to get Darcy to sit for an interview—she must be exhausted, he surmised—but their woman on the field, Donna Biagio, had been able to talk to her after the medal ceremony for the long jump.

He cut to Donna, who was towering over Darcy in her blue windbreaker with a yellow trident embroidered on the left breast. The gold medal hanging from her neck dangled nearly to her waist. Donna was shouting over the crowd behind the camera. "Ana, how did you feel when you knew you had won your fourth gold medal?" Matt groaned inwardly. How long had Donna spent planning her questions?

"OK," Darcy said.

"You have the middle round of diving tomorrow, Ana, and the medal round the next morning. That same afternoon, you're scheduled to run in the marathon! How do you think you'll do in those events?"

"I don't know. All right, I hope."

"Tell us, Ana, how you happened to choose the particular events you did. Why not the 400 meter race, for instance, or the springboard?"

"It was the schedule."

"Excuse me? The schedule?"

"Yes. Coach Haskin couldn't put me in events that had overlapping heats."

Donna was evidently trying to think on her feet. "You mean, your coach entered you in whatever events the Olympic schedule allowed? It didn't matter what the events were? You mean you could have been in totally different events had the schedule been different?"

Donna never got her answer. A large, ruddy man in a blue blazer with a yellow trident on it stepped into the picture, wrapped an arm over Darcy's shoulder, and said, "I'm sorry, ma'am. The bus is leaving. We have to go. Thank you!" and led Darcy off.

Donna recovered as best she could, turning things over to the man at the anchor desk, who thanked her and cut to yet another run of commercials.

The pitcher shook his head over the empty pizza box. "Didn't matter!" Well, I'll be."

## CHAPTER 35

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Special Agent Aldridge was back in his Washington office, deep into a thorny personnel matter. The bureau couldn't justify the continued expense of three dozen agents wandering around west Texas looking for some frightened runt of a girl, even if they did have some burning questions for her. There were still a dozen people on site, but Aldridge wasn't hopeful. It had been nearly three months without a sign of her. It was aggravating, but then they had looked for that Unibomber guy for years—finally found him, too.

He was juggling duty assignments in what felt like his twenty-seventh try at achieving a workable arrangement when his secretary buzzed him on the intercom.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Aldridge, there's a Special Agent Malek here to see you."

"Malek? Does he have an appointment?"

"No, sir. He said something's just come up. It's important, he says."

"All right. Send him in." He tossed down his pencil and covered the personnel files with interoffice routing envelopes. The door opened, and a soft-looking, fiftyish man with glasses and a burr haircut walked in.

"Hi. Daniel, isn't it?"

"Yessir. That's right. I wasn't sure you'd remember me. I work in the Pershing Avenue lab."

"Right. I haven't seen you in quite a while, not since we worked that neo-Nazi case out in Nevada."

"Yessir."

"What's up, Daniel?"

"Well, sir, have you by chance been watching any of the Olympics?"

"The Olympics? Yeah, sure. Nearly everybody I know has. What about the Olympics?"

"Then I guess you've seen that girl who's been winning nearly every medal in sight?"

"You bet I have. Darcy, Ana Darcy—it's almost unbelievable what she's done, isn't it? No one's ever seen anything like her before." Aldridge was beginning to get a funny feeling. "Why do you mention her, Daniel?"

"Well, sir, I've seen her in nearly every event she's been in. She fascinated me from the start just like she did everybody else, but the more I looked at her, the more something bothered me."

"Yeah? What?"

"I didn't know, at first. It was just a feeling, you know? But it kept nagging me, and finally, yesterday, it clicked."

"What clicked?"

He pulled a manila envelope from under his arm, opened it, and slid out an 8 x 10 photograph and laid it on top of the folders on Aldridge's desk.

"See this? This is a photo of that Ana Darcy girl that I printed from video. She was getting ready to do a dive." The picture showed Darcy's head, close up, looking intently straight into the camera. The video scan lines were perceptible, but it was otherwise a clear picture. Her face was totally focused in concentration, like an eagle looking at a mouse.

"Right. I recognize her," said Aldridge, feeling something tingle in a back corner of his brain.

"Now look at this." Malek pulled another photo out of the envelope and laid it next to the other one. It was the one from the wanted poster they had put up by the hundreds in west Texas.

"I studied this photo a lot when we first got it from the Army," Malek said. "I must have compared it to two hundred other photos of various young women. I have checked all the measurements in both these photos, sir. I think this is the same woman."

Aldridge had to sit down. His head felt like it might explode. "Are you sure?" he asked, stalling for time. It was obvious, actually, as soon as Malek had laid the photographs next to each other. Jesus! At last!

"Yes, sir. The photogrammetry, that is, the main measurements, are the same. The hair and the nose are different, but those are easy to change. The pupillary

distance and pinaform, that is the shape of her ears, everything else, is the same. It's her, sir. I'm certain of it. I would testify to it in court."

Aldridge shook his head. "Well, I'll be God damned," he said. "I'll be flat God damned! You're right; it's gotta be her. Wow, excellent work, Daniel!" He thanked Malek effusively, patted him on the back and shook his hand and eased him out of his office as soon as possible. He'd put Malek in for a commendation on this...but later.

How in the bloody hell did she turn up in Ireland, anyway, at the flaming Olympics? And why, for the love of God? Could anything be more bizarre? Some of the Bureau's analysts had argued that she couldn't have come from earth, but whether she had or not...to turn up in the Olympic games? What in the holy hell could that be about?

Well, no matter, really. As long as she was out of the country, she was not his problem or the Bureau's. She was someone else's. By George, it was time to notify that someone else and see if they could grab her. The Bureau might not get the credit, but he would know they deserved it. He would always remember, by damn. If he ever wrote his memoirs...

He reached for his phone. "Gloria, get me the Director, right now. Use a secure line, please."



## CHAPTER 36

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The third observance of the partners' Olympic-watching parties looked like it would be the last. The closing ceremony wasn't for another three or four days, but the two events they most wanted to see were being broadcast live, today: the finals of the women's 10 meter platform event, followed by the women's marathon. The former took place in midmorning, Dublin time, and the latter in the afternoon.

They assembled in the meeting room in the middle of the afternoon, feeling not the least bit guilty about pooling all the firm's otherwise lucrative billable hours in watching television. Sports was their business too, at the moment, big business. Benning generously pronounced happy hour open, but only Bynum joined him at the bar. Braithwaite and Caxton said they'd wait. It promised to be a long afternoon, and maybe evening as well. Everyone was a little on edge. There was a lot of checking of watches.

The coverage began with several segments devoted to Darcy. The network's prime-time sports anchor man, Eric Bradley, opened the broadcast: "The Barbadian athlete Ana Darcy has set the athletic world on its ear over the course of the games in Dublin, with record-shattering performances in cycling and track and field. Tonight, we are going to take a look at Ana Darcy from several perspectives. Her personal life and history remain almost entirely a mystery, but our staff has been doing some digging and we have put together several special reports for you tonight. First, Peter Briscoe, in New York, has been looking into Ana Darcy's achievements and comparing them to those of the great athletes of yore. Peter?"

Briscoe's report was built around an interview with a prominent sports physiologist. He averred that performances like Darcy's were practically inconceivable.

In view of the demonstrable fact that the world had seen them happen, then she must have been drawing on finite reserves of strength that could not possibly continue. He claimed to have observed signs of stress in her. She would, he thought, very likely experience a total collapse early in the marathon, the most grueling of Olympic events.

After a long commercial break, Bradley conducted the second segment himself, interviewing the sports doctor the network called on regularly for the Tour de France and other major events. Dr. Fergus, a middle aged, bearded gent in a white lab coat, pointed out that the drug testing in this particular Olympics had been especially rigorous, and that Darcy had tested drug-free from the beginning. He could not rule out, however, some heretofore unknown regimen or agent. He closed by pointing out "It's obvious, Eric, after a little reflection, that even athletes in the past who were known to have been using performance-enhancing drugs have not been able to achieve even one of the records that Ms. Darcy has in this Olympics. The fact that she has done so not once but four times—so far!—is simply unexplainable. Hers is a totally extraordinary accomplishment."

The third segment was narrated by one of the network's long-time reporters, a genial elderly fellow known for his puff pieces about odd or engaging characters. His theme seemed to be "Darcy mania," a phenomenon he illustrated with many video clips: crowds of excited girls carrying signs in New Delhi; Rastafarians singing her praises worshipfully through clouds of smoke; Irish women lighting candles in churches; French school children in an auditorium gathered before a large television on a stage; man and woman on the street encounters in Melbourne, and so forth.

There followed yet another commercial break, interrupted in the middle by a teaser showing the diving platform looming over the glass-like, blue water of the pool, the stands packed with spectators. A voice said, "When we come back, the gold medal round of the women's 10 meter platform diving...."

"Did I tell you that we've been contacted by nineteen different parties interested in exploring representation?" said Benning.

"That Lollar. What a guy," said Bynum. Caxton snorted.

"Just to let you know, in case others contact any of you. We're starting a list. We still don't know what Ms. Darcy's intentions are, beyond her present contracts with us. We'll have to talk to her after this is over. Hartley, that's probably your sad duty."

"That's right," Braithwaite rumbled. "Stick the black man with the hard part." Caxton spit scotch onto the carpet and coughed several times, holding his hand to his nose.

Onscreen, the diving began. Darcy had built up what seemed an insurmountable lead in the semifinals the day before. In this final round, despite good dives from most of the rest of the women the conclusion seemed inevitable. The crowd, while not unappreciative of her closest competitors, went crazy whenever she slipped out of the pool after a dive and smiled hesitantly at them. She waved shyly once and a rhythmic thumping and clapping thundered throughout the building.

The same pair of announcers from the previous two days went into paroxysms of analysis during the slow motion replays of each of Darcy's dives. It did seem amazing to the watching lawyers how all the divers approached perfection but failed ever so slightly in tiny ways while Darcy seemed to hit every dive with hardly a waver. The color commentator, a young former diver named Naia Donough, was particularly fixated on Darcy's entry into the water, showing slow motion tape frame by frame from cameras both above and below the water. "She's doing something with her hands," Donough said. "She's shaping them somehow at the instant they hit the water, but she's doing it too fast and there are too many bubbles around her hands to be able to tell exactly what. Of course, she's small, and wouldn't make a huge splash anyway. But she's amazingly precise in controlling and orienting her body at the exact moment of entry. That's hard to do when you're falling while spinning at forty miles an hour. I've never seen any diver as consistently able to control her body as she is. I'll tell you one thing, Hal—the videotapes of these dives are going to become training aids the world over."

The partners had seen enough diving over the past three days to know that the women saved their most difficult dives of the day for last. The more difficult a particular dive was, the larger the "difficulty factor" multiplied into the scoring. None of them understood it completely, but they had learned that dives were various combinations of spins and twists, and that the spins and twists never exceeded three or three and a half. When Donough said that Darcy's last dive would have four and a half spins and two and a half twists, and that she, Naia Donough, wasn't sure it was possible, they could only stare at the screen in silence, as breathless as the spectators in the natatorium.

Darcy nailed that one too, her body spinning and twisting so rapidly that it was a blur on the television screen. There was no splash and barely a sound—just bubbles floating to the surface, as if she had sucked the water down behind her. It was so quiet when she slipped out of the pool that the camera picked up her coach's "Yeah!" as he handed her a towel and hugged her, and then a steady, pulsing roar began that shook the building for a good five minutes. The unfortunate

next diver had to stand on the high platform until the crowd quieted, and then, perhaps shaken by it all, badly missed her dive.

As soon as the final four divers had taken their turns, the medal ceremony was held at the end of the pool opposite the platform. When Darcy stepped on the top riser, the crowd applauded anew. The medals were awarded, the anthem was played, and Darcy ventured a hesitant wave, which increased the noise level. She looked clearly dismayed by the ruckus, only increasing the passion of the spectators. Officials hustled her out to a waiting bus to take her to the starting line of the marathon. The screen cut to commercials.

Bynum, a respectable college athlete in his day, glanced at Braithwaite. "Hartley, what is this? What the hell is this?"

Braithwaite's mouth twitched. "You got me. I just work here."

Benning shook his head. "This is unreal. This is huge. What are we getting ourselves into?"

"That's five," said Braxton.

The screen was showing a van with the Olympic symbol on the side passing through a neighborhood of row houses and little shops. The camera zoomed in on two heads silhouetted behind the driver. The shorter of the two appeared to be eating something.

## CHAPTER 37

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The women's marathon was scheduled to begin at 8:00 pm Alpine time. Matt wondered if they had scheduled it that way for the television audience in the United States, or if the middle of the afternoon in Dublin was simply the best time for a really long run. His nerves were shot. It had made his heart ache to see Darcy standing practically naked, probably cold and scared to death, in that giant natatorium, with thousands of strangers shouting at her. How she could focus so intently was a mystery. He was certain that she wanted to run and hide somewhere—he damn sure would want to, if he were in her place.

At least he understood running. The two latest commentators were full of details about the course, the challenges in this part or that part, and “the wall,” the point at which a runner's conditioning and food played out, leaving her with only her force of will to withstand pain and hallucinations to keep going. Matt had once run five miles to see if he could do it, and he could, but it took him three days to get over it. Merely walking twenty six miles would take him half a day, if he could even do that. Running twenty six plus miles seemed impossible. The woman who won this race would probably do it in two and a half hours.

That would conclude Darcy's events, and before Matt's bedtime. Hooray. Maybe he could finally sleep soundly again.

There looked to be about a hundred women milling around at the starting point. While the camera panned over them the commentators introduced six or seven of the favorites, including the current world record holder, a wiry woman from Kenya, and Darcy. Matt felt his eyes watering. She looked solemn and lonely, focusing on the ground in front of her and looking up only when another

runner patted her shoulder or whispered something to her. She didn't smile. None of the runners did.

Matt had absolutely no notion of strategies in such a race, but at least he knew that the cycling race had been a team event, with team strategies and signals. Here, each runner would be on her own. A few minutes after it began, much like the cycling event the participants had stretched out into a main group, with a few leaders, a few laggards, and a few in between. This time, however, Darcy was not one of the leaders. She was in the large group in the middle, running smoothly.

She was still in that same group after four miles. Donna Biagio, the track and field announcer, was there: "Darcy's running well enough right now, Hal, but she's in the middle of the pack at this early stage. Three runners have already dropped out, and I have the feeling that the next few miles might tell the tale for Darcy also. She's done amazingly well up to now, but then she only finished the diving event less than an hour ago. It's hard to see how she has anything left...wait a minute, Hal. Darcy has moved up on the two runners ahead of her. She's still running steadily, but it looks like she's picked up her pace ever so slightly."

Donna was right: as the camera zoomed in on the middle of the pack, Matt saw her ease past two more runners. He felt a sharp pain in his left shin and looked down to see he had been pressing it against a table leg. He stood up and went into his kitchen to put more ice in his iced tea. When he got back to his chair, Darcy was passing a group of three women and Donna was beginning to raise her voice: "We still can't tell, Hal, whether she's really serious with this pace or if she's trying to fake the other runners into keeping up with her."

Her new pace was not a ploy, evidently. She was still running smoothly, squinting her eyes against the sunlight, and gradually passing more and more runners in the group. By the seven mile point she was leading the large middle group. At nine miles, she was out front of the middle group and approaching the smaller group of leaders. Matt noticed his ice had melted. He ignored it.

At eleven miles only two runners were ahead of her. Both announcers were concentrating on Darcy now. "She's picked up the pace just a bit again, Donna. She doesn't look terribly stressed but if she's smart she'd better be saving something for that last tough third of the race!"

Donna concurred: "Don't forget about 'the wall,' Hal. As far as we know, Darcy has never competed in a major marathon before, and the wall is famous for crushing newcomers. She probably should cool her present pace off, that is, if she wants a chance at finishing in the top three in this race."

Indeed, the two women ahead of Darcy did not seem particularly concerned, even when Darcy passed them and opened a slight lead.

There was no help for it: Matt had to go to the bathroom. On the way back he poured out his tea, replaced the ice, and splashed in some orange juice. His hands were shaking. Some spilled on the counter but he did not stop to wipe it up.

At the fifteen mile point Darcy seemed to be running much as she had been. The last two runners she had passed were probably sorry they hadn't taken her challenge more seriously. She was far ahead of the second place runner, who could only be seen from time to time, when the intervening hills allowed.

At the twenty mile point she was six minutes ahead. Matt could see no sign of a wall no matter how hard he looked. Darcy seemed to be running on her toes rather than her whole foot, like the other runners. Her expression was concentrated and serious, but her movements were still light and quick.

There were a surprising number of spectators along the course as it wound up and down hills and across bridges. Most of these were cheering Darcy on, but one young man in cutoff shorts and faded t-shirt darted out and grabbed Darcy as she ran by, wrapping his arms around her and sending them both crashing to the pavement.

Race officials in the car following Darcy were on him in an instant, pulling him aside and sitting on him until police could be summoned, but Darcy was up and running again in less than a minute, holding both hands to her head briefly. Matt found himself standing without realizing having done so. He gaped as Darcy continued to run, favoring one leg and bleeding from a scrape on her knee and a cut on her left temple. Her eyes were wider than he'd ever seen them, and she looked to be in pain. She was running down the stripe in the middle of the road now, not hugging the curves as she had. The announcers sounded like they wanted to pound the young man, and possibly the race officials, senseless, but they soon concentrated again on Darcy. She was close to her former pace, still limping, but breathing steadily and looking straight ahead. The left side of her face and her left hand were smeared red from the blood she'd wiped away. She slung her hand at the ground and a few droplets appeared on the lens of the camera in the car following her.

The Olympic marathon is always laid out so the final 400 meters takes place on the stadium track. When Darcy emerged from the tunnel onto the track, an enormous roar arose from the packed stands. She slowed, obviously startled, looked around quickly, and then began running again, still limping, completing the lap to a standing ovation, and almost disappearing into the arms of Coach

Haskin. Both looked as if they were about to cry. He held a damp towel to her temple.

Matt was exhausted, for himself and Darcy too. The booth announcer recapped the run, nearly eight minutes under the previous record, while Donna Biagio, sticking her microphone through the crowd, asked her yet again how she felt ("Tired," she had replied, in a shaky voice, dried blood spotting her tank top). The coach guided her into an ambulance, which rolled slowly out of the stadium, lights flashing.

Poor Darcy! At least it was over! Matt took a hot shower and fell into bed in his underwear, falling asleep instantly.

Somewhere, a bell was ringing and it wouldn't stop. Matt forced his eyes open—it was his telephone. The clock showed it was nine in the morning. Crusty! Oh, man, was he embarrassed! He picked up the receiver and mumbled "Hello?"

"Matt?"

"Yes?"

"Matt? Is that you?"

He tried to make his mind work again. "Cheryl??"

"Yeah, it's me, Matt. Hey, Matt, have you heard from Darcy?"

"Darcy? She just won the marathon, didn't she? I mean, last night...uh, yesterday afternoon? She's OK, isn't she?"

"Yeah, Matt, she won. She won every event she was in. Everyone in the village is talking about her. No one can believe it. It's crazy! But Matt! Have you heard from her?"

"No, I haven't. Why?"

"Do you know where she is?"

"Huh? No. How would I know?"

"She's not here, Matt!"

"What? She's not where?"

"Not here. In the dorm. In the village. In our room. We had a party for her after the marathon but she didn't show up! The hospital released her. Most of her stuff is here, but she's not. We don't have any idea where she went. She didn't call you?"

"No. No! Oh, jeez."

"Matt, the security guys have searched the whole village. She's gone, Matt. Matt, promise me you haven't heard from her!"

"No! I mean Yes! I haven't heard from her. I promise."



“What are we gonna do, Matt?” Cheryl’s voice was a major third higher than Matt had ever heard it.

“I don’t know, Cheryl. I have no idea.”

## CHAPTER 38

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News of the missing athlete was all over the morning news programs. The two Olympic officials who appeared on camera seemed to be genuinely puzzled, even outraged. The TV personalities touched on the most outlandish possible explanations, up to and including abduction by terrorists.

All right! thought Aldridge, watching the coverage over his pop tarts. Those guys are more on the ball than I would have predicted! That takes seeds, man! Now, they'll have to figure out what to do with her. Thankfully, that was not his problem. Time to call a few acquaintances and see what was shaking. He stopped at a pay phone on the way to his office.

It only took one call. Jeff Simmons, one of his oldest friends from their days as trainees at the "Farm" in Virginia and now a mid-level official with the Agency, told him cryptically what had happened, or rather not happened. Carefully talking around the fact that an alien was his subject, he said in a low voice, "The package you sent never arrived. My family checked the whole mailroom, but apparently someone else picked it up before we got there."

"Crap!" said Aldridge. "I wonder if it got forwarded somewhere."

"No idea," said Simmons. "We're checking a few things, but so far, there's no sign of it."

"Damn!" said Aldridge. "Back to the drawing board. We'll have to have the Post Office do a thorough search. Thanks, Jeff." He had mixed his metaphors but he didn't care. The way he saw it, it just meant that the hunt was still on. And he was still in it.

The sleek corporate jet taxied to a stop as a tanker truck and a Rover sedan with Barbadian government plates rolled up to meet it. A large, round-shouldered black man got out of the sedan and climbed aboard. Hartley Braithwaite put his passport in a different pocket of his coat and took a seat facing the plane's single passenger.

"Miss Darcy. May I congratulate you, dear lady? You have achieved something utterly magnificent, something no one would have believed could be done, and you have done it with surpassing beauty and grace. You have thrilled the entire world."

"Thank you, sir." He could barely hear her. She looked exhausted, pale and thin, dwarfed by the airplane seat. There was a bandage above her left eye and scratches on both arms. He was astonished to see she had shoulder-length blonde hair. It was hard to believe this was the same person he had seen running, jumping, and diving with such determination only days before.

"Thank you for sending the plane for me. I...I just couldn't stand being there any longer. I kept feeling like people were after me. And when that man...that man...."

"I'm sure that was horribly traumatic, my dear. You recovered wonderfully. I'm glad you had Coach Haskin ask us to send our plane. We are happy to be of any service we can. I mean that with all my heart."

"That's very generous of you, sir. And of your firm, of course. I don't know what I would have done...."

"Please do not worry yourself about what might have happened, Miss Darcy. I promise you our firm will do everything it possibly can, and it can do a lot, to help you gain control of your life, no matter what you might have in mind."

"Yes, sir. Thank you sir."

"I have made the passport arrangements you requested, thanks to friends in the Ministry. We have a flight of several hours to Miami, and we will have plenty of time to discuss your plans for the near future. We have already set up several accounts for you and we have a number of other arrangements put together for you to consider. Believe it or not, thanks to the contracts you signed before you left to train, your main account is now nearing six figures!"

"Thank you, sir." She painfully elbowed herself to a new position in the seat and cleared her throat. "Mr. Braithwaite, I do have a request to make. There is something I must do, that I simply have to do, before anything else, and I will really appreciate your firm's help with it even though I cannot explain just what it is right now. I'm sorry, Mr. Braithwaite. It truly is a matter of life and death. If

your firm could help me for three or four days, maybe a week, then I will be happy to meet with your firm for whatever purposes they might wish."

She looked solemnly at him, her face strained. "I need this plane, or another, for that week, sir. I am sure once I can explain the purpose, your partners will agree it was worth it. In any case, I will try to pay you back for whatever it costs."

The jet's engines whined to life. Braithwaite was serious too. "Let us talk it over once we are airborne, my dear. Something can be worked out, I feel sure."

## CHAPTER 39

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Dr. William Sledd was a light sleeper. He attributed this to the dry air in Alpine, one of the area's best features in his opinion. Thus when his telephone rang at three in the morning, he awoke and answered it crisply.

"Hello? Yes, this is Dr. Sledd. May I ask who's calling?"

"By the frost! Of course I remember you! Oh my heavens, how could I not, after what you have done? My dear, dear, young lady, may I congra...what? I beg your pardon?"

"Ah. I see. Well, no names then, if that's what you prefer. I assure you, no one cares to eavesdrop on me. You, of course, may be another matter. At any rate, may I just tell you how exhilarating it was to have seen what you did at the, at the, ah...recently. I'm an old man, my dear, as you well know, but I'm glad I lived to see what you have shown us. You make me believe that there may be hope for our species after all."

"Yes, certainly, I remember the advice I gave you. It seems to me that you have followed it beyond anyone's wildest dreams."

"Yes, that is true—it is only the first half of the solution to your problem."

"The next step? What would I suggest? Well, then: it seems to me that you need an arena, if you will, a forum, perhaps, from which to convey your vital message. Given our people's current lamentable reading habits, that forum would seem to be television, wouldn't you think? Perhaps an extended interview would answer. The interviewer should be, rather than one of the innumerable blow-dried weasels who infest the airwaves, an experienced, skeptical, and incorruptible person of sterling reputation. What are your thoughts, my dear?"

"Yes, I do happen to know a person like that. You asked for no names, but I will tell you that he is widely respected among the punditocracy. He is irascible, to the point, and very, very perceptive. He and I were classmates at Yale, back in the Bronze Age. I would be happy to contact him for you, if you wish. He seldom gets scoops, as it were, but a story such as yours would, I think, interest him greatly. His program is even broadcast internationally, which would doubtless suit your purposes nicely. Shall I call him for you, my dear?"

"It would be my privilege. I of course cannot promise that he could do it within the week, but I shall make every effort to convince him that the matter is urgent. How shall I contact you?"

"Certainly. I am almost always here. Call back any time. I look forward to our next meeting, as well! Thank you, and very good luck to you, my dear."

Crusty's phone rang for the twelfth time in an hour. "*Alpine Avalanche*. Editor speaking... Oh, hello Rhoda! How the hell are you?" It was Rhoda Williams, wife of the owner of the Bar-S ranch. "How is that white hunter, mega-lawyer husband of yours?"

"Aww, hell, Crusty, Dwayne's in Alaska. He's been gone two weeks. He's trying to buy antelopes or some damn thing, and then he's headed to a Washington meeting with the muckamucks. This might be your big chance, fancy pants!"

"God knows I've tried, Rhoda, and it didn't work. I know you aim higher than newspaper editors. What's on your mind?"

"Speaking of aiming higher! Hey, Crusty, there's a chance that John Travolta might be landing here later this afternoon to spend the night. He's going to be flying over in one of his smaller planes, not the 707, and I invited him to drop in for dinner. I'm gonna put the arm on him to kick in to the university's development fund. Why don't you send that Matt Méndez fellow out and maybe he could get some pictures and do a story?"

"Hot damn! That would be excellent, Rhoda! Let me find Matt and get him over there soon as I can! If you're not careful, I'll come along just to pinch your butt!"

"Aww, Crusty, don't get your hopes up. I'm not even sure John'll stop by. Don't waste your time. I know Matt, and we can have a nice visit even if John doesn't make it."

Matt had never been inside the big house at the Bar-S. It was quite a layout, full of art, expensive-looking carpets, and big windows. Rhoda Williams was quite a woman, too. Tall and slim, about fifty, with just a hint of cosmetic tight-

ness in her face and wearing a green silk shirt over pressed blue jeans, she welcomed Matt warmly. No one resembling John Travolta was in sight.

"I've got a guest for you to interview, Matt. It's a surprise. Go down the hall to the VIP suite, second door on your left, and knock. Go on, now."

She smiled and gently pushed him in the right direction.

He knocked. Someone inside said something, he couldn't tell what, and he turned the knob and entered. Silhouetted against the glare from a window, Darcy was standing there, looking at him.

His knees nearly gave out. If he'd thought, he never would have done it, but he didn't think. He rushed to her and wrapped his arms around her, crushing her to him.

"Darcy!"

"Hi, Matt."

"Oh, Darcy!"

"Hi."

His brain was threatening to short out. "Darcy!"

He hugged her again. Her face was gaunt and hollowed out, she was thinner and sporting several bandages, but her smile lit up her face. His heart soared. He kissed the top of her head.

"I was expecting John Travolta!"

"Too bad, Matt. Mrs. Williams thought of that. She was so nice. She said you could tell Crusty that he couldn't make it. That's true. I hope you're not disappointed."

"Oh, gosh, Darcy, Darcy. I was so worried about you! Cheryl called me when you disappeared. She was worried out of her mind."

"I'm sorry about that. I had to get away from there. I was going crazy."

"I thought you must be. Darcy, you were amazing! Have you seen the cover of *Sports Illustrated* and *Newsweek*? Or *Time*? You're everywhere. The whole world is amazed at what you did."

"I don't know, Matt. I wanted to get noticed, but I might have overdone it. I don't know what happened—something came over me. I just wanted to win. It was weird."

"Golly, Darcy. You were great. I still can't believe you did that."

"Well, it's done. Please don't tell Cheryl you've seen me, not for another few days anyway. I still want to stay out of sight. I hope all this uproar means people will take what I have to say seriously, but I just don't want to be this famous, Matt. I can't stand it! I need some peace and quiet when this is over."

"What are you going to do next? Have you figured it out?"

"Yes, maybe. I have something planned for Wednesday, two days from now. I don't want to say anything about it yet, but you'll know when it happens. At least, I hope you'll know."

"I hope so too. Darcy, I'm still holding the story, like I promised. But all I've really been thinking about is you. Oh jeez, I'm glad you're all right."

She eased herself down onto the couch. "I'm so tired, Matt. I'm just about worn out. Mrs. Williams told me I could stay here a few days and rest. I hate to ask you this, but would you mind terribly staying with me and keeping me company? If you have the time? I could really, really use a friend right now."

Matt couldn't believe that he was actually sitting down next to Darcy and putting an arm around her and drawing her to him. She leaned her head on his shoulder.

"I would love to, Darcy," he replied softly. "I would love to."



## CHAPTER 40

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It was miraculous. Matt actually felt his life changing for the better. He could never in his wildest dreams have imagined that he would be spending four consecutive days with Darcy. Even when she slept, which was often, he couldn't bear to leave her. He watched her sleep for hours, half in a dream state himself.

It was the strangest thing. He was certain that if he were to tell anyone about it, they would assume that sex had been involved. But the truth was that it hadn't been. To his surprise he was blissfully happy just to have a woman—this woman—sleeping soundly next to him and to hold her close. Darcy seemed to want no more than that, indeed, to be happy with that, and that was plenty for him.

She must have slept eighteen hours a day for several days. Even when she was awake, she was drowsy and soft, not the energetic, high-spirited person he'd known before. He wondered if other Olympic athletes were similarly recuperating. Probably not—which of them had expended more energy over that two weeks? He loved to watch her sleep so peacefully. It was inexplicable to him that she seemed to enjoy his company. He wouldn't have dared commit some indiscretion which might ruin things for both of them. His eventual newspaper story now looked like a certain career-making bombshell, but for the moment, nothing was more important to him than being with Darcy.

He had no idea what Rhoda Williams thought they might be up to, but that lovely, blessed woman seemed delighted to match make and share secrets with both of them. She had an amazing repertoire of gossip about people Matt had only read about or seen on television. He and Darcy learned to look forward to

meal time at the Bar-S not only for the wonderful food but for Mrs. Williams' stories. Conversation or no, tired as she was, Darcy ate like a horse.

Mrs. Williams assured them that no one would know the famous Olympic super-athlete Ana Darcy had stayed there, not until Ana said it was OK, and Matt tended to believe her. Mrs. Williams dearly loved secrets, and at the moment she was sitting on what was probably the world's hottest secret. She'd even called Crusty and convinced him that she needed Matt to do some reporting for her and the paper for several days, and that if Crusty didn't agree when it was all done, she would pick up his salary. Matt could have kissed her; in fact he did kiss her. She laughed and said that being kissed by such a handsome young man made it all worthwhile.

On the morning of their second day at the Bar-S, Darcy had asked to use the telephone. When she returned, she seemed oddly excited. Mrs. Williams asked her if everything was all right.

"Oh, yes, ma'am. Everything's fine. I have an interview in San Antonio the day after tomorrow."

"Oh, my!" said Mrs. Williams. "An interview! I thought you were going to stay out of sight. Have you changed your mind?"

"No, ma'am. Not really. But I really need to do this interview. After it's over, I hope I can still sort of hide out somewhere."

"Bless your heart, dear, I know you do. I haven't bothered you with how much you have been mentioned on television the past few days. I'm sure you don't need to know that, but if you wanted, I believe you could be the biggest celebrity in the world right now."

"Yes, ma'am. But I don't want to be. It scares me, actually."

"I don't blame you a bit! I know it sounds strange coming from me, but sometimes I think peace and quiet are the best things in the world."

"Yes, ma'am. I agree. I used to have lots of that. But I don't any more—at least not before you let me stay here. This has been wonderful."

"Now, you just don't even mention that, child. You are always welcome here. About that interview—it's in San Antonio?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, shoot! That's a long way, and my husband is off with our plane, and the one you came in isn't here either. Why don't I call the airport and get a charter flight for you?"

Matt interrupted. "That's all right, Mrs. Williams. I'll be happy to drive her there."

And that's what he did, after Mrs. Williams fussed a while, making Darcy borrow some of her classy clothes, and sending them off with a big ice chest of food and drink.

They had a lovely drive. Matt took the "low road" to San Antonio, the more southerly U. S. Highway 80, rather than Interstate 10. It was about ten hours either way, but the old road offered much better scenery and some interesting rest stops. Darcy was concerned about her interview, so Matt figured it was better to drive straight through to give her a little extra time to prepare once they arrived. They might investigate some of the points of interest on the return drive.

She was still sleeping a lot, either against a pillow mashed against the window, or sometimes, to Matt's delight, against him. She had been sleeping this way when Matt drove over the Pecos River Bridge. The road was bumpy and it took him a minute to realize that Darcy was shaking on her own. She awoke sobbing, and he wrapped his free arm around her and pulled off at the observation area over the canyon. All she would say was that she had been dreaming about people chasing her. After they had walked around a few minutes and watched the buzzards wheeling in circles far below them in the canyon over the river, Matt asked her if her fatigue was a leftover effect from the strain of the Olympics.

"It might be," she said. "It's probably also a result of my diet, though."

"You mean they didn't give you enough to eat?"

"No, I had plenty to eat. I just wasn't burning it fast enough. That's how I did what I did, by turning food into energy so quickly, and by metabolizing the lactic acid and byproducts—it's complicated, really. I first noticed the slowdown after I had been training for several weeks. My times dropped off because my body wasn't producing energy efficiently on a sustained basis. Remember when you helped me send that message to Hleo?"

"I'll never forget it."

"I was so relieved when Hleo answered. I sent him my medical records to analyze and he figured out I needed extra large amounts of an enzyme, a sort of metabolic catalyst actually...well, I never understood it completely myself. But once Dr. Hashmi found some for me and I began taking it, my energy output began improving gradually. It had to build up in my body first, and I was afraid it wouldn't work soon enough. But I managed," she said simply. "I guess I ran myself down at the end, though. I'm feeling better now. I'll be all right."

"Did you ever manage? You may be a genetic miracle, but you've also got a lot of guts."

"Do you really think so?"

"Are you kidding? I damn sure do! To do what you did, all alone in a strange place, with the whole world watching and people trying to grab you off the street at any minute? That's not genes—that's bravery. I still can't believe the courage you had. I know I couldn't have done that."

"That's sweet, Matt. No one ever told me I had 'a lot of guts' before."

"Well, you do. You really do."

"You're funny, Matt. I'm glad you're here."

The small cab of Matt's Mitsubishi turned out to be a wonderful place to chat with Darcy. It was practically intimate, and they talked of things that hadn't occurred to them at the Bar-S. Matt was almost embarrassed to summarize his pathetic career as a graduate student, studying literature and linguistics. That was what had originally interested him in Darcy, he reminded her—that book of cuneiform she had been studying. He glossed over his arduous and frustrating career as a teacher of writing at El Paso Community College, and his newspaper career as well. He felt he was talking too much.

He wanted to know about her family and early life. Strangely, she seemed as embarrassed by the details of her life as he had been by his.

"Aw, c'mon, Darcy! What about you? For instance, were you always such a good athlete, even when you were young?"

"I was always active, yes. We have competitions of all kinds, but I was never a standout performer. It's just that the moon station has a nice little gym in it, and I used to love to work out there. I have a—what is that thing? A treadmill?—and other equipment too. I was in better shape on your moon than I was back home, actually. And you know, some of the credit should go to coach Haskin. He was wonderful."

"Weren't the boys always after you, back home?"

"What do you mean? After me? Not really...."

"Well, don't your people get married?"

"Of course!"

"Well, how do they arrange it? I mean, is it like here, where a boy will ask a girl out, and they fall in love and decide to get married?"

"It depends, Matt. I told you, we're a tribal society. We're a lot more stratified than you are here. The ordinary people do sort themselves out like that. The chiefs and their children tend to make arranged marriages, for political reasons, to strengthen alliances and so forth."

"Didn't you tell me your father was a chief?"

"Yes." She looked at her hands in her lap.

"I'm sorry," blurted Matt. "I forgot. That was a long time ago. Your father wouldn't still be around, would he? That was stupid of me."

"No, that's all right. I just hadn't thought about my parents in several days. The truth is, I wasn't the best daughter I could have been."

"What do you mean?"

"I actually refused two marriage proposals. When I refused the third, well, that's when they sent me on this mission. It was sort of an honor, but also sort of like exile."

"Wow! I never realized that! Golly! So, you were alone...even before you were alone?"

"Yeah."

"Awww, Darcy. You're not alone now." He put his arm around her and hugged her again.

## CHAPTER 41



They arrived in San Antonio after dark. Matt chose a mid-size motel where there would be much coming and going and where he could park outside the room. Darcy was asleep before the 10:00 pm news was on.

She didn't wake up until 8:30 the next morning. Matt was dressed and ready to roll.

"Where are you going, Matt?"

"You're hungry, right?"

"Yes!"

"I thought so. But you said yesterday you wanted to stay out of sight as much as you could, right? So why don't I go get us breakfast, and also scout out the address where your interview is this afternoon? That might save us time later. San Antonio is awful confusing to a country boy like me."

He was back in an hour with a bag of taquitos and salsa. She had nearly finished one before he had sugared his coffee.

"Matt, this is good!"

"Yeah, those are fresh tortillas. They're not as good as Grandma Reyes', but they'll do. There's another in there for you. Hey, Darcy," he continued, "I found that address. It was a house! I thought it'd be a television studio. Are you sure it's the right address?"

"Wow, this salsa is great, too!" she said, her mouth full. "Yes, it's a house. I asked the man who arranged it to try to keep it quiet until it was broadcast. Maybe we can do it and leave before anyone knows we were here. What makes this salsa taste different?"

"Probably the fresh cilantro—it's an herb, I think." She smiled and dug into the white paper bag for the remaining taquito.

The address was a fancy old three story house in the King William District, a historical area not far from downtown San Antonio and the Alamo. Matt parked on a side street and walked Darcy to the front door.

His knock was answered by an elderly Anglo woman dressed to the teeth. She even had blue hair. Matt instantly felt inadequate, but the lady smiled and asked them to please come in. She showed Matt to a chair in the parlor and ushered Darcy down a hallway, telling her "I'll bring your driver some tea, dear. I'm so glad to meet you, Miss Darcy. I'm...." Her voice tapered off as Matt eased himself into an elaborate chair. The room was packed, very tastefully he was sure, with brocade, Victorian bric-a-brac, and books. There was a pile of them on a table next to his chair. He began browsing.

An interminable three hours later, after Matt had read all he would ever want to know about quilting and the Vatican, Darcy came down the hallway with a solid-looking, jowly man at her elbow. She had changed out of her disguise at some point, and her blonde hair flowed gloriously over her shoulders.

"Thank you, Ms. Darcy, for all your efforts. It was an immense pleasure to have met you and to have interviewed you. I am certain the network will want to run it as soon as possible, probably tomorrow evening. Please do keep in touch, especially if I can be of any service. It is my deepest wish that should your claims prove out, appropriate action be taken, for all our sakes. You are a lovely, delightful young woman. And give my best regards to Bill, will you?"

"Yes, sir, I will. Thank you, sir. I'll be happy to pass on your greetings."

He shook her hand delicately and turned and went back down the hallway.

Matt whispered, "Was that John McLauphin?"

"Yes, do you know him?" she replied, keeping her voice low.

"Well, no, but I've seen him on TV. I always thought he was a grouch! He sure likes you!"

"Oh, he's not so bad, once you know him," she said, patting him lightly on the arm.

"And Bill...?" Matt asked.

"Bill?"

"Yeah, Bill. He said to say hello to Bill."

"Oh. Dr. Sledd," Darcy replied.

"Dr. Sledd. Of course...."

"Let me change my hair and let's go, Matt."

Two hours later they stopped at dusk at a giant truck stop on the outskirts of Uvalde. While the pump pulsed gas into the tank at an island far from the store, Darcy could see Matt squatting in front of the truck and then in back, his head moving back and forth quickly.

"What were you doing?" she asked when they were under way again.

"Huh? Oh, I've probably seen too many spy movies. This morning I took a marker and changed some of the numbers on my license plates. I changed the 3's to 8's, for instance. Just now, I erased the marks."

Darcy said something unintelligible.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing. It's just an expression in Luvit. I guess it translates, how do you say it? Safe is better than..."

"Better safe than sorry?"

"Yes, that's it exactly."

The Thursday leg of the trip had been fun after a late start from the motel in Del Rio. Darcy had been impressed with the Amistad dam and lake and the sight of the Pecos River flowing into the Rio Grande far below the scenic overlook, but her favorite stop was the Judge Roy Bean tourist center in tiny, "historic Langtry."

He thought he would never get Darcy out of the cactus garden, where she studied every one of the hundreds of cacti and other desert plants growing in abundance on the rocky hill behind the headquarters building. She read every placard about the famous hanging judge, his futile fascination for the actress Lily Langtry, and the way he ran his peculiar bar-courtroom. She had a hundred questions, to which Matt usually had only one answer: "I don't know." He agreed, however, that the plants were beautiful, especially the enormous century plant blooms that towered over them.

No radio stations were in range except from Mexico. Rural Mexico seemed to be a Darcy mania-free zone. All he could pick up was tejano and norteño music. Matt had been fighting the setting sun shining into his eyes for the last hour, and he sensed Darcy was tired too. An hour from Alpine, he felt the future weighing on him.

"Darcy, what's next on your list?"

"Pardon?"

"What's the next thing you figure you need to do?"



"Oh. Well, I need to give Mrs. Williams her clothes back. Don't you just love this green shirt?"

"No, silly! I mean, yes, the shirt looks terrific on you, but where do you have to go after you do that?"

"I promised I would meet with those lawyers, you know, the ones who sponsored me and Cheryl."

Matt felt a stab of anxiety. "You told Mrs. Williams you wanted to keep out of sight. Have you thought about where you might go?"

"Not really, Matt. I just don't have much knowledge, first-hand knowledge, of earth. You know that."

"Yeah, I do. Hey, what about this? My Grandmother Méndez lives in southern New Mexico. It's beautiful there, out of the way, and there's an extra building on her place where you could stay as long as you want. She's all alone now, and I bet she'd love having you nearby. It's close enough to a fairly big city that you could visit a library or go shopping if you want. Would you consider something like that?" He held his breath.

"That's an interesting idea. Why don't we talk about it after I meet with the lawyers? They're going to set things up so I won't have to worry about living expenses. It may make a difference whether I have any money or not."

"Won't have to worry about living expenses? Darcy, you're going to be rich! You'll probably be a millionaire! With that kind of money you can do anything you want." He felt another couple of stabs, deep in his heart.

"Oh, I don't know, Matt. Maybe. I know one thing, though."

"What?"

"It means you will be released from your promise!"

"My promise?"

"Now you're the silly one. You promised not to write your story about me until I said it was all right. It'll be all right, Matt. You can write your article. You can even write a book. You'll be a millionaire yourself, and famous everywhere!"

"Aaah, yes. The article. The article! And the book...."

Darcy was right. There would be huge money in a book about her, gigantic money. His future would be assured. People would say they had always known he was destined for success, they'd known him when. His parents would never tire of dropping his name (though their friends might). Guest spots! Documentaries!

The possibilities piled up in his mind as the truck ate up the darkening miles through Alpine to the Bar-S ranch beyond.

## CHAPTER 42

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## SEPTEMBER

“Morning, Jack. Have you heard the news yet?” Dick Caxton and Hartley Braithwaite barged in on Jack Benning before he’d poured his first cup of coffee.

“I thought I had,” he replied, “but from the looks of you two I must have missed something. What news?”

“You ever seen that One Plus One show, with John McLauphin, on public television?” McLauphin was a veteran political journalist who did a weekly news interview program from Washington, D. C.

“Yeah, sure. Not regularly, but the guy’s good. What about it?”

“The station is announcing a special edition of the show Thursday night—tomorrow evening, at 8:00 pm.”

“Yeah? So what?”

“He’s interviewing Ana Darcy.”

Benning’s cup clanked against the saucer. “He’s what?”

Braithwaite spoke up. “That’s right. The regular networks have been running all kinds of wishy-washy investigative stuff for days about who she is and what might have happened to her after the Olympic games and where she might be now, and then whammo, McLauphin gets the interview. He’s refusing to talk about it—just says to watch the show.”

Benning looked down at the coffee droplets on his desk. “No shit. Maybe we’ll finally learn what our client has been up to this week. I’ll be damned! How would you gentlemen like to have one more television party?”

The next evening, the three partners were once again gathered in their board room in front of a television. Bynum was in Washington, but he'd told them on the phone that he would be watching from his hotel room. He said the hotel staff was buzzing about the show. Even Mrs. Anderson returned to the building. On the clock or off, she wanted to find out what the firm's number one client might have to say.

This time Caxton's attempt at humor, that at least with public television they wouldn't be bothered with beer commercials, fell flat. This wasn't a sports event, where they knew approximately what would happen. Now, they had no idea what to expect. The opening music and credits from the underwriter of the show cut to the basic interview set, two people separated by a desk in some kind of study. John McLauphin sat on the right, in a natty coat and tie, beefy face as red as if he had just come in from the beach. On the left was Ana Darcy, wearing a green silk shirt with her hands in her lap. A scab was visible on her left temple. On the table between them were six gold medals, their ribbons fanned out away from the camera, and a thin sheaf of papers next to Darcy. McLauphin had a note pad in his lap.

McLauphin opened by explaining that the special edition of his show was necessary for reasons having to do with his guest which he would go into later. The show was being taped in a city outside of Washington, which he would also explain. He quickly recapped what most of his audience almost certainly already knew, that Ana Darcy, competing for team Barbados, had won six gold medals, setting world records by astonishing margins in several, and creating such an international hubbub that she had had to go into hiding. Now, he continued, she wanted to make a statement and, for the first time since the games, sit for questions.

He complimented her on her performances, thanked her for agreeing to be interviewed, and asked her to make her statement. She smiled quickly and said, "Thank you for inviting me to be on your program, Mr. McLauphin. First, I must make an apology. I want to apologize to my fellow athletes at the Olympics, to the officials of the Olympics, and to the public. I was not entitled to compete for these medals, and I am not entitled to keep them."

She leaned forward and slid the medals toward McLauphin. "I would ask you, sir, to please see that these are returned to those who awarded them to me, and that they be given to the athletes who now hold the silver medals. The bronze medal winners should have received silver medals, and the fourth place winners should have received the bronze."

McLauphin looked at the medals in shock, as if they were radioactive. Then he shifted his eyes back to his guest. "And why are you not entitled, Ms. Darcy?" he asked in a quiet voice.

"I competed as a citizen of Barbados. I am a citizen of Barbados, and I thank the Barbadian government for extending me that honor. But I am not a citizen of Earth, and as such I should not be in competition with those who are. The Olympic rules make no allowance for cases like mine, naturally enough, but even so, it is not fair. I competed under false pretenses."

There was a sharp crack next to Braithwaite. He glanced to his left and saw that Benning had just snapped a \$300 Mont Blanc fountain pen in two.

McLauphin didn't flinch. "Are you saying you are from somewhere other than this planet? Are you saying you are not human?"

"I am human, Mr. McLauphin. Many thousands of years ago, my ancestors were moved from Earth by beings unknown and transplanted, if you will, to a similar planet in a solar system many light years from here. In recent years we have sought to find our planet of origin. I was the one who found Earth."

"Are any of your fellows here with you?"

"No, sir. I am here alone."

McLauphin frowned as if Darcy had told him she'd wrecked his car. With icy coolness, he said "You look human to me, Ms. Darcy. Can you prove you are from another planet?"

"Perhaps. For one thing, my genetic character was modified before I was born. Scientists on earth are now investigating a process similar to the one used on me. They call it germline therapy. In my case, among other things, I was given many more fast-twitch muscle cells than is normal in unmodified individuals. The result is that I do not have the muscle strength of a comparable person on Earth, but my reflexes and reaction times are much faster. The world records I set are evidence of that.

"I also can convert food into energy at a much faster rate, which helped me in the marathon and the bicycle road race."

"Very impressive, Ms. Darcy. Clearly, it is beyond doubt that what you have done indicates certain amazing physical abilities. But it does not necessarily follow that those abilities prove you are from another planet. You could be, for instance, an exceptional person from this planet. Stranger things have happened! How might we know that you are not, perhaps, a genetically altered, eh, earthling?"

"There are several possible ways. First, I would be willing to submit to a DNA test. I don't know what that might indicate, but my mitochondrial DNA might

provide some evidence.” McLauphin’s famous eyebrows rose over the lenses in his glasses.

“Second, I landed in an escape pod that was tracked by your military. They captured me briefly and took me to a base in El Paso. They took my flight suit. Its composition and performance characteristics should show that it was not produced by Earth-based technology. I cannot tell you where it is now, I’m afraid, but there’s no reason it should not be submitted to public examination. They have my DNA also, for that matter.”

“So, Ms. Darcy,” McLauphin grumbled, his voice gaining volume as he spoke, “you are saying that your ancestors were removed from Earth millennia ago, that you have returned and have been running around making a spectacle of yourself by collecting gold medals at our Olympic games, and that your clothes have been confiscated and hidden by our military! Do I understand that approximately correctly?” He glared at her.

Darcy looked stunned. Her eyes began to shine and a tear rolled down her cheek. She did not wipe it away. “Yes, sir,” she said in a small voice. “That’s the truth.”

In a still smaller voice she added, “But there was a reason I did that.”

“And what, pray tell, would that reason be, Miss Darcy?” he said, more softly.

“This planet is in great danger. In a little over four years, the earth will pass through a debris field left from a collision of two meteoroids. The damage cannot be predicted exactly, but it is likely to be catastrophic and widespread. I told an astronomer in west Texas and I told the men who interrogated me at the base in El Paso, but no one believed me. They thought I was crazy. But it’s true. The people of this planet must take that message seriously. That’s why I entered your Olympic games. That’s the only reason I entered them.

“I admit that my calculations may contain a margin of error, but I think it is small. In view of the awful consequences if I am right, and especially because countermeasures need to be started immediately, there is no time to waste.”

She placed her left hand on the sheaf of papers on the desk and slid it toward McLauphin.

“These are the calculations, sir. I ask you to pass this information to people who can either disprove it or verify it, and if they find it to be accurate, begin taking countermeasures as soon as possible. Please, Mr. McLauphin—many, many lives depend on it.”

“Well, kiss my ass,” muttered Benning.

“Holy, holy crap,” said Caxton.

“Cheese on crackers,” said Braithwaite. The other two looked at him. “It’s a Bajan expression,” he added.

On the Friday following the bombshell McLauphin/Darcy interview, some work was done at Benning, Bynum, Caxton, Braithwaite, but not a lot. That the firm represented Ms. Darcy had been generally known for a while—the partners themselves had announced it, proudly, earlier. Now, however, it caused problems. The phone lines had been tied up all day long, as had the cell phones of the partners, the interns, and the secretaries. Throngs of important and less important visitors clogged the outer offices, and satellite trucks, reporters, and groups of ordinary citizens lined the street outside. A dozen police officers maintained order as best they could.

One of the few to get in to see Jack Benning was an aide to the President’s chief political advisor, a dough-faced, short haired slicker named Horace Macchia. Benning told him what he told everyone else in a statement before microphones and cameras later that afternoon, that the firm didn’t know where Ms. Darcy was at the moment (which was true), that in his opinion her warning should be taken at face value, which was to say, seriously, that they would be in contact with her soon (which he hoped was true), and that he would have more to say later. In his afternoon statement outside the front doors of the firm, he added that he would answer whatever questions anyone had as best as he could. They came in flurries.

“Ms. Darcy is fine. She suffered scrapes and a cut in the attack during the marathon, but she was not seriously hurt.”

“No, Benning Bynum Caxton Braithwaite did not know Ms. Darcy was from another planet until we heard her say it along with everyone else watching the McLauphin interview. And no, we do not know where she is now.”

“I do not know what Ms. Darcy’s future plans are. We know she is unable to return to her base on the moon, and must necessarily stay here for now, probably permanently. She has said she wants to live quietly and has no desire to exploit her status. She is the daughter of an important person in her society, but she has not been authorized to represent them in any way. She is here as a private citizen. The only reason she came here was to bring the warning of danger to this planet from those meteoroid fragments. Assuming that warning proves out, I think we all owe her an immense debt of gratitude for what she did, at considerable risk to her own life, I might add.”

“As far as I know, there are no precedents in the law for the legal status of extraterrestrials. (There was laughter at this.) But I do know that Ms. Darcy is a

bona fide citizen of the nation of Barbados, and is therefore entitled to be accorded all the legal protections of the law thereunto appertaining.”

In the moment it took for that bit of legal verbiage to sink in, he added, “This firm will be open as usual on Monday morning. I expect to have another statement for you on Tuesday at noon. Thank you very much.” And he ducked back inside.

One thing he neglected to mention was that the partners were scheduled to meet with Ms. Darcy the following day, Saturday. They prepared as unobtrusively as they could, taking home files and printouts in their briefcases when they left on Friday afternoon. The reporters and satellite trucks were still parked out front, but the partners just waved as they claimed their cars and drove home for the weekend.

Saturday morning they drove separately to the golf club where their firm maintained a membership, past the gate guard, and toted their golf bags, whose pockets had the folders and printouts zipped inside, into the clubhouse. Dick Caxton had reserved the VIP lounge for “a big corporate client,” which was certainly true, even if size-wise the client was rather diminutive. They had no bigger client, actually. No law firm in the world had a bigger client.

That knowledge made them nervous. Caxton, particularly, paced the floor.

Bynum was fidgeting too, sitting at the large table in the center of the room. “Dick, quit worrying and have a seat and get your papers in order. You’ve done this two hundred times.”

“Yeah, right, I have. But that’s not it. It’s her; it’s that girl. The last time I saw her she was this little scared kid who didn’t own a decent pair of running shoes. Now she’s the greatest Olympic athlete there ever was, she’s from another planet, for God’s sake, and she wants to save the earth from total destruction. Can you imagine how many satellite trucks would be parked by the first tee if they knew we were meeting her? You damn right I’m worrying! I have not done this two hundred times! I haven’t even done it once!”

He sat down and began fumbling with the papers in front of him.

Outwardly, Benning and Braithwaite seemed fairly calm. Benning looked at his three partners.

“Gentlemen, I don’t need to review what we’re going to do here. As George pointed out, we do this kind of thing all the time. I know the circumstances are unique. But I want to reiterate that we need to go the extra mile. We don’t know the extent to which our client might want to make use of her renown, but even if she flies back into space, she’ll still have done more for this law firm than any other client we’ve ever had. We are in her debt, even if we don’t admit that to

her. We need to do right by her. Just concentrate on the matters we've prepared and it'll go fine."

His cell phone beeped. "Yes? OK, good."

He looked at his partners. "That was Burton. Ten minutes." Burton was the ex-Navy pilot who flew their plane and drove guests around. He was utterly reliable and completely unflappable.

"Hartley, when she gets here, you start. She knows you best. And don't gimme that "stick the black guy" crap. I'd be happy to wrestle you to go first, only I think you'd pin me."

A few minutes later, Caxton, pacing again, gaped out the window. "She's here. She looks like an Apache!"

The door opened and Burton and Darcy walked in. With Darcy's chin barely as high as his elbow, Burton looked like a father on "take your daughter to work day." He glanced around the room, nodded at Benning, and went back through the door and closed it. Benning knew he would remain immediately outside until a week from Monday, if necessary. Darcy had black hair and was wearing a large, shapeless windbreaker. She took off the jacket and peeled off the wig, shaking her hair so that it spread over a crisp blue shirt and tailored black slacks.

She smiled at the partners, who had risen to their feet. This kind of formal situation was something she was used to. She felt more comfortable than she had in months.

"Um!" said Braithwaite, clearing his throat. "Ms. Darcy, welcome. Please have a seat. Would you like anything to drink?"

"No, thank you, Mr. Braithwaite. The water on the table will be fine. It's good to see you again, sir." She stepped forward and shook his hand, and then walked around the table to do the same with the other three partners, smiling at each. Hardened lawyers all, they blushed like adolescents. "Please, sit down," she said, taking her own advice.

"We watched your interview with John McLauphin, Ms. Darcy," Braithwaite began. "I'm sure you'll have no trouble believing that we've never seen anything quite like it."

"No, sir, none at all. There are now probably millions of people, instead of hundreds, who think I'm insane. I've been—how do you say?—out of pocket ever since. I wonder how it went over. Do you know?"

Benning spoke up. "McLauphin put the information you gave him on his website, so the whole world has it now. In this country, astronomers and physicists at JPL and NASA are said to be looking at it, among others. The President has called a meeting for next Friday to evaluate it. I've heard that the Europeans



are doing much the same, and also people in Australia, Japan, and elsewhere. It looks like you really got people's attention."

"Oh, that's wonderful," Darcy sighed. "Obviously the next step will be to find a means to divert one or both meteoroids...but that's out of my hands. Surely, people will be able to cooperate to that extent."

"Let us hope," said Benning, looking at Braithwaite, who was about to speak when Darcy beat him to it.

"Before we start, I'd like to thank you all for your help and understanding the last few days, and especially for the use of your plane. I hope you can see why I couldn't explain what I was going to do. I'm sure it was very expensive, but I will be happy to repay you when I can."

"That will not be necessary," said Braithwaite. "As you will learn shortly, you could buy the entire airplane if that were your desire. But despite that, I speak for all the partners when I promise you that we are proud to have had a part, however small, in what you have done for the people here, for this planet, as it were."

Darcy seemed at a loss. She looked at Braithwaite in wonder.

"In accordance with the contract which you signed before the Olympics began," he went on, "we have licensed your athletic images for a variety of applications. These have vastly increased the account of which I apprised you earlier this week, by the sum of approximately five million dollars, and the total grows monthly. The entire amount is accessible to you at any time, through a numbered and anonymous Swiss bank account. This is the same account I detailed for you on the plane from Barbados. You may make incremental withdrawals from any automated teller machine in the world. All American taxes are paid. Dick Caxton has taken care of that, and will continue to oversee it for you."

"My goodness!" was all she could say.

"Yes. That means, if you leave the principle at interest, you should be able to count upon an annual income of \$250,000 per year, indefinitely. And that amount will almost certainly triple, or more than triple."

"Oh!" She put a hand to her throat.

"I should add, Ms. Darcy, that the arrangements you and your lunar station manager have set up to handle secure communication with us in the future tested out well. It is a most ingenious system. The communication experts we have consulted confirm that you should be able to contact us from anywhere in the world without fear of being traced. And we are ready to conduct the other test you recommended, by telephone, at any time. But back to your financial situation....

“...I have not yet mentioned the rights to your story. Your authorization, should you care to license it as you are legally entitled, to books, magazine and newspaper articles, movies, television—all media—may be expected to yield, by the conservative estimate of Mr. Caxton, \$100 million, or more. That takes into account the 25% commission to be paid to this firm according to the contract, I should add. Congratulations, Ms. Darcy! You are a very, very wealthy young woman!”

Darcy looked utterly shocked. “I...I....” A tear rolled down her cheek as Braithwaite handed her a tissue with a flourish. The other partners beamed, and Benning nodded and repeated, “Congratulations, Ms. Darcy.”

Darcy sniffed a couple of times and dabbed her watery eyes. Finally, she looked at Braithwaite and said, “You said newspapers. And books. I would like Matt Méndez to write those. He’s a reporter in Alpine. Alpine, Texas, that is. He works for the *Avalanche*. He helped me from the beginning, and he kept his promise to not write anything about me until this was over.”

She glanced at Benning. “And now it’s over. I told him he could write it all then. That’s OK with me.”

“Very well, then, Ms. Darcy,” said Braithwaite. “That could make Mr. Méndez a very rich and famous man indeed. You are very generous, extremely generous. You understand that while your decision will probably make Mr. Méndez millions of dollars, it will also cost you millions of dollars?”

“Yes, sir,” she snuffled, and then straightened and looked back at him. “That’s what I want.”

“Consider it done, then,” said Braithwaite. “Mr. Caxton will adjust that agreement. Now, there are a few minor matters we need to arrange, if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind,” said Darcy.

## CHAPTER 43

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The private jet roared off the runway at the Bar-S ranch ten minutes after letting off its only passenger. Commander Burton, the pilot, gave Darcy a high five and then winked at her as he opened the door. “Good luck to you, Miss D! You’re a pistol.”

“What’s a pistol?” Darcy asked Rhoda Williams, on the short drive to the big house.

“A pistol? Why, surely you know what that is! It’s a gun, you know, a little gun that you can hold in one hand.”

“Yes, ma’am. I know that! But why did the pilot call me one?”

“Oh! That kind of pistol! That’s different! That kind of pistol is a person, a smart, high-energy person. He’s right, you know—you are a pistol.”

“Really?”

“Honest,” said Mrs. Williams. Once they were inside and Mrs. Williams had poured Darcy some orange juice and herself some chardonnay, she blurted, “Sugar, I’m sorry things were in such a whirl the evening you and Matt came back from San Antonio. I didn’t find out about that interview you had with that McLauphin fellow until my husband called and told me to watch the rebroadcast this noon.” She looked at Darcy strangely. “I didn’t tell him you had been our guest. He’ll swallow his teeth when he finds out you were here.”

“Darcy dear,” she continued, “Before, I thought you were simply an amazing athlete. But, my lord, I had no idea you were...you were from, from...”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m sorry about that. I should have said something, but...”

“But what could you have said? Please understand—I’m not put out in the least. I’m just, well, I’m just all in a tizzy, that’s all! I’ve left the TV on ever since,

and do you know there's been some program about you on one channel or another the whole time? You're all anyone's talking about!"

"Really? I hoped someone would be looking at that astronomical data I gave Mr. McLaughlin."

"Oh, yes. I didn't mean they were only talking about you personally, although there was a lot of that—who you are, where you might be, and all. No, a lot of it was about scientists and governments and telescopes and money and rockets. There was even a whole program on that suit of yours. They said they'd never seen anything like it. I couldn't tell if anything was actually being done about those comet things, but a lot of people are talking about it.

"Darcy, you wouldn't believe all the people who want to meet you, or interview you or see what makes you tick. I mean, it makes sense, since you're one of us, sort of—you know what I mean—but you also come from a totally different planet. There are religious people who think you're some kind of angel sent by God or something. Scientists and historians and medical people want to study you, and some politicians have been talking like you're a sort of ambassador from your people."

"I'm not any of those things. I'm just me."

"I know you are, dear, I know you are, you poor little thang." She patted Darcy on the shoulder and hugged her with her free arm. "What ever are you going to do now?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Williams. I need some time to think. I really appreciate your hospitality, but I can't stay here. If people learn I'm at your ranch, your life will never be the same. I'll find a place where no one knows me and I can just live quietly for a while."

"God bless you, child. I'll pray for you. Would you like me to call that nice Matt Méndez and have him come out for a visit before you leave?" Darcy nodded. "Good. I'll do that right now. I'll get him to take a picture of you and me together. I won't show it to anyone until you say. I'll never forget you, dear. My husband will kill himself that he wasn't here to meet you instead of going shopping for elk."

Matt gladly came to visit but he didn't stay the night, despite badly wanting to. Darcy seemed tired and let down. While Mrs. Williams was off supervising the preparation of supper, he could speak to her privately. "Hey. How are you feeling?"

"Oh, Matt, I've had enough fame to last me the rest of my life. I'm tired of all this."

Glancing toward the kitchen, Matt said in a low voice, "Have you thought about Grandmother Méndez?"

"Yes. Yes, I have. I think I'd like to give it a try, Matt."

"That's terrific, Darcy! Look, I'll tell Mrs. Williams that I'm taking you to Abilene. She might keep it secret or she might not, so let's just not tell anyone where you're really going, OK? Can you leave in the morning?"

She nodded slowly, eyes steady on his.

"OK, good! I need to make a few arrangements tonight. We'll leave in the morning, early."

After supper, he had to get back to his little house, make a couple phone calls, and pack. By the middle of the next morning, he and Darcy were rolling north through the Davis Mountains and approaching Interstate 10 to El Paso (and Abilene, if one were to turn that way, which they did not).

Darcy had been nervous about driving through Fort Davis again, but they saw nothing out of the ordinary. Matt thought they should not stop and say goodbye to the Delbosques, since any word of a sighting of her might call down unimaginable hordes of reporters, camera crews, and even less desirable sorts. Driving past the gate to the dude ranch where the Delbosques lived, Darcy stayed quiet and tense. Once outside Fort Davis she enjoyed seeing the loveliest mountains Texas had to offer—not in the Rocky Mountain class, quite, but wonderful nonetheless. On the far, downhill side of the mountains, she relaxed as the skies opened up to the vast arid rangeland beyond.

"Matt, tell me more about your grandmother and the place where she lives."

"OK, sure." He thought for a minute. "Abuelita Méndez, that's Grandmother Méndez, lives on the original Méndez property that her grandfather settled over a hundred years ago. It's on the banks of the Rio Grande River in New Mexico, just downstream from Las Cruces, which is now a fairly big city. Over the years, the children stopped farming the land and moved away. Some of the land was sold off. What remains is the family compound, with the main house and a couple of smaller buildings, plus a barn and a garage and so forth. My dad got married and moved to Albuquerque. My uncle lives in San Diego, California. Aunt Rosa lives in Colorado with her family. Only Grandmother Méndez is left, and she's nearly 80 years old.

"The whole family is worried about her. She's doing all right for now, but she's not getting any younger. We've tried to get her to hire some help, but she hasn't wanted to. She's kind of prickly about that—she's an independent cuss, you'll see. I'm going to tell her you're from Alpine and you'd like to live in one of

the little houses in the compound and eventually save enough money to go to college. I'll tell her you'll pay a little rent—she'll like that—and you'll be close if she needs help, which also should appeal to her.

"It's a real peaceful and beautiful place, Darcy. And it's so out of the way that no one has ever heard of it. I think it'll be perfect for you, at least to start with. And...I can come to see Abuelita Méndez as often as I want and no one will think anything of it. That is, if you don't mind...."

"I won't mind, Matt. But I guess we'll have to see if your grandmother accepts me. If she doesn't, I'll have to think of something else."

"She'll accept you," Matt said. "She'll love you. How could she not?"

At the first opportunity, Matt left the Interstate for the old highway that followed the Rio Grande upstream to El Paso. He wasn't worried about being spotted, what with Darcy wearing her black braids—two Hispanics in an old truck? Nothing unusual about that. He just preferred the older, slower roads. Darcy too seemed to prefer it. She loved the irrigation canals, the green fields of crops in the middle of the desert, and all the small buildings and signs of life. Good sign, thought Matt: Abuelita Méndez lives on the same river, only in a prettier area.

"Darcy, are you sure you don't mind doing this?"

"No, Matt. I don't mind. I have to do something, go somewhere and live. I wouldn't have any idea where or how, without your help."

"I mean, you're probably the most famous person in the world right now. People would do anything to have you living near them—a beautiful young woman who just happens to be from another planet! You could live anywhere you wanted, in as big a mansion as you wanted. You could live like a queen!"

She winced. "Matt, there's a saying you all have that I like. 'There's no such thing as a free lunch.' Have you heard that?"

"Yeah, sure I have."

"I like it. It means that no matter what I do, there's a price to be paid. If I lived at the Bar-S ranch with the Williams, or in an expensive apartment in New York or Paris, or a big house in Beverly Hills, the price will be too high. I'd hate it. That's not the kind of person I am.

"I'm looking forward to staying with your grandmother, Matt. I'm sure it'll be fine. In fact, I'm grateful to you. I don't know what I would have done without you."

"I wish I could do more. But I'll stay there with you as long as it takes to get you set up and comfortable."

"That'd be great, Matt. I'll really appreciate it." After a pause, she added, "What about your article, and the book?"

"Oh, yeah, that. Well, Crusty gave me a leave of absence to work on it. That's what I'm supposed to be doing now, don't you see. There's no telling how many weeks of research I may have to do before I go back." He rolled his eyes at her.

He had a brainstorm as they drove through the little farming community of Fabens. He pulled in and parked in front of an old building sporting a sign saying "Ropa Usada." "Do you reckon your clothes look like what a poor college student might own?" he asked.

"Not really," she replied. "I have a few pieces of my Olympic warm-up clothes left—I can't wear those. Mrs. Williams wanted me to take some of her clothes, but those wouldn't work at all. She did give me some undergarments, but I won't give those up for anything." She rolled her eyes back at him.

"Yeow," said Matt. "I better let you deal with your underwear. How about I take you shopping? Let's see what they have in this place. After all, nothing is too good for this world's most unique citizen!"

It was fun to watch Darcy enjoying herself shopping up and down the racks of used clothing. She ended up with quite a few items, some from the children's department: blue jeans, shirts, shorts, t-shirts, jackets, shoes. At the register, the proprietor gave her a courtly bow. "Es un gran placer de servirle, señorita," he said. To Matt's utter astonishment, Darcy replied "El gusto es mio, señor!" Matt raised his eyebrows at her while the man was bagging her purchases. Darcy wouldn't let Matt pay, unfolding a wad of twenties from a pocket of her warm-up pants. "I used an ATM machine!" she whispered, and raised her own eyebrows back at him.

Mount Franklin, the mountain that spears El Paso into two parts, was visible on the horizon hours before they actually reached it. Darcy pointed out the rest stop where she'd got a ride from Mr. Hernandez and, as they drove towards down town, the access road down which she had run to get to the rest stop. By Matt's odometer, it was something like twenty miles from the rest stop to the exit to Fort Bliss, and maybe another five or ten after that to the base. "Do you want to drive through the base, for old time's sake?" he joked.

"No! No, thanks," she replied. "There are too many people and too much traffic here. Let's keep going and get through it, please!"

She sank down in her seat until her eyes were at the level of the window. In less than an hour they were through the pass and looking back at the other side of Mount Franklin. The mountains at Las Cruces loomed fifty miles ahead.

## CHAPTER 44

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To Matt's relief, Darcy seemed pleased with her little house in the corner of the adobe-walled Méndez family compound. The main house, a rambling adobe affair with galleries on three sides and an inner patio, sat surrounded by a number of huge cottonwood trees which whispered in the breeze. From the back gallery, the Rio Grande could be seen, cultivated fields stretching along it in both directions, severe desert mountains rising majestically in the distance. From the front of the house, facing old Highway 28, desert sand hills stretched out of sight. The sky was a deep blue, and the only noise other than the wind in the trees and birds was from an occasional vehicle passing down the curving, two lane highway.

Darcy's house, also of thick adobe, had belonged to the foreman in the days when the Méndez family had been a local agricultural power. It had five small rooms which soon responded to Matt's and Darcy's efforts to spruce them up. Matt reflected on the incongruity of the world's most sought-after person helping to paint, dust, and sweep the venerable rooms of a humble ranch foreman's house into shape so she could live there. She could reasonably expect to live in a mansion in Los Angeles with an eighteen hole golf course in the back yard, or a castle in Monaco, if she wanted. But she seemed to enjoy what they were doing. She was smiling more and more often, even with flecks of old paint stuck to her nose and her arms streaked with dirt.

Abuelita Méndez accepted Darcy tentatively, especially once she knew the newcomer would be paying a little rent for the house. At dinner the first evening, she had told Darcy she looked more "Spanish" than "Mexican," and Matt had taken that opportunity to explain that Darcy was from Argentina. Normally he never lied to his grandmother, but this was different. He figured no one would



know a thing about Argentina. If Darcy did something odd, folks would chalk it up to that. She couldn't use the name Darcy either, but Darcy invented the name Del Arco, Ana Del Arco. It sounded Italian to Abuelita Méndez. "Ai, there are all kinds of Italians and Germans and others down there, ¿que no?" The fact that Ana was an orphan seemed to affect her most. "Pobrecita," she said. "All alone in the world."

Matt stayed three days, visiting with his grandmother and helping Darcy put her little place in order. The afternoon of the third day, with an increasingly severe case of separation anxiety blooming in his mind, he and Darcy went to Las Cruces to buy a few more building supplies, a computer, and a television set.

He kept thinking of problems that might come up. Abuelita Méndez still drove, not always very well, but what if she couldn't any longer? Darcy didn't have a driver's license. What would they do then? A dozen other problems crowded into his brain. He tutored her as best he could on basic plumbing and electricity, and told her how to call Old Man Jiménez, the local handyman. (Abuelita Méndez called him "Old Man Jiménez" even though he was ten years younger than she was.)

Finally, Darcy cut him off. "Don't worry about us, Matt. Your grandmother has been doing fine by herself for years. How much worse can it be with me here too?" He glanced at her, startled out of his gloom. "What I want to know is how your article and book are coming. Have you begun thinking about them yet?"

"Well, yes, some," he replied. "I'll drive back tomorrow and get to work on them the day after that. Crusty is in a hurry for the newspaper feature, because he figures he can send it out and spread the paper's name, and Alpine's, all over the world."

"That's great, Matt! You'll become a celebrity yourself!"

"Yeah, I guess so. I'll be able to pay off my debts, too!"

The day-long drive back to Alpine made Matt more and more uneasy. It didn't help that the talk radio stations in El Paso were still consumed with Darcy mania and meteor madness. Clueless callers yammered ceaselessly about what should be done about the meteors and where the little space athlete might be hiding.

Both topics were invariably mentioned on the hourly network news as well, on all the stations he tried. According to one report, musicians at one rock club in England had projected a picture of Darcy above the stage and said that she would be making an appearance there later that night. Pandemonium erupted and eight people were hurt in the stampede.

On another station he learned that American scientists had decided to send a nuclear-tipped rocket against one of the meteors and European scientists would build one to be launched against the other. The Chinese, Japanese, and Australian governments had formed a coalition to send a third rocket as insurance for the first two. The announcer claimed, truthfully as far as Matt could recall, that “this international effort on behalf of the people of the entire planet is a first in history, and may set the pattern for future cooperation in other areas.” So why wasn’t he happy?

His drive became even more depressing when he turned south from Van Horn and drove out of radio range, leaving him alone with his thoughts. That old knife popped back into his mind again to stab him repeatedly as he passed through the nowhere town of Valentine, famous only on February 14th for the postmarks their post office would stamp on the cards and letters lovers sent in with return postage.

It was very strange. He should have been happy. It looked like the threatening meteoroids were going to be moved out of earth’s path by one rocket or another. His book was almost certainly going to make him obscene amounts of money. All the people who doubted he would ever amount to anything, including some members of his family, would be reduced to admiration or jealousy over his vast wealth and renown. He could build a big house on the mountain above Dr. Sledd’s place, buy a new truck, and visit Darcy whenever he wanted to.

Well, that wasn’t quite likely. Darcy had to keep a low profile—that was a given. She just didn’t have the celebrity mentality—why should she?—and she would certainly be terrified and miserable spending the rest of her life as the focus of attention of billions of people and the merciless media. She had had all she wanted of that at the Olympics. Once it became known that he knew Darcy well, his name too would forever be in the news. Any time he left town, for whatever reason, he could easily imagine crowds of reporters, paparazzi, and tipsters keeping tabs on him and hoping to track him to her. He’d be lucky if he ever saw Darcy again in person. He probably couldn’t even telephone her and be confident that the call would not be traced.

He thought about the article he’d promised Crusty. He’d have to interview the Delbosques, Coach Pérez, and Cheryl Ford, if he could locate her. The Alvilar family, who put Darcy up for a time, would have to be talked to also. And there was Rhoda Williams, that kind and helpful woman, whose brush with fame left her almost quivering. Oh yes, and Dr. Harcroft—Matt’s conversation with him started the whole thing off. He was looking forward to inspecting Harcroft closely for any signs of the regret which he should by rights be feeling. Even

though no one could blame him for having thrown Darcy out of his office, with hindsight he still looked like a boob.

Well, if he had to write the article in order for Crusty not to kill him, then he'd write the article. He began blocking it out as he covered the last miles to Alpine in the dwindling light.

## CHAPTER 45



Darcy was enjoying getting settled in her new location. It was the first time she'd been able to relax in peace since leaving her cozy base on the moon. That seemed like years ago. It was comforting to arrange her own small house within a larger compound, itself set off and isolated from its surroundings. She was used to that. And Matt had been correct: the area was beautiful. There were all kinds of lovely trees up and down the banks of the river, there was water flowing in the irrigation canals, cultivated fields, lush orchards, blinding desert, and angular rocky mountains all within sight.

Matt had also been right about Grandma Méndez. He had warned her that the old lady was sometimes hard to get along with, but Darcy had had no problems on that score. She was not that different from Hleo, really. Both were prone to be crotchety. It was wise to treat them with respect, but there were compensations too. Hleo was a terrific station manager and a resourceful and swift expeditor of details. Grandma Méndez wasn't as speedy as Hleo, but she had a vast store of practical knowledge that Darcy needed to know and which she loved teaching to her lodger. She had been particularly scandalized that Ana (from Argentina! ¡por el amor de dios!) had only a bare working knowledge of Spanish. Most of the time they spent together, Abuelita spoke to Darcy in Spanish.

Darcy ingratiated herself in the old lady's eyes by helping willingly around the house. Her favorite chores were cooking and gardening, followed by sorting, at Grandma Méndez' direction, boxes of old family photographs and documents and compiling them into scrapbooks. Darcy learned things about Matt's early life that he himself probably never knew or had forgotten. Through the piles of snapshots, she watched him grow from a cute, mischievous-looking youngster into a

strapping, sturdy young man. They made her wistful about her own childhood, so long ago and so far away.

Although Señora Méndez had done her share of cooking in her day, she no longer had much enthusiasm for it. Still, she was happy to teach Darcy, who found each new flavor combination a revelation. If there was a taste she didn't like, she hadn't encountered it yet. Mrs. Méndez didn't own a lot of books, but half of those she did own were cookbooks, and Darcy studied them at length. Much of the food they ate was purchased fresh, from the local producers. Darcy began to know these people, and to chat with them about the details of producing it.

There was even an extensive network of paths and little-used field roads that she could run on. Many of the paths followed the irrigation canals through local fields, in full sight of the nearby mountains.

Evenings were a problem. Grandma Méndez went to bed early, at which point Darcy generally retired to her own little house. At first there was little to do. Borrowing books from the old lady didn't offer the variety she would have preferred but she could find no library within walking distance. While on a run one afternoon she met a middle-aged woman on a bicycle who taught at a nearby high school and who told her about the books by mail program run by the Las Cruces Public Library. Once Darcy convinced Grandma Méndez to register with them (in the interest of her lodger's education), she could look forward to resuming her research into early history and culture. There was no hurry. She had plenty of time.

That was her biggest unknown, really: time. What was she going to do with the rest of her life? She had little idea how long her life might be, given the strange road she'd taken to get where she was. Was she going to always live in a little adobe house in the corner of a family compound in southern New Mexico? She would never reveal her true identity, not when it was so clear all the havoc that would cause. Her one experience with that had been more than enough. But that didn't mean that she had to lie low and do basically nothing at all.

There was still so much to get used to and to learn about. She decided she'd worry about the future later. She spent four evenings assembling and learning to use her stereo, television, and computer. After arranging for internet service, she spent another evening online, bookmarking websites and dialing up the email account she had opened in Barbados.

She drafted a message to Hleo in code but did not send it, instead saving it to a folder she created. The following evening there was an answer from him in the same folder. Perfect! She actually felt some affection for the old fellow. To her

surprise, he also seemed to have missed her company. He told her he had set things up so she could proceed with the test he had planned earlier, so the next morning she activated the little microphone on the computer and dialed the office of Hartley Braithwaite.

"Hello. Is Mr. Braithwaite there, please? Please tell him Ana is calling. Thank you."

It looked like it was going to work! Hleo would be delighted...unless he was already listening.

"All right. All right, gentlemen, please sit down and we'll get started. This shouldn't take much over an hour if you'll just come to order, please."

Special Agent Aldridge was happy to be seated in a back corner. Meetings like this, under the new Homeland Security Department, were probably going to be more common, but for now he was happy to just watch. There were people there he'd never seen before and never heard of. There must have been thirty all told, from the CIA, the DIA, the FBI, Customs, and six or seven other agencies. It was a veritable smorgasbord of functionaries. The highest ranking one, someone he had not only heard of, but knew to be wary of, was Horace Macchia, one of the President's main political advisors, sitting next to the man standing at the podium.

Aldridge was content to be seated in the back. He was very nearly a "senior official" by now, and might have merited a chair at the head of the room. For sure, he was one of the better informed people present, on this particular case. Still, until he knew the lay of the land better, it made sense to keep a low profile.

Presiding was some guy named Chastain, August Chastain, an undersecretary to the Secretary of Homeland Security. Aldridge had heard him called Augie. Augie began with a briefing that was totally unnecessary as far as Aldridge was concerned, summarizing the brief career of the extraterrestrial Ana Darcy, from her first detection over Texas by radar to her disappearance from the Olympic games. Aldridge zoned out, doodling floor plans for a shop he was going to add behind his house, until finally Augie said something that interested him.

"The department does not know the current whereabouts of Ms. Darcy. A number of national assets continue to look for her. One of them has had the law firm representing her, Benning, Bynum, Caxton, Braithwaite, based in Miami, under observation for the last two months. Yesterday, a telephone call was intercepted over the internet. It was a communication between Ms. Darcy and her lawyer, Harvey Braithwaite, a Barbadian citizen and partner in the law firm. I will play part of it for you now."

Aldridge stopped doodling. He wasn't a lawyer, but he thought this kind of thing was illegal without a court order. If there had been a court order, Augie didn't mention it, but maybe that was how Homeland Security was doing things these days. In any case, he would be happy to listen to the recording.

When the audio started, a rich, Caribbean-accented baritone was saying "...quite satisfactory, in fact, well beyond our expectations. Dick Caxton has invested it for you as per your request, and it will remain at interest until you decide what if anything you wish to do with it."

A female voice with pleasant alto overtones replied "Thank you, sir. I appreciate your attention to this matter. What I'm really calling about, however, what I most want to know, is if any action has been taken with respect to those meteoroids. Can you tell me anything about that?"

"Yes, I can, Ms. Darcy. I don't know if you have access to the media where you are, but I can tell you that following any number of meetings of experts around the world, the data you supplied has been substantially confirmed. At the present time, the United States and the European Union have each agreed to launch a space probe, and another rocket may be launched by a consortium composed of the nations of Japan, Australia, China, and several others. I believe, if I understand what I have read and seen, that all concerned are now plotting orbital data and assembling the required vehicles for launch. It looks to me as if the threat has been taken seriously and that the plans to counter it should more than likely prevent any harm to earth. Allow me to congratulate you for your efforts, by the way. Without your warning, it appears the damage to our planet might well have been catastrophic."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Braithwaite! That's wonderful! I'm so relieved! Now I won't worry about that—but please keep up with the news, sir. I'd like to call you again from time to time for updates, if that's all right."

"Certainly, dear lady. It has been our very great pleasure to assist you in this matter. We are at your service as always of course. And should you decide to become a more public presence, we will be happy to help smooth your transition in any way possible."

"Yes, sir. Thank you sir. I don't anticipate that, Mr. Braithwaite. I have done what needed to be done, and now all I want is to live quietly and peacefully, if I can."

"By all m...." A switch clicked and the playback ceased. Augie stepped up to the podium. "Our lab techs tell us that female voice matches the voice of Ms. Darcy recorded at the Olympics. You may draw your own conclusions from the conversation."

A hand went up. "Yes?" said Augie.

"That conversation had to have been traced. Where did it come from?"

"Yeah. Well, we know and we don't know."

"What's that mean?"

"Apparently Ms. Darcy was using a repeater."

Horace Macchia looked up at Augie and said, "A what?"

"A repeater. It's a remote transmitter that receives a signal on one frequency and sends it on at a different frequency."

The voice that belonged to the original hand spoke up again: "Well, that can be traced too. Where was it? Did you locate her?"

"We traced it, but we didn't locate her. There was a slight problem." He paused. "The repeater is on the moon." He continued over the buzz of chatter in the room: "It's no problem to pick up a signal originating on the moon. We've put landers there that still send back data. Even ham radio operators bounce signals off the moon from time to time. But we have no way of detecting what signals are sent *to* the moon. Probably every electromagnetic transmission on the planet reaches the moon. If Ms. Darcy is using her moon base as a repeater, which is our guess, we'll never locate her that way. We'll have to do it some other way."

Macchia leaned over and whispered something to Augie, who spoke into the mic: "All of you know Horace Macchia, Assistant Deputy Chief of Staff at the White House. Mr. Macchia has something to say."

As Augie sat down, Macchia stood up and cleared his throat. "I came here straight from the President's national security briefing. We played the tape you just heard for him this morning. The President has decided, and the National Security Committee concurs, that all attempts to locate Ms. Ana Darcy by whatever means available are to cease immediately. She is not considered a threat to the United States.

"I trust I need not tell you how we would look to the voters if our agents were to haul in, by the scruff of her neck, a tiny photogenic young woman who is the most famous athlete of modern times, the person who saved our whole planet from destruction, and the idol of little girls and men of all ages around the world. We will announce to the media this afternoon that Ms. Darcy is no longer being sought by the U. S. government, and issue an invitation to her to come forth and share her knowledge with the world. Let me repeat that phrase: '*no longer being sought*.'" He looked around the room.

"Are there any questions?"



There were no questions.

Special Agent Aldridge folded up his doodling and stuck it in his pocket.

## C H A P T E R    46

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After Matt left for Alpine, Darcy was beginning to hope that her life might be secure, peaceful, and even interesting. If it was lonely, at least she knew how to deal with that. She saw Grandma Méndez every day, and other people on her runs and other outings. It wasn't as though she was on the moon.

She also felt better after talking to Mr. Braithwaite. She no longer worried about meteoroids. Her little television had brought happy news the previous evening, if it could be believed. Apparently, all the people searching for her had been recalled! Instead, she had been invited to come forward and allow herself to be, well, she didn't know what. In any case, she was resolved to decline. Her people would send an official delegation eventually, whether in 50 or 100 years she didn't know or care. At least when they arrived they should find a viable planet.

She was also cheered by Hleo's communication setup, which enabled her to email without fear of being located. Telephone conversations were not going to be frequent, but at least the staged call with Mr. Braithwaite had evidently been detected as Hleo had planned.

She was beginning to enjoy her computer. She renewed her ties with Hleo, who seemed to be lonely himself. He no longer doubted the wisdom of having helped her. She promised to send a report of his service to the Council, in case it were needed. He welcomed her first-person reports from earth, which her people would be hungry to hear about. He even had some good suggestions for things she could investigate in the future. It looked like they could still be a team!

After a bit of searching, she managed to find an email link to Dr. Sledd at the bottom of a webpage of one of his monographs on cryptography. She sent him a formal but friendly message, wishing him well and offering to resume their dis-

cussions by email, if he desired. Next, she found the website of Sul Ross State University in Alpine, and through it was able to email Cheryl Ford. She thanked her for her support during difficult times and asked how her athletic career was going.

Several hours at the computer was all she could stand. She changed into shorts and went out for a run. Later, having showered, made and consumed some excellent (if she did say so herself) tortilla soup with fresh green chilies, and watched the evening news, she read for an hour in Grout's *History of Western Music*. For some reason, that made her yawn uncontrollably. That was no problem—there was little reason to stay up late.

She had just turned out her reading light and pulled up the covers when she heard the unmistakable popping sound of a car rolling over the gravel at the front of the house. Sitting up, she saw headlights sweep around the adobe wall as the car rolled slowly up to her house and stopped. The headlights went out. Her heart leaped into her throat.

In a flash she was at the back door. She opened it and slipped outside. Had she let her identity slip somehow? She stood still, listening. There was the sound of soft footsteps on her little gallery, only one person, it sounded like. She rapidly calculated escape vectors: over the wall, through the gate in back, around the other side of her house and out the front. She was barefoot, but no matter—she would run if she had to. She silently eased along the side of her house until she could peek through the bushes at the corner. A soft knock came from her front door. "Ana? Ana, are you there?"

She knew that voice! "Matt?"

The porch creaked as his weight shifted and he whispered in her direction, "Darcy? Why aren't you in bed?"

And then she was in his arms. They hugged each other with an eagerness that surprised them both. "Let's go inside," Matt whispered.

"We can't."

"Why not?"

"The door's locked."

"Oh, no! I'll get a rock and break a window."

"OK, but let's try the back door first."

Once inside, he hugged her again, fiercely. "Golly, I've missed you. I missed you so much!"

She was feeling strangely emotional herself. With her voice muffled against his warm chest she said, "I missed you too." She pushed back a few inches. "Wait a

minute! Is everything all right? I thought I'd never see you again! Why are you here? What about your article and the book?"

"The article went to press early this week. I brought you a copy. I thought you might be interested. Turn on a light and I'll go get it out of my truck." When he returned he handed her a folded edition of the *Alpine Avalanche*. "Front page, of course. Don't blame me for the headline. That was Crusty's doing."

She opened it to the headline: "Starchild Lands in West Texas, Remembered By Many Local Citizens." She looked at Matt. "Starchild?"

Matt held up his hands in surrender. "I told you; not my idea. Crusty must have seen too many science fiction movies in his youth. Sit down and read it. I'm going to get a drink of water and borrow your facilities."

While she sat by her little reading light, Matt wandered off on his errands, shaking his head that he could so confidently announce to she who lived there that he was going to make use of her bathroom and kitchen, rather than requesting her permission. He'd never done that before. Yet he didn't feel presumptuous. One small step for a man...come to think of it, it was a guy stepping on the moon who'd said that first.

He returned to the front room and sat next to her on the couch while she finished his article. She laid it in her lap and looked at him.

"Well?" he said.

"It's a good article, Matt...."

"Yes?"

"Yes, it is. But...."

"But?"

"But...there's more to it, isn't there?"

"More?"

"Yes, more. You've mentioned most of the people I met, from Dr. Harcroft to the Delbosques to Cheryl and Coach Pérez, but..."

"But?"

"Oh, Matt! You know what I mean. This article makes it seem like all you know is what these people told you. You never say you know me yourself, beyond seeing me on the track with Cheryl and like that."

"Right."

"Well? Why did you leave that out? Wasn't your editor unhappy about that?"

"I never told Crusty I knew you. Remember? I was going to keep quiet on the story until you gave me the OK. Only Cheryl and Mrs. Williams know that we were friends, and both of them agreed not to mention it to anyone."

"But...but why did you do that? Are you saving it for your book?"

"There's not going to be any book, Darcy."

"No book? What do you mean, Matt? What about all the money you were going to make?"

"I don't care about the book any more, Darcy. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that if I wrote it, I'd be so well-known that I could never see you again." He swallowed. "I couldn't stand that. I'd rather be with you than have the money."

She stared at him, no expression on her face.

"I sold my house in Alpine. I closed my bank account. I quit my job. I told Crusty and everyone else that I was moving back to Albuquerque to be close to my parents. They think I'm a loser, but I don't care what they think. If you'll let me be close to you, that's all I care about, Darcy. I love you, Darcy."

He looked at her looking at him. In the light of the one lamp her eyes began to get shiny. She reached for his hand. "Matt, you know people in my family only marry for money or power. I'm sure I told you that. Chief's daughters only marry for money or power."

He stared at her, petrified.

"But, Matt...if you can give up both of those things for me, then I guess I can give up both of them for you. Don't go live with your parents, Matt. Stay here with me? Please?"

Now his own eyes were beginning to sting. He drew her close against him and toppled sideways on the couch, pulling her on top of him. With her hair cascading all over his face he whispered into her ear, "You got yourself a deal."

# BOOK II

## CHAPTER 1

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# NOVEMBER

“Ummph...what the hell?” Matt murmured. Something was patting his eyelid, for the love of Pete. But his head was under the covers, right? No, wait—it wasn’t. There was cold air on his forehead. His head must be exposed to the air in the room.

It must be a cat, trying to wake him up. Dammit! He blew a puff of air towards the suspected cat (he didn’t dare open his eyes). Heavy cat feet tromped down his body and a flabby, soft weight settled over his calves. That would be Mork, the biggest of the three cats, and the most eager to eat. Vibrations against his leg told him his guess was right. Mission accomplished, Mork was waiting for him to finish waking up and break out the cat food. Feeding the cats first thing in the morning—bad idea, he thought for the fiftieth time.

For now, it was so warm and snug under the covers. He stretched slightly, feeling the woman next to him. Her back was to him; he turned toward her and wrapped an arm around her middle, nuzzling the back of her head with his cheek. Her breathing altered briefly and then she stretched too and settled against him, radiating warmth.

This can’t be me, he thought. What did I do to deserve this woman? This is not happening. I’m dreaming—this is way too good to last, way too good....

He stuck his arm out from under the covers and felt for the saucer on the headboard. Finding the apple there, he took a bite out of it. He replaced his arm around her middle.

She stretched again and nestled closer to him, mumbling some words in her native language. He only knew about six words of it (including “Darcy” and “Hleo”). Add that to his list of things to do: learn Luvit, Darcy’s native language.

Mmmm. Her hair smelled nice. She was the only woman he’d ever been confident and comfortable with in bed. Not that he had had that much experience, but he’d always felt sort of on trial before. Darcy was more a companion. He had no idea how that had happened, but it was a revelation, and excellent fun.

What the blazes was he going to tell his parents? They thought he’d taken some time off from his newspaper reporter job to help his grandmother get her property fixed up. That was true, actually. It just wasn’t the whole truth.

So what could he say? “Oh, by the way, mamá, you know that woman you saw on tv who won six gold medals in the Olympics? The one who disappeared after she warned everyone about the two meteoroids? Well, guess what? She’s staying in Grandma’s foreman’s house and I am living with her and we’re in love and, and....”

No, he couldn’t imagine telling his parents anything like that. For several reasons.

One reason he couldn’t was that he wasn’t all that sure she was actually in love with him. He was head-over-heels in love with her. She liked him; he knew that. She just wasn’t that demonstrative. Maybe it came from living by herself on the moon for something like seventy years while she watched things develop on earth. (And that reminded him that he was in bed hugging a hundred year old woman. If anyone had told him he would be doing that....) Or maybe she didn’t want to commit herself. But he had to be honest: maybe she just didn’t love him....

Another reason he couldn’t tell his parents was that she was probably the most sought-after person on the planet. After successfully waking people up to the threat from those meteoroids, she dropped completely out of sight—to rural New Mexico, of all places, with him, of all people.

As it was, politicians, biologists, linguists, historians, sociologists, political scientists, theologians, and ordinary people as well as nuts of a thousand kinds wanted to know more about her, to see and hear her, to read about her, to be close to her. She was not an outgoing person under the best of conditions, and she had no desire to live under a spotlight. If the slightest hint got out as to where she was a salivating throng of media hotshots would be upon them within the hour, and their present happy lives would come to a screeching halt. No, he could tell no one about her, not even his parents.



The third reason was that over the past three months Darcy seemed to actually be enjoying their modest existence within the Reyes family compound. She was living a largely self-directed life, learning and studying on her own, and making careful contact with the world via her internet link.

Her modest needs, and his own, too, for that matter, were easily accommodated. She had a generous income from licensing the rights to her athletic images, managed by the law firm that sponsored her during the Olympics. As far as he could tell Darcy was happy. The downside of her income was that it was generated by the publication of her images, which kept her in the public eye. She was as famous as she had ever been, perhaps more so, by virtue of having dropped out of sight. He had read that her Wheaties boxes had become so desirable that they were being forged. He couldn't go into town without seeing her image on a magazine at the checkout counter or in a newspaper.

For now, though, he was living a dream. She was sweet-tempered, curious about everything, stimulating company, and, now that things had settled down, had revealed a lively sense of humor. Heretofore, he had preferred his girl friends a little heftier, but that no longer mattered. She had made a believer out of him. If only she loved him....

In a few minutes he would get out of bed, put some wood in the woodstove and warm the place up, pour out some crunchies for the cats, and serve some orange juice to his girl friend from outer space. Life was good.

She rested a warm hand on the arm he had wrapped around her ribs and mumbled a couple more words—English or outer space? He couldn't tell.

They liked sleeping in a cold room in the winter. Darcy would have been willing to get up and stoke the stove, but Matt felt it was the male's duty to do it for her. She had a thing about weather. The worse it was the more she loved to be out in it, even though she had no love for the cold. Earlier in the fall he had missed her during a thunderstorm. He found her standing outside, barefoot, her t-shirt and shorts soaked through, hair streaming, wiping water out of her eyes and laughing. Maybe it came from being cooped up all those years in her moon station, or maybe her home planet didn't have storms like that. He wondered how she'd like the spring sandstorms that were common in the desert.

She normally fed their three cats, not that he would have minded. Darcy liked cats, and cats liked Darcy. She could get them to do things he'd never dreamed were possible. It must be a wavelength thing; he had no idea. Maybe they thought she was the mama cat—hard to know what a cat thought, really. Or Darcy either, come to that.

She stretched again and straightened her body, turning towards him, her hair cascading over her face. Why did it never tangle? he wondered—another of life's many little mysteries. She put a hand on his chest and tucked her face under his chin. A wave of tenderness swept over him. He put his hand on the back of her head and gently stroked her hair.

It was still hard to conceive she was from another planet in another solar system light years from earth. He believed it on one level and yet on another level it was hard to accept, just as she herself seemed completely ordinary in some ways and totally extraordinary in others. His finger softly traced her ear.

Her voice was a whisper he could barely make out.

"Are you trying to wake me up so I'll feed you?"

"No ma'am," he whispered back. "Mork already woke me up. I'm just studying your ear. Let's stay in bed and I'll keep studying you, all day long."

"Mmmm," she whispered, burying her head deeper under his chin.

He wrapped his free arm around her and pressed her to him, just as a heavy weight struck his hip. That was followed instantly by vicious hissing and spitting and rocketing cat feet racing across the bed. Something in the bedroom crashed to the floor.

"Hell," he said under his breath, and threw the covers off and got up to defuse the incipient cat war with an offering of food.

"I'll be back. Stay right there."

"Mmmm."

Darcy stretched again and peeped out from under the covers, checking the state of the sky visible through the cottonwood branches outside: clear, blue, and cold. It looked to be a beautiful day. She reached up to the saucer and took a bite out of the other side of the apple.

She heard Matt set the stool back on its legs and pad off toward the kitchen, preceded and followed by meowing cats. She chewed, swallowed, stretched again, and pulled the pillow under her head.

She felt safe and happy for the first time in a long time, since childhood, really. She had not been in danger as a young woman, particularly, but she had certainly been torn by forces beyond her control in her father's administration. As the leader of the Tribal Council he had been responsible for maintaining order among the tribes, and his eligible daughter was one of the biggest pieces on his chess board—except she had not cared to be a chess piece in a political game. Sending her on the grand mission to find the home planet solved two problems—it was an honor but also a way to move her aside in the expectation that her younger sister would be more compliant.

She remembered clearly the pre-launch farewell ceremony, half celebration and half funeral, so long ago. Everyone understood the situation. Her father was filled with pride yet at the same time terribly distraught, to be bidding his eldest daughter farewell, forever. She herself had been resolute, honored but also frightened. The only way she got through it was by shutting down her emotions. That was still a problem for her.

The mission itself had been fairly dangerous. Although it had been carefully planned, no one had ever tried anything like it before. If something had gone seriously wrong, she would have been unable to summon help. The best they could do was to provide her with Hleo, a reliable and wise advisor to the kingdom for many years. Before his death, he gave his permission to have his neural structure copied into a machine. He navigated their way to earth's moon, set up the lunar base, and oversaw its operation and the observation of earth.

For the first time in her life she was free of politics and larger obligations. She could be herself, once she discovered just who that person was. It was wonderful to settle down with a pleasant companion and continue her studies of earth and its peoples while right in the middle of them. There were plenty of horrible things about earth, and plenty of bad people here, but that wasn't the whole story by any means. Even Hleo, still on the moon, seemed to understand that now.

The lid clanged down on the metal garbage can they kept the cat food in. Matt was an exceptionally kind and supportive man, her best friend in the entire universe. She'd never understood much about the care and feeding of a man, but she wanted to try, with Matt. She knew a good deal about male aggressiveness and assertiveness, having grown up in the middle of it. Matt did not seem to be typical in that regard, but she still wanted to nourish his friendship if she could.

He had been impressed, for example, by her admission that while she was genetically structured to have exceptionally fast reflexes, she wasn't quite as strong as most humans. So she let him lug the forty pound sacks of cat food from the store to the car and then into the house. If it had been up to her she would have simply bought the stuff in ten pound bags. But Matt felt better about saving a little money and lugging the heavy bags around, so she was careful to thank him for his exertions.

She had seen him tired and frustrated, but he'd never been short with her. Maybe his penchant for staying in shape helped. As long as she'd known him he'd exercised, but he seemed to enjoy it even more in her company. She took secret pleasure in his muscularity. When he crushed her to him so she could hardly breathe, she felt thrilled rather than threatened. Before Matt, she would have been terrified had anyone done that to her.

From the next room came the sound of the wood stove being opened, the clanking of the poker stirring up the coals, and then a series of thumps as fresh wood was tossed in.

For the moment, she'd luxuriate in bed and see if Matt kept his promise to return. The odds were excellent, she thought. She had a schedule for the day—she loved schedules—but it was flexible, and she could begin a little late.

All the same, her current pleasant situation was probably tenuous. It would be foolish to expect it to last. In fact, she needed to work on a Plan B, and maybe a Plan C too, just to be safe. She'd have to add that to her schedule.

"There's orange juice when you're ready," Matt's voice penetrated the covers.

"Thanks," she said, sweeping back the covers. He slid in next to her.

"I'm cold! Warm me up!"

She slid an arm and leg over him and snuggled against his chest. "I'll try."

## C H A P T E R 2

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“Hey, Matt, what are you doing?” Darcy had on the black wig she wore whenever she left the house. Matt seldom thought about it any more.

“Huh? Oh, I’m changing the washers in Grandma’s sink faucet. It’s been dripping—maybe you noticed.”

“Yeah, I did. I thought you said those had little cartridges that you just replaced.”

“The one over your sink does. This is an old one. See here? These rubber washers screw down onto the seats and shut off the flow of water.”

Darcy picked one of the washers out of the little plastic box on the counter and peered at it. “Yeah, I see how that works. Pretty simple, really.”

“You’d think so. But my experience is that nothing, but nothing, in plumbing is ever as simple as you’d like it to be. What have you been doing this morning?”

“A bunch of things. I’ve been online shopping for a harpsichord!”

“A what?”

“A harpsichord.” She was about to add “Don’t you know what a harpsichord is?” but thought the better of it—no need to put him on the spot. Instead she said “It’s a keyboard instrument, sort of the grandfather of the piano.”

“Golly, no kidding! Why do you want one of those? Don’t you like that electronic keyboard you have now?”

“Well, no, not really. Nothing can equal the sound of a real harpsichord. You’ll have to hear the one at the university—it’s incredibly beautiful. My music teacher says I’m learning fast and the electronic one will just hold me back. Dr. Kirkpatrick helped me find a fellow who makes them! He’s going to make one for me!”

"Is that right? That's amazing! Aren't they expensive?"

"We can afford it Matt. Believe me, we can afford it."

At that moment, the screen door slammed and Grandma Méndez walked in with an armful of mail. She'd been gardening, apparently. She was wearing a house dress and track shoes, and the knees of the dress were smudged with dirt.

Matt's grandmother was as hale and hearty as an 80 year old could possibly be, even if she was no longer up to the duties of major household maintenance. She had grown fond of Darcy. Teaching her poor, deprived "Argentinian" lodger the ins and outs of New Mexican domestic life had become one of her most cherished tasks.

"It's getting to where we get so much mail I can hardly carry it in from the box! And most of it's just trash! I swear, tomorrow I'm going to take that little cart out there with me, just in case."

"Buenos días, Abuelita," said Darcy. Grandma Méndez loved Darcy's honorific "Abuelita." She had made herself Darcy's Spanish tutor as well. "Are you going to be ready for lunch pretty soon?"

"¡Ay, claro que sí! I spent half the morning working in the garden, and I'm hungry! What strikes your fancy today?"

Abuelita Méndez had happily included cooking in her instructional program, but now that Darcy had moved beyond the basics, the three of them usually prepared and ate only the noon meal in Abuelita's house, being social in an almost old-world fashion in the middle of the day. At night, the old lady turned in early after only a light snack, allowing Matt and Darcy a more intimate meal in their own house.

"I was thinking, maybe some green chili rajas?" The old lady's eyes brightened. "And some pork chops in sour cream? I put some artichoke hearts in to marinate last night. Matt could help me make some ceviche. We could eat in less than an hour. Would that be all right?"

The old lady shook her head. "Ay, que mija! What a cook you have become!" She pinched Matt on the arm. "Matt, listen to me. You must marry this girl. You hear me, nieto de mi alma? Stop messing around and marry her!"

"I hear you, Abuelita" said Matt, wiping off the counter and glancing at Darcy, who was solemnly regarding a pile of fresh vegetables. "I promise, we'll talk about it."

"Bueno. A promise is a promise. No tengas como vano el consejo del anciano (Don't consider the advice of an old person useless.). Now, let me wash this dirt off and I'll help fix lunch."

Abuelita Méndez had a repertoire of thousands of “dichos,” the wise sayings of the ages, ready for all occasions. The problem, Matt realized, was that she was often right.

## CHAPTER 3

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Matt was cleaning up their tiny kitchen after a pleasant late supper of caldo con arroz y chilis verdes, thinking it really was true—Darcy had become a wonderful cook. She always said the flavors and smells earth had to offer were two of the best things about it. She certainly had a talent for combining ingredients.

She was sitting at their little dining table by the woodstove, barefoot and with damp hair after her post-exercise shower, jotting notes in a small notebook. She saw him looking at her and smiled.

“Making plans for your harpsi-thing?”

“No....”

“Thinking up more recipes?”

“No, not really. Making notes for something else. Would you believe I’m going to have a press conference?”

Matt dropped the metal mixing bowl he was drying. Cats shot off in all directions, headed for safe places. “You’re WHAT?” Into his mind jumped a nightmare vision of traffic helicopters stationed overhead and satellite trucks lined up down the highway. “I thought you wanted to stay out of sight! What’s the deal with a press conference?”

“I still want to stay out of sight. I think it’ll be all right, Matt. It’s going to be an online press conference. Hleo will help set it up.”

“What? You mean on the internet?” He picked up the mixing bowl.

“Yeah. People will be able to ask questions and I can respond, but no one will be able to locate me. Hleo will see to that. I really had to do it, Matt. It’s been incredible the pressure people have been under because of me. Honestly, you wouldn’t believe it.



"I mean, it stands to reason that the United Nations would want me to address them, what with me being from a society of humans unknown to them before this. I've told them I am not here in any official capacity and have no diplomatic standing or mission. I'm just a private citizen. But they still want me to make an appearance or something. Mind you, I haven't talked to them directly. The law firm told them for me. They've felt a lot more pressure than I have.

"And the President of this country, Matt, is trying to meet with me. I don't want to do it. I'm afraid it'll get all political and I can't stand that. My people wouldn't want that either, I'm sure, not without their input.

"And then there are the scientists and scholars. I sympathize with them more than with the diplomats and politicians. I want to explore our common roots too. But I just can't walk into some lab or conference and say 'Here I am. Study me.'

"So I've agreed to hold an online press conference, with the help of Hleo and John McLauphin. You remember him, right?"

"I sure do. He's that political analyst on television who did your interview after the Olympics. He seems trustworthy."

"I think so too. It'll be sort of a slow motion press conference, in writing. It may even take several days. Maybe I can calm people down a little. Staying out of sight like this just serves to make me more mysterious...."

"I don't know, Darcy. I see you every day. We even sleep together. You're still mysterious to me."

Her face lit up in the smile that always lifted Matt's heart. "Good. That makes us even. You're sort of a puzzle yourself."

Matt's face got serious. "Oh," he said.

"Oh, what?"

"Abuelita Méndez."

"Oh. *That* 'Oh.'"

"Yeah, that 'Oh.' I promised."

"Yes, you did. Well, we talked about it."

"No, no. We can't quit now. How about it, Darcy? Why don't we get married? I love you, Darcy, I can't believe how much I love you. You love me, or I think you do. At least we don't scream at each other and throw things. That's a plenty good reason to get married. Let's do it!"

"I agree that's a wonderful reason to get married, Matt."

She pushed her notebook away and sat back in her chair.

"At first, I didn't want to get to know anyone on this planet. I was scared of everyone, sometimes with good reason. You met me about that time. But I outgrew that after I'd been here a while.

“Then, when you and I began driving all over west Texas and New Mexico and became closer, I didn’t want to think about getting married because I’ve never wanted to get married. That’s basically the reason I was sent here, you know, because I refused proposals, not once but three times.”

“Now, I’ve put all that behind me. My people almost certainly won’t take me back. I’m on my own now. I can do what I want. But I’m not sure what I want, Matt!” She looked down at the table. “I just don’t know if I want to get married, to you or anyone. Maybe something’s wrong with me, Matt, you think?” There was a catch in her voice.

“Aww, Darcy.” Matt knelt by her chair and wrapped his arms around her waist. She hugged his neck and laid her cheek on the top of his head.

“There’s nothing wrong with you, amor. I want you to be happy. With me or without me, married or not, I just want you to be happy. Married or not, I still love you.” He was hoping that she’d say she loved him, but she didn’t. At least she kept hold of his neck. He could feel her breath in his hair.

## CHAPTER 4

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At three pm the next afternoon Darcy was typing furiously at her computer keyboard. She and John McLauphin were putting their “press conference” together, and at the same time she also had a running correspondence going with her old friend Dr. William Sledd, the retired professor in Alpine. Sledd was slowly gathering data (he called it a “corpus”) of words and word sequences in Darcy’s native language and working with other linguists to prepare a paper for a linguistics journal. Once it was published, the world’s language experts would go to work trying to place the language accurately historically and geographically, and perhaps begin to understand where Darcy’s ancestors had come from originally. Darcy was as interested in this as Sledd was.

She and McLauphin were sorting out questions submitted by various journalists and others, and exchanging ideas on which to answer first and how. He had never done a press conference like this before but his unerring instinct for cutting right to the heart of an issue was helping things go fairly efficiently.

She stopped typing and sat back in her chair to think. Through the living room window she could see Matt happily waxing his new pickup truck, his pride and joy. Her thoughts turned from verb conjugations to Matt himself. She was busy nearly every minute of every day, online with John McLauphin, Dr. Sledd, one of the lawyers at Benning, Bynum, Caxton, Braithwaite, or Hleo, her assistant and comrade at the moon station, or practicing her music, or reading something or listening to music, or exercising, or cooking. She was fully occupied, and quite content.

But she wondered about Matt. He had quit his reporting job in Alpine and wasn’t looking for another yet. So far he seemed quite happy to stay mostly

within the Méndez family compound with her and Abuelita Méndez. He found plenty to do while she was otherwise engaged. In fact, the whole compound had begun to look less run down and more like a home in active daily use, which it was.

She had some notion of male pride, though. Would he come to resent the fact that she was world famous, always busy, and rich beyond their dreams? She'd seen no reason to discuss finances with him, but her estate lawyer, Mr. Caxton, assured her that her worth was over ten million dollars and growing steadily. That opened a lot of possibilities.

She pushed back from her desk, slipped on her tennies and her black hair, and walked out into the brilliant sunshine to see how Matt was doing. The wind was making a gentle sighing sound high in the trees, and in the distance banks of wispy clouds matched the whiteness of the sand dunes on the western horizon.

He beamed when he saw her walking up. "Hey, Ana! You wanna help?"

Matt was good about remembering to use her adopted name wherever they might be overheard. Alone together, he called her Darcy, which although it was her "last" name seemed natural to them both.

"Sure! Tell me what to do!"

"Take this soft cloth, spray just a little of this stuff on it, and buff the paint lightly until the streaks are gone. See?"

"Sure!" She tried it. "How's that?"

"Perfect. It'll shine the chrome too!"

"Your truck is already shiny, Matt. How much shinier can it be?"

"I don't know." He rolled his eyes at her. "That's what we're going to find out."

She buffed happily for a good fifteen minutes until they came together at the front, finishing up. His buffing elbow bumped hers several times and he gave her a bigger bump with his hip. She bumped him back and then he grabbed her around the middle and tickled her ribs. She shrieked and bent back one of his little fingers.

"Whoa!" he hollered. "Uncle!"

"Uncle? What does that mean?"

"It means stop! I give up! You almost broke my finger!"

"Oh, surely not. I just bent it a little! You tickled me! I haven't been tickled in a hundred years!"

He looked at her. "Yeah, well." She might have meant that literally. Her knowledge of idiomatic expressions was sketchy. She could actually have meant a hundred years. "If you're not careful, it might happen again a lot sooner than

that!" He feinted a grab at her ribs, but Darcy, ever so much faster than he was, just raised her eyebrows.

"Now let's do the windows."

They began polishing the windows.

"Matt, you remember I asked you about those migrant kids the other day?"

They had watched while fifty or more workers harvested a nearby field of onions by hand. It looked like very hard, dirty work. Some of the workers looked to be children.

"Yes, I remember. What about them?"

"Do the children go to school?"

"They're supposed to. It's the law. But in practice, they miss a lot. And they're always moving. If they're in school, they're not making the family any money. Some of them graduate from high school but a lot don't. It's a tough way to live."

"I was thinking, Matt. What if there were a school on wheels that could follow them as they move?"

"Well, sure, that would be good. But it would be expensive. No school district would pay for it because the kids are never in one district that long. They're not even in the same state that long. Theoretically a mobile school could be a good thing, but it's not likely to happen."

"We could pay for it, Matt."

"Huh? You mean us, you and me?"

"Sure. You wouldn't believe how much money those lawyers have made for me, for us. We could never spend it all on ourselves, and if we tried it would be such a waste. Why not do some good with it?"

"But...but, how? If you start spending big bucks like that, the reporters won't be far behind. Then everyone will know where you are."

"There are other ways it could be done. We could set up a foundation. The law firm could do that. They could even run it for us. You could advise them. You know the situation here, and what would work."

"Gosh! You have the money for that?"

"I think so. I think we do."

"You keep saying 'we,' but you won't marry me!"

"I'm sorry about that, Matt. Give me a little time, please. You helped make that money possible. We don't need that much. Why shouldn't we do something with it that will help someone?"

"That's a real good idea." He shook his head. "Let's investigate that."

"And there's something else too."

"What?"

“Remember that book you were going to write that you didn’t write?”

“Of course! If I had written it, I’d have been so notorious that people would follow me everywhere and I couldn’t get within twenty miles of you. I still don’t want that to happen. What makes you ask about the book?”

“I think you ought to write it.”

“What? I don’t get it. Why do you say that?”

“Dr. Sledd, Mr. McLauphin, all the specialists I talk to, say that this is an important historical event. It needs to be recorded, even if it’s not published yet. If you write it now, all the details will be fresh. Some day in the future, it can be published, and it will be all the more useful then. I told you, I have no idea what my life expectancy might be. I’m already old, even by our standards back home. I may not live that long, Matt. You need to write that book now!”

“Oooh, Darcy!” He forgot to use her public name. He dropped his paper towel and folded her into his arms. “Don’t say that. Don’t think that. I can’t stand it! I love you, babe!”

He even forgot to wish she’d say she loved him back.

## CHAPTER 5

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When Matt returned from the grocery store, Darcy was dicing onions in the kitchen, the late afternoon sun lighting up her cutting board. Evidently she was making some tasty dish for their evening meal. It was a good job for someone with her reflexes—she was making short work of those onions. Matt set down his grocery bags and stood behind her, massaging her slender neck and shoulders with his fingers.

“Hey,” he said.

“Mmmm, that feels good.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“You just did, didn’t you?”

“OK. Can I ask you something else?”

“You did it again!”

“Arrrr. OK, then, can I ask you a question after this one?”

“I guess so.”

“Have you ever tried drinking wine?”

“Nooo....”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know, really. For one thing, we have, or we had, alcohol at home. It was a problem sometimes.”

“Hmmm. Well, it’s a problem here too, sometimes. But for most people it’s not. It’s just that you take such delight in new tastes, I was thinking you really ought to try wine. The flavors can be incredible.”

“You think so, huh?”

"I do. In fact, I got you a surprise at the grocery store. They were having a sale—any six bottles of wine for ten percent off. The wine guy at the store helped me pick an assortment that would appeal to someone from outer space."

"How thoughtful of him! I wonder how he knew which to choose?"

"Actually, he couldn't be sure. That's why I got six. One or two is bound to be nice. Let's open a couple and sample them with supper, how about?"

"I don't know, Matt. That was thoughtful of you. I'd hate to mess up my mind, though, or slow my reflexes...."

"Oh, it'll be fine. It's controllable—just try a little, and see if you like it! We don't have to drink a whole bottle. It'll keep! Besides, if it does mess up your mind, you might marry me!"

"You goof!" She dug an elbow into his midsection. "All right, I'll try some. But not enough to marry you. Not yet, anyway."

"Great! I can hope, at least!"

An hour later they were cleaning up the kitchen after supper. Mork and Foosh (Darcy assured him that was a common pet name back home) were dozing contentedly on a stool and a chair, respectively. Eleanor, the third cat, was sitting as if petrified on a window sill, staring outside.

"Man, that was a good supper! That red sauce was incredible! What do you call it?"

"I don't have a name for it. I never made it before. It's sort of like that red sauce they serve at La Posta, didn't you think?"

"Sort of. Only better, much better. Wow!"

"I'm glad you liked it. I liked the wine!"

"Good for you!"

"I thought the cabernet was better than the merlot, but my favorite is the beaujolais. What does 'oaky' taste like? The label on the merlot mentioned 'oaky notes.'"

"Darned if I know. I never tried to eat an oak tree. Can you feel the alcohol at all?"

"I think so. I've heard people talk about feeling a 'buzz.' That's kind of what I guess I feel."

"Excellent!" He hung up the dish towel. "Even if you won't marry me, maybe I'll still be able to catch you and haul you off and have my way with you!"

"I'd like to see you try!"

Just as she got to the word 'try' he bent over, swept a hand behind her knees, and picked her up in his arms. "Wa...!" she said, as he tossed her a few inches in



the air to get a better hold on her. She wrapped both arms around his neck as he squeezed her tightly against his chest.

"You're not much heavier than a sack of cat food," he said, "but a lot sweeter, fortunately!"

"You're scaring the cats!" she said. It was true. Mork and Foosh were regarding them with eyes as big as saucers.

"We don't want to do that. Let's leave them in peace." He stepped sideways through the doorway to the bedroom and laid her gently on the bedspread. Her eyes were twinkling.

"I believe that's the best money I ever spent in a grocery store." He kneeled by the bed and studied her. "Are you OK?"

"Sure. I'm just pretending to be fuzzy-headed and helpless."

"Ah. Then let me help you."

He pulled off her socks.

"You have the cutest little toes. Do you know that game with toes?"

"Game?"

"Yeah." He grabbed a foot. "This little piggy went to market. This little piggy stayed home...."

She started laughing.

"...this little piggy had roast beef. And this little piggy had none. And THIS little piggy cried 'Wee, wee, wee,' all the way home!"

She yelped and pulled her legs up.

"I thought you were helpless!"

"I was pretending! Two can play that game, you know!"

"I don't think so," he said, raising his eyebrows. "I'm bigger than you are."

In a flash she grabbed his hand and curled his fingers into his palm, pressing them back against themselves.

"Ow!"

She rotated his arm until it was behind his back.

"Hey!"

Then she reached between his legs and goosed him.

"Yeow!" He lurched all over the room, knocking over a chair and a stool, until she let go, laughing like a madwoman. She sat on the bed, still laughing, tears streaming from her eyes.

"Jesus!" he said, standing bent over at an angle. "I can't believe that! How the hell did you do that?"

She couldn't answer. She was hiccupping now. Finally she pressed her hands to her cheeks and looked at him with a more or less straight face.

"Cousins. I grew up with dozens of cousins. They played pretty rough." She wiped a tear from her cheek and hiccupped again.

"Damn! I like a woman who can take care of herself. I even like a woman who can make a rhyme every time. But you're a miserable failure at pretending to be helpless!"

"Poor, poor Matt. I'm sorry. Is there any way I can make it up to you?" She pulled her t-shirt over her head, tossing it on the bed.

"Well...."

She stood up, unsnapped her jeans, and stepped out of them.

"Well, since you asked, I guess you could help me with these shirt buttons."

Once their clothes were out of the way and the covers pulled back, Matt wrapped his arms around Darcy and pulled her tightly to him.

"Oof!" she huffed, holding her breath.

"God, I love you." He rolled on top of her and she put her arms around him and hugged him back. He freed his arms and propped himself up on his elbows. With his thumbs he gently smoothed her eyebrows while he looked into her eyes.

"This is nice, Matt."

"Oh, man, yeah!"

"I've wondered. Are you disappointed that I'm, that, well...you know how men are supposed to prefer women who have big, um...?"

"I know what you mean. You can say it."

"Matt, my background was pretty strict. We didn't talk much about stuff like that, not with men, at least."

"No, I'm not disappointed. In fact, I'm delighted. You couldn't be more beautiful. If I had it in my power to make the most beautiful, most fun-to-be-with woman, she would be exactly like you. Maybe she wouldn't grab me by the cojones, though...."

"That's sweet, Matt. You can't have everything, you know."

"To be fair, we men generally assume that women prefer men who have big, uh, well, you know...."

"I know what you mean. You don't have to worry about that. In fact, I think yours is getting bigger."

"By golly, I think you're right. Mmmmm."

She shifted her hips and opened her legs a bit, resting her heels on his calves. He moved inside her slowly, cradling her face between his palms. She kissed him gently, and then he lowered his head and brushed her ear with his lips, breathing softly.

Holding her to him, he rolled carefully until she was on top, her hair spilling down onto his face. She kissed him three, four, five times, and then she rolled them back to their original position and gradually, things became more urgent.

She looked into his eyes the whole time, as he looked into hers. He had no idea what his face showed, but hers was a study in focus. Somehow, their faces controlled their bodies, signaling imperceptibly back and forth, with more and more intensity, until finally her face told him that they'd arrived, and then they both slowed in release.

He buried his face next to hers, half out of breath.

"Oh, my God!" he gasped.

It was all he could do to slide his hands under her back and press her against him.

"That was so nice. God, I love you. Marry me, Darcy. Marry me!"

She didn't answer, but he felt her take a long, slow breath. He eased back and looked at her. Tears were welling up in her eyes.

She wrapped her arms around his back and pulled him down onto her, blinking the tears away.

She still didn't say a word.

The next morning Matt awoke alone. The covers on Darcy's side were thrown back, and he had not even a hungry cat for company.

He found her sitting at the dining table, staring out the window at the dawn creeping over the mountain, a cup of tea on the table in front of her. Foosh and Eleanor were in two of the other chairs, their paws doubled in front of them and their eyes closed.

He padded up behind her and laid his hands gently on her shoulders, pressing his thumbs lightly against her neck muscles.

"Hey."

She bent her head sideways until her cheek touched his hand.

"How you doin'?"

She looked down at her tea cup.

He knelt beside her and brushed the hair that hid her face back over her shoulder. Her eyes were brimming with moisture. She shook her head and sniffled.

"What?"

"I'm sorry, Matt."

"Sorry? For heaven's sake, what for?"

"I don't know what's wrong with me." She swallowed and sniffled again. "I just want to be a normal person, Matt. I feel I am a normal person. But what if

I'm not? Maybe I don't know what normal is. I don't even know what I want, Matt!"

She sniffled again. He laid his head in her lap and hugged her knees. The morning sunlight was working its way down the cottonwood trees outside. The rustling leaves gave a vibrating effect to the sunlight. She stroked his hair.

"Darcy, Darcy. I love you. You know that. I've only ever loved you. I'll always love you. But I don't know if you love me. I think you might. I hope you do. You've never said...."

"I'm sorry, Matt. I'm such a mess. You're so patient with me, so sweet. But there's more—I was going to tell you today. I have to go away, Matt."

"You what?" He sat up straight and looked at her in panic. "Away? What does that mean, 'away'?"

"Just for a few days, Matt. I promised Dr. Sledd that I would let a doctor examine me. And I need to meet with that lawyer, Mr. Braithwaite, and sign some stuff to set up our foundation. I knew you wouldn't like it, but it'll be all right, Matt. I'll be back before you know it."

"I'll go with you!"

"Not a good idea, Matt. I'm comfortable with my other identity. I'll be all right. I have to meet several people who'll know who I am. If you are with me you'll be identified too. It's just as important that you not be known as that I am not. We don't want someone to trace you back to me...to us."

"Alma, alma mía! I can't stand the idea of you traveling alone! I'll make sure no one who knows who you are sees me with you."

"Still not a good idea, Matt. Hleo has worked it all out. You know Hleo would never let me take foolish chances. I'll be gone less than a week." She caressed his hair.

"Maybe the change of scene will give me some perspective. Maybe I'll feel more confident then. Maybe I'll feel normal. Maybe I'll know what to do with myself."

"Oh, jeez." He laid his head back in her lap.

He had a bad feeling about her going off by herself, but he didn't want to make a scene—it wouldn't change her mind. He'd seen husbands stomping around forbidding this or demanding that, but he couldn't be like that. Hell, he wasn't even a husband.

Darcy was not normal, though he'd never tell her he thought so. She was alert, resourceful, and amazingly able to take care of herself. But it was a big world, and she would be a small person alone in it. Anything could happen. Thinking about it gave him the fantods.

He poured himself some orange juice and nuked a quesadilla while Darcy checked her email. She was probably right about Hleo working things out. From what he knew of him, Hleo was one canny dude. Darcy had slept for most of the seventy years she'd been on the moon, only waking every five or six years for updated information. Hleo had been on the job the whole time.

Darcy told him Hleo had followed the development of the internet since its earliest days, replicating at their base the computers in use on earth at any given time and learning to hack with the best of them, from the beginning. It was thanks to him that Darcy was able to communicate securely online. The government was no longer looking for her (or so they said) but there were plenty of others who'd love to locate her if they could. Thanks to Hleo setting up, in effect, a server on the moon, no one was able to trace beyond that point.

It might actually be good for Darcy to get out on her own for a while. She still hadn't seen much of her new home planet, after all. She should be able to travel anonymously. She was adept at disguises, thanks to her friend Luisa Delbosque in Alpine, who had coached her in theatrical makeup techniques. They had two cell phones, and they could call each other any time and even check email. Plus the law firm had seen that Darcy had a valid Barbadian passport and permanent resident status as a visiting professor.

The bottom line was that he didn't own her. She was her own person. If she insisted on traveling alone, he didn't have much say in the matter. He'd miss her terribly and worry himself sick, but what did she care? She said it would just be for a week or less. Maybe it would be all right. He'd do his best to hope so.

## CHAPTER 6

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The whole drive to the El Paso airport, all Matt could think about was Darcy's safety. He felt silly, like a mother hen, but he couldn't help it. At least he was able to keep from talking ceaselessly about it. They'd already made their arrangements. Darcy was wearing jeans, tennies, a long-sleeved shirt, and was carrying only a backpack with clothes, bathroom stuff, a couple books, and some snacks and water. She wouldn't have to check any luggage. She had heard someone on television say that it was unwise to take anything on a trip that one could not carry at a dead run for a half mile. She thought that was a good idea. That's why she never wore shoes with heels or straps—in case she had to take flight suddenly.

Darcy even seemed to enjoy the hassle of airport parking, checking in, and walking long distances. It was all new to her, Matt realized. At the entrance to the security checkpoint he gave her a long hug and two kisses, and watched her progress through the various stations without problem. She turned and waved with a glorious smile and then slung her backpack over her shoulder and strode off down the concourse, looking like a college student on spring break.

Darcy found the proper departure lounge quickly enough and chose a seat against a wall where she would be out of the way. She pulled out a book and began reading, looking up every couple pages to quickly scan her surroundings.

Through the immense windows of the lounge she could see several airplanes parked nearby, runways beyond with more planes taxiing here and there, and in the distance, the Franklin Mountains glowing in the sunny dry air. Several dozen children were standing at the windows or horse playing under a television show-

ing a baseball game. It was all noisy, with the smell of hot grease from the food court adding its own note of chaos.

People were milling about in the lounge and on the concourse. Darcy noted yet again how slowly and clumsily most of them moved, as if they gave no thought at all to their actions. Besides the children, there were young men and women in uniforms of several kinds, older people in suits with briefcases—business people, probably—parents, elderly people, one woman in a wheelchair, and a fair number of what looked to be students, among whom Darcy figured she would be counted by any casual observer. Differences of social class, if any, were hard to make out.

A few of the young men glanced in her direction but except for that she seemed to be ignored. She managed to absorb some of the information in her book, a history of pre-Roman tribes of northern Europe, despite the occasional muted thunder of jets taking off outside. Her flight was on time—a half hour to go. So far, so good.

When boarding was finally called, Darcy was surprised to notice that some passengers were already comfortably seated in the front part of the airplane—first class, she remembered from when Hleo bought her ticket, much more expensive. There weren't many, and some were better dressed than those in line with her, even though others looked just as informal. Where had they come from? Hmm...maybe this was a social division she had missed. These people were paying twice what she was to fly the same distance, for all of one hour. That must mean something. She'd have to check it out, later.

The ticket Hleo had purchased included assignment to a window seat. Knowing Hleo, she wouldn't have been surprised if he had studied a map of west Texas and figured out which side of the plane would have afforded the most educational view of the land forms she was to fly over. It was only a one hour flight to Dallas, but Hleo had reserved her another window seat on the Dallas to Miami leg as well.

He would have had no control over the seat next to her, though, which was claimed by a very large, fair young man in a blue uniform wearing a little round white hat. It turned out to be a good opportunity for her to practice her conversational skills. The man seemed especially interested in her, at least until she mentioned a fiancé. She soon learned that his name was Jim Miller, that he was a petty officer in the Navy, that he had enlisted in the Navy because he was from El Paso and thought the ocean might be better than the desert, and that he was headed to Norfolk, Virginia, to rejoin the Dwight Eisenhower, a "bird farm."

She must have looked confused by that, because he added, "An aircraft carrier. We call it a 'bird farm' because of all the airplanes it carries."

"Ah," she said.

"Are you a student?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Where?"

"At Miami International University." She gave a silent thanks to Hleo, who had supplied her with a cover story for just such occasions. She had documentation as a professor, but this didn't seem like the time for it.

"That's cool. Where are you from? I mean, you have a slight accent, and you didn't know what a 'bird farm' was."

"I'm from Barbados."

"No lie? I know where that is! The ship put in there once, last year. It's a beautiful place."

"Yes, it is."

"Hey, that's also where that Olympic athlete is from...what's her name, the one who's from another planet! Darcy! Ana Darcy! Do you know her?"

"No, not really. She only trained on Barbados for a couple of months. I was in school in Miami."

"Man, oh man. She must be something! You must have heard about her, right? I saw all the Olympics I could, when I wasn't standing watch, and I've never seen an athlete like her, male or female. She was incredible! You think she's really from another planet?"

"I guess. What do you think?"

"Oh, man, I hope she is. She sure was right about those meteoroids. She saved our bacon on that deal. Just think! She could be from a whole group of people who came from here in the first place—they're sorta our relatives, right? Maybe we'll get to meet them some day, you think?"

"Maybe."

"Damn, that's neat! And then she disappeared! No one seems to know where she is now. I'd give anything to meet her. I bet she's really something!"

"Could be."

"Too bad you don't know her. If you did, people would be interviewing you on television!"

"I guess. I do know Cheryl Ford, though."

"Who?"

"Cheryl Ford. She won a gold medal in the 10,000 meters. She's from Speightstown, in the middle of the island."



“Oh. I don’t remember her.”

Their conversation moved to what little he did know of Barbados, mainly Bridgetown, where the ship put in. It was a small island and Darcy had known it well and she was easily able to keep him talking. That seemed to be the secret of being a good conversationalist—to get the other person talking and keep them talking. It wasn’t hard at all.

When the plane began accelerating down the runway, Petty Officer Miller observed that if she wanted to know real excitement she should be catapulted off an aircraft carrier. Then they sat back to enjoy the takeoff. Shortly after getting airborne he became absorbed in watching the flight attendant bending over the drink cart. Darcy studied the stark mountains and heat-scalded land they flew over. The roads tended to lie as if on graph paper, and in many spots the land was dotted with what she guessed were oil wells. She’d seen some from the ground, earlier, during several trips in pickup trucks.

If Miller liked acceleration, she reflected, he should try accelerating to 98% the speed of light some time.

## CHAPTER 7

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Matt knew as soon as he got home that if he wasn't going to go crazy with worry he needed to keep busy. Maintaining the homestead and taking meals with his grandmother covered part of it, but he needed more. As Darcy had pointed out, his pickup was about as shiny as he could reasonably expect. He had a couple things planned.

For one, he decided to begin the book Darcy suggested he write, the account of her first months on earth as he had been able to reconstruct them, with her help. He had written a decent newspaper article about her, after all, and he still had his notes from that. He'd simply left his own knowledge of Darcy out of it, so as not to draw attention to himself—but that was easy to add after the fact. As long as it was not going to be published soon, he might as well take it right up to the present—why not? It would be a new experience writing for history rather than for the bottom of a hamster cage, that is to say, a newspaper. He would dig out his notes and start roughing in the outline.

The other thing he'd never done was to look at Darcy's online press conference. She had spent days answering the questions that she and John McLauphin had selected from those submitted, compiling them all into a file to be sent to McLauphin and posted in a few weeks. He had never looked at the whole thing. Mostly, he'd been aware of Darcy typing away at a blazing pace. He'd never seen anyone type so fast.

The file was huge—it even had a table of contents! He was more and more absorbed as he read through the quiet afternoon, under the reproachful gaze of their cats. It was fascinating to see Darcy's writing style. He couldn't tell the extent to which it had been edited, but it was clearly Darcy—no nonsense, grace-

ful and efficient, giving little specific away about her carefully guarded homeland, but done with tact and even a little cautious humor.

He lost track of time as he scrolled through the questions that had come from all over the globe. Skimming back and forth through the questions and clicking the embedded links to other questions, he jotted occasional notes to ask her about later, or to include in his book. Eventually, he'd have to do it methodically, but for now it was a revelation, and good recreation.

*Q. What do you know about the beings that removed your ancestors from earth to your present planet? (Antonio Biagini, Affari Milani, Italy)*

*A. We know very little, unfortunately. It happened several thousand years ago at least. Our ancestors were not literate, so all that has come down to us began as oral tradition. We don't know who they were or why they did it, but we do know that their intentions were not malicious. Perhaps they simply wanted to see how humans would adapt to a new situation. Our legends say that they taught many things, including writing and basic technologies. They disappeared at some point, and we don't know what happened to them.*

*Q. When are we likely to meet more of your people? (Charles Coetzee, The Star, Johannesburg, South Africa)*

*A. I don't know. Probably not soon. As I have said above, I am not here in an official capacity and I am not allowed to identify the precise star my planet orbits. But I can tell you that it took at least several decades for me to get here, traveling at nearly the speed of light. It would take that long for my reports to reach home, and that long again for a reply, or for emissaries to travel here. If there is a faster way to travel, we have not discovered it yet. I regret this as much as you do—perhaps more.*

*Q. By our standards, you are an extraordinary athlete. Are you as outstanding among your own people? (Frank Chevrier, Sports Illustrated, USA)*

*A. No. Our people vary about as much as yours do, though the range is probably wider due to our genetic tweaking. [link]. I would have been terrible in strength events. Even in speed events like the 100 meters, I had to train hard to overcome my lack of explosive power.*

*Q. What do you think of what is evidently your people's original home? (Ian Deller, Cheshire Chronicles, Cheshire, England)*

*A. The diversity and richness of earth is wonderful—it is such a beautiful planet. The weather, the smells, tastes, sounds, sights, are all miraculous. The cultures, lan-*

*guages, the history—I don't think I'll ever get tired of enjoying them. People tend to take them for granted, but they shouldn't—they should cherish them.*

*Q. What is your native language? (Kimberly Dugat, Jefferson High School, Lake Charles, Louisiana, USA)*

*A. Our name for it is Luvit. I have been able to determine that it seems to be a member of earth's Indo-European language family, as are Greek, English, Persian, Hindi, French, Russian, and so forth. If you look up "Indo-European" in a college desk dictionary, you should see a chart of this family. Currently, I am working with some of your linguists to try to determine where our language might belong on this chart.*

*Actually, the people of my planet speak over thirty different dialects of Luvit, but we think they all came from the same source, much as Spanish, French, Italian, Portuguese, and others all came from Latin. In a similar way, English, Dutch, German, and others came from Germanic. Even earlier than that, both Latin and Germanic came from Proto-Indo-European. The linguists I'm working with think that my language might be one of the original branches of Proto-Indo-European.*

*Q. Do you have computers? (Paul Sanderson, Middleton Junior High, Boulder, Colorado, USA)*

*A. Yes. They are not unlike your computers: we use monitors, we have keyboards, and so forth. Our writing system is different, of course [link] but our media works differently, being three dimensional and holographic. Your scientists are exploring similar data storage methods right now. We even use the binary system.*

*Q. What is your moon base like? (Peter Dietrich, Renssaeler Polytechnic, Dusseldorf, Germany)*

*A. It amounts to a small building, about 1000 square meters. My station chief, Hleo, takes up no room [link], and all the space I need is a gym, sleeping quarters, working spaces, and a small 'living room.' It was very cozy. Sometimes I miss it.*

*Q. What is the main source of energy on your planet? Do you have petroleum? (Hiroko Kunitake, Asahi Shinbun, Osaka, Japan)*

*A. We use a variety of energy sources, including wind and hydroelectric, but the main source is hydrogen, which is non-polluting and replenishing. We also have excellent ways to store energy, not unlike your batteries.*

*Q. What is the nature of your people's social structure? (Andy Kuiper, The Boston Globe, Boston, USA)*

*A. A thorough description would take volumes, and anyway I'm not authorized to represent my society in any detail. But I can give you a basic idea, perhaps. We are pretty sure our ancestors were nomads, and lived in tribes. We're no longer nomadic, but the basic social structure of the tribe is still the fundamental unit of our society, just as it is among some peoples of earth today. All our people belong to one tribe or another and the tribes are grouped into larger tribes in an organization that amounts to a government. Some of our leaders are elected, and some are hereditary. That gives us what you call might call "checks and balances." Counsels of all kinds, where consensus is sought and reached, are very important. Some marriages are personally arranged, and others are done for political reasons, to unite tribes and share obligations. It can get very complicated, but that is the basic idea.*

*Q. How did you find earth in the first place? (Quentin Brashear, The Melbourne Times, Melbourne, Australia)*

*A. We have always known we were not native to our planet, that we had come from somewhere else. It was one of our most important goals to try to find out where we originated, and if there were others like us somewhere. Once we developed the technology to scan the universe for electromagnetic radiation, we began doing so, much as your own scientists are now doing with the SETI project [link].*

*The early signals we detected from the direction of earth were the most promising of several possibilities. Most likely they were from early attempts at wireless telegraphy or experimental radars. They were enough for us to decide to send out a scout for a closer look. It was my good fortune to be that scout, and to actually find earth.*

*Q. Why have you gone into seclusion? May we look forward to perhaps meeting you some day, or perhaps hearing you speak? (Madelyn Wheatley, The Seattle Post-Intelligencer, USA)*

*A. I apologize for that. I am basically a shy person who has lived alone for a long time. Large crowds of strangers make me uncomfortable. I did what I did only to make sure that the meteoroids were taken seriously. I am not a diplomat or a politician. I'd like to continue to explore the clues to my people's origin here and to meet people individually or in small groups. I mean no disrespect to anyone. In time, perhaps I can meet more of you, perhaps through the internet, like we are doing now, or on television.*

Matt gradually became aware that Mork was rubbing hard against his ankle, which could only mean one thing—dinner time. Their cats could tell time better than he could.

“All right, guys,” he said, setting off a trio of meowing. “I’ll give you a snack, and then I better go have a bite to eat con mi abuelita!”

Reading the blog had helped him feel a little closer to Darcy. Something told him he’d need another session with it before bedtime.

## CHAPTER 8

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Darcy stood on the sidewalk for a minute after the taxi pulled away to take in the scene. She remembered the palm trees and the building housing the offices of Benning, Bynum, Caxton, Braithwaite from her pre-Olympic interview. It seemed to have been ages ago. The air was noticeably more humid than in New Mexico, and it had a tang of salt in it, she thought. From somewhere she heard the cries of a sea gull.

There was no one in the lobby of the law offices except a young receptionist doing something at a computer.

"May I help you?" she asked Darcy, glancing at her backpack.

"I'm here to see Mr. Braithwaite."

The woman checked a binder. "He's out to lunch right now. If you'll take a seat in the waiting room, I'll call you when he gets in."

"Thanks."

The waiting room was rather plain, with several couches, chairs, and a couple of tables with lamps. There were some attractive seascapes on the walls and a number of magazines were stacked here and there. She was grateful there was no television. At the far end sat a girl of perhaps 13 or 14, wearing low-cut jeans, sandals, and a short top that must have been meant for a slightly smaller person. She had spiky brown hair and she was chewing gum and kicking her feet. She didn't look happy.

"Hi," said Darcy, setting her backpack by one of the chairs.

"Hi," said the girl.

"Are you OK?"

"Huh?"

"Are you OK? You look like you might not be feeling well."

"What? Oh, uh, yeah, I'm OK. Well, sorta OK."

"Do you need a lawyer?"

"Huh? Oh, uh, no. I'm waiting for my mom. She works here. I got sent home from school."

"You did? You mean, they just told you to go home?"

"Well, yeah. Kinda. Well, actually, I got in trouble."

"Trouble? And no one tried to help you? I'm sorry, I'm not from around here and I guess I don't understand."

"Yeah, well, I sorta sassed a teacher."

"Sassed? What does that mean?"

"You really aren't from around here, are you? I talked back to her. I told her she was a stupid bitch."

"My goodness!" After a few seconds, she added "Was she?"

"Was she what?"

"Was she a stupid bitch?"

The girl emitted a convulsive guffaw. "I thought so. I don't know. Maybe she was just doing her job."

Darcy was beginning to understand, but she said "I still don't get it. If you are her student and she was doing her job, how come she's a stupid bitch?"

The girl shook her head. "You're really not from around here! Where are you from, anyway?"

"A long way off." She looked at the girl expectantly.

Finally she said, "I'm just a trouble maker. I hate school. It's stupid."

"Hmm," said Darcy, and added in a low voice, "but there's more to it than that, isn't there?"

"What do you mean?"

"You feel powerless. You feel like a failure, right?"

The girl stared at Darcy, who added, "I know the signs when I see them. I feel the same way."

"You do?"

"Yeah. I'm pretty much a mess myself. Even when things turn out right I'm not happy. I don't even know what I want out of life. I have a boy friend, but I don't know what to do about him. Stuff like that."

"Really?"

"Really. All I've been able to figure to do is just do the best I can. I'm the only one I have control over. If I keep trying, and if I'm patient, things'll have to get better sooner or later, I figure."



She looked at the clock by the door.

"Excuse me for a minute, please. I need to change."

She picked up her backpack and headed for the women's room. When she returned, she had changed her jeans for black slacks and her work shirt for a maroon blouse. Her wig was in the backpack, and her real hair flowed over her shoulders.

The girl stared at her wide-eyed, her gum nearly rolling out of her mouth. "Ohmygod, you're...you're...."

There was a movement at the doorway as the receptionist rushed in. "Ms. Darcy! I'm so sorry! I didn't know it was you—I should have asked. No one told me to expect you! I'm so sorry! Won't you follow me? Please forgive me!"

"No problem," she said, following the receptionist out the door. She turned and smiled at the girl, whose mouth was still open. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone you saw me, at least not for a few days, OK? Thanks! Bye!"

Hartley Braithwaite met her at the door of his suite with a big smile and a two-handed handshake.

"Ana! How lovely to see you again! We exchange emails frequently, I know, but a personal visit is a special pleasure! Please come in!"

"Thank you, Mr. Braithwaite. It's good to see you again too."

It must have been her upbringing, but she always felt better in formal situations. She let herself be shown to a comfortable leather-upholstered chair and accepted a cup of tea and some "biscuits," Braithwaite's term for the cookies, from his secretary.

"And how are you enjoying your life these days, if I may ask?"

Neither Braithwaite nor anyone at the law firm had any idea where she lived.

"Very well, thank you, sir. I am busy all day long, every day, it seems. As you know, I am in contact with many people via email. I am collaborating on a study of my native language and also putting an online press conference together with John McLauphin. I study history, languages, I'm even taking music lessons!"

"Excellent, my dear. I'm so happy to hear it. I must tell you that every time I see any of my friends in the Barbadian ministry, they inevitably ask me about you, and desire me to give you their best wishes."

"Please, give them my best wishes too, Mr. Braithwaite. You can tell them that my days in Barbados were among my happiest on earth, and that I'd love to return for a visit some day, assuming things settle down a bit."

"I'll be delighted to tell them, of course."

"And, Mr. Braithwaite, I must also ask you to apologize for me to your partners for the trouble I have caused your firm. I'm speaking of the political pressure you have received because of me and my reluctance to meet with all the politicians and diplomats of the world. I'm sure it has been a terrible burden to you."

"Not at all, dear lady. One thing lawyers do is take heat for other people. It is our profession! To tell you the truth, the public exposure which your case has brought us more than compensates for any difficulty. The firm is in the news on a weekly basis. Did you know that we have hired three new lawyers just to handle the increased volume of international business?"

"No, sir, I didn't know that. It does ease my conscience somewhat. Thank you for telling me."

"You are welcome and please do not worry yourself ever again that politicians will bother this firm! Now, I know you have made the risky trip here to get your foundation up and running. Dick Caxton, whom you remember, will be in overall charge of it, and we have two associates who will handle matters for you on a day to day basis. Would you like to meet them now?"

"Yes, sir. I'd be happy to."

"Then so you shall. Also, I must tell you that I was able to arrange the other meeting we talked about previously. The gentleman in question is presently in Miami, and can be here on short notice any time this afternoon. I would think an hour with him should suffice. Perhaps after you have conducted your business with Mr. Caxton?"

Darcy nodded slowly.

"All you need do is return here, to my office. I suggest that I join you, as your legal representative. I do not think you will need me, but it may be a good idea to have a third party on the scene. I am certain there is nothing to worry about."

"Thank you, sir. I'll be grateful for your presence."

"Excellent. Let me show you to Dick Caxton's office."

Dick Caxton, the firm's contract expert, had an office even bigger than Braithwaite's, but his was lined with books and file cabinets, and featured several large tables, one of which was stacked with printouts of some kind. At the other table, uncluttered and gleaming, sat Caxton and two other people. They stood when Braithwaite and Darcy entered.

Braithwaite made the introductions. One of the two was a solid-looking woman named Charlene Stratemeyer. Possibly in her early forties, she was crisply dressed and had what looked to be professionally done reddish brunette hair, nails, makeup, the works. She had an engaging smile.

The other was a stunningly handsome man, Darcy thought. He could have been a movie star. Braithwaite introduced him using only initials instead of a first name: V. T. Newsome. Darcy guessed he was in his mid-thirties, but he had the taut look of an athlete, slicked down blonde hair, wide shoulders, blindingly white teeth and a gorgeous smile, set off by a golden tan complexion that women would kill for. His clothes were tasteful, looked expensive, and fit him so as to show off his impressive physique.

Caxton was speaking. "Charlene comes to us after five years of managing charitable foundations in California. Our firm is a relative newcomer to that branch of the law, and we look for her to expand our activities throughout the United States, the Caribbean, and Latin America. V. T. spent several years in the District Attorney's Office in New York City, but he grew up in a family which had several of its own foundations and that was his original purpose in going to law school. Now he gets a chance to make his mark in a wider market, so to speak.

"Your foundation will not need a full-time manager yet, Ms. Darcy, but Charlene will oversee its operations from day to day as required." (He did not see fit to mention that Darcy had previously requested a female attorney for the job.) "V. T. will assist whenever negotiations require it, and when liaison with other foundations is sought."

"At present, the fund's endowment stands at a little over \$14 million. We estimate that in a year, under the stipulations you have specified, the amount should approximate \$50 million. As you will see when we examine the various trust documents, the foundation will not solicit private donations. For the most part it will work in cooperation with other similar foundations. I might add that we endorse this idea, since we are comparative newcomers to charitable endeavors, and that will allow us to benefit from the established practice of these other institutions.

"The name of the fund, as you requested, is The Second Planet Foundation. Shall we go over the documents?"

Darcy looked at Charlene and V.T., who glanced at Darcy with a certain amusement, and they all nodded assent. Caxton pulled over two large binders and flipped the first one open.

Ninety minutes later, having signed her name more times than she could count, her comprehension thoroughly battered by legal lingo, she watched Caxton close the second binder.

"That will do it," he said. "Charlene will register The Second Planet Foundation with the Internal Revenue Service and you'll be in business. Congratulations!"

They shook hands all round.

V.T. looked at his watch. "You're not flying out tonight are you?"

"No, I'm not," Darcy replied.

"Then let's go out and celebrate! We can dine in style and look over the lights on the harbor, and maybe even find a good band playing somewhere!"

"That's a wonderful idea, and I'm sure it would be lovely...but I'm sorry, V.T. I have a thing about staying out of the public. If someone were to identify me the evening would be ruined. We'd have to run for our lives. Another time, perhaps?"

"How about this?" said Charlene. "You can see at least some of the lights of Miami from my house. Why don't we have supper there?"

"On such short notice? That would be too much trouble!"

"Wait!" V.T. had that same gleam in his eye. "I know a Japanese restaurant that does gourmet take-out. Let me call them, get some sake, and we're in business. Do you like Japanese food, Ana?"

"I don't know. I never had any. But so far I've never had any food I didn't like!"

"That sounds great," added Charlene. "Dick, would you invite the Braithwaites please?"

"I sure will. I wish I could be there, but Ellen and I are already committed. Doggone it, I'd rather visit with Ana and eat Japanese food, but you all have fun."

"I'll pick you up, Ana."

"Thank you. Don't be surprised if I'm a brunette, V.T.."

When Darcy returned to Braithwaite's outer office his secretary nodded and picked up the telephone. "Ms. Darcy is here, sir. Yes, sir." She got up and walked around the desk as Braithwaite opened the inner door. He said nothing, but smiled and raised his eyebrows, extending a hand to usher her inside, closing the door after her.

"Ms. Darcy, allow me to introduce Special Agent Robert Aldridge, of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Mr. Aldridge, this is my client, Ana Darcy."

Rising from a chair was a compact, well-dressed man of perhaps 50. He stepped forward with a tight smile and held out his hand to her.

"How do you do, Ms. Darcy?" he said. He had keen eyes set in a craggy face, and his movements were carefully controlled. "It is a pleasure. Thank you for agreeing to meet with me."

"You're welcome, Mr. Aldridge. We must share some of the same curiosity about each other."

"Indeed we must. This is highly irregular, I admit. Before I say anything else I should reassure you that as the President has announced, you are not being sought by anyone in the United States Government. I have asked for this meeting more for personal reasons than anything else. You are under no obligation of any kind."

"I understand. Thank you, sir."

As he had seen from videos of her Olympic events, she was small, though not tiny. Surprisingly, she didn't seem nervous. If anything, she was quite self-possessed. Rather than bubbling with boundless Olympian energy, he sensed the presence of alertness, that she was observing him as closely as he was her. He decided to give her the first at bat.

"Ms. Darcy, I need hardly say that you are the first person that our Bureau has ever tried to apprehend who was not from this planet. As the person in charge of most of that search, I can tell you that it was quite an experience. Now that it is over, and we know that we intend no harm to each other, I would be happy to answer any questions I could about that search."

"Oh!" After a second, she replied. "Most of the time I was not aware of people actively looking for me. It was only at the first, when I was seized and confined and questioned that I had any reason to complain of being badly treated."

"Yes, ma'am, I'm sure that's true. I very much regret that. But I must tell you that the Bureau, my employer, had nothing to do with that. That was a special unit of our Army which is charged with intercepting possible threats. They train for all sorts of eventualities, but I don't think tact is one of their techniques."

"No sir, I promise you it is not. But as you have said, it is over. I think I do not have any questions. I am content to move on, Mr. Aldridge. Perhaps, however, you have questions for me."

So, she *was* alert. He wasn't fooling her—she knew why he wanted this meeting. He might as well fess up. "Yes, ma'am. I do. A couple, if you don't mind, just to satisfy my own curiosity."

"I watched your interview with John McLauphin, ma'am. You told him your people sent only one person to search for your home planet, that is, one actual person plus your station manager. They sent you. I'm wondering—why you, and not someone else?"

She didn't hesitate. "The mission required someone young, obviously, and someone in good health. Less obviously, it required a person politically acceptable to a majority of our people. There were several candidates, but I was chosen."

"How is it that you were politically acceptable?"

"My father is a senior official in our government."

"Could you elaborate?"

"Our society is hierarchical in some ways. We were originally nomads, and the notion of family units and tribes is fundamental to us. My father is a chief of many tribes."

"So, you are not exactly an 'ordinary' citizen. You are from a group of leaders." That made sense to him. That explained her unflappability.

"You could say that. But I had little leadership authority back home. You may be interested to know, Mr. Aldridge, that I am going to have a press conference in a week or two. Mr. McLauphin has designed a website where I can respond to people's questions online, in writing. I felt an obligation to introduce people here to my people, and this seemed a simple way to begin. So far, I have addressed perhaps 200 questions from people around the world, including the one you just asked. When the site goes online, you might find it worth looking at."

"No doubt I will. I will watch for it, and thank you. Another thing, Ms. Darcy: you would probably have been amused to have seen how amazed we were, when we were looking for you everywhere, to find you creating a worldwide sensation at the Olympic Games. That is, we assumed you were in hiding, but we then discovered that everybody in the world with a television was watching you. Later, on John McLauphin's program, we learned the reason you did that, but I wondered how you got the idea in the first place."

Should she tell him about Dr. Sledd? If she did, that might lead him to Matt, and to most of her acquaintances. She decided not to. "I met a very wise person," she said, "the type of person who would have been a valued counselor on my home planet. I shouldn't mention his, or her, name without first getting permission; I'm sorry. But I explained my quandary, that I had urgent information for the people of this planet, but that if I stepped forward I would be imprisoned and probably ignored. That person suggested that I become a celebrity somehow, and then speak out. It worked, as you know, but the price was high. Now, I must keep a very low profile. Even Mr. Braithwaite," she looked in his direction, "does not know where I live."

"It certainly did work. Are all your people exceptional athletes?"

"No, sir. I'm not especially exceptional myself, as I said to Mr. McLauphin. But I am quick and my metabolism is very efficient and training and competition did the rest."

"They certainly did. I'm grateful for your resourcefulness, Ms. Darcy. We all owe you a debt of gratitude. Speaking of resourcefulness, I'd be interested to

know how you escaped from custody at Fort Bliss and how you then managed to return to the Fort Davis area.”

He had to already know some of that—the Army would have told him about her escape. Perhaps he wanted to know if she had any confederates in El Paso. Well, she hadn’t. “They didn’t watch me very closely. I jumped a fence and ran, basically. I used the sun.”

“The sun?”

“Yes. We flew directly west after I was taken. To get back I had to go east. I ran east along a major highway until finally I got a ride.”

“You hitchhiked?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well I’ll be damned. I wondered about that. We checked everything we could, but there was no way we could have backtracked you to a hitchhiker. That was dangerous, ma’am! Did you have any trouble?”

“A little.” She volunteered nothing after that, but his curiosity finally got the better of him.

“A little?”

“Two men bothered me.”

“Bothered you?”

“Tried to detain me.”

“Detain you? So...you ran?”

“No. There was nowhere to run. We were on the edge of the desert. I stopped them.” He stared at her for two beats. “I incapacitated them. Temporarily.”

“Ah.” Another second passed. He couldn’t stand it. “May I know how?”

“I hit one in both eyes with a knuckle. I slapped the other’s ears. Both create intense, but short-term, pain.”

“I see.”

Listening in, Braithwaite was fascinated. He had no idea his diminutive client had experienced such difficulties, or been so assertive at escaping from them. Astonishing!

“One more thing, please. You also escaped from custody, FBI custody this time, at that house in Fort Davis. How did you do that?”

“Your agents were holding a group of us in front of the house while they searched the inside. I was disguised, not very well, as an old woman. Apparently, one of the agents inside found a cat, which bit him and caused him to shout. Every agent around us looked at the house. I took that instant to run away. They didn’t notice.”

He shook his head. "Amazing. I talked to each one of those agents. They swore they never took their eyes off the group, but I know better. It's only natural to look towards someone yelling. But if you ran away at that point, you must have done it in less than a second. Much less." He looked at her.

"I can move quickly."

A realization appeared on his heretofore poker face.

"The false start!"

"Sir?"

"I just remembered. One of your 100 meter heats at the Olympics, the one where everyone but you took off running. It was a false start. You knew it the instant it happened, didn't you?"

"Yes. It had happened many times in training. I knew the heat would be restarted, so there was no sense in starting myself. I just waited."

"You made that decision in a fraction of a second!"

"I suppose. Something like that."

He shook his head again. "Amazing. Utterly amazing. And you disappeared immediately after the marathon, too. Did you run off then as well?"

"No, sir. I had had enough running at that point. I asked Mr. Braithwaite to send a plane for me. I was about to have a nervous breakdown. Crowds of people make me uneasy. And I was in pain, from the cumulative effect of all the events and the marathon and that man who attacked me. I had finished all my events. I wanted to get away. Thank heavens for this law firm and their plane."

Braithwaite recalled the exhausted person he had seen in an airplane seat. No wonder she was exhausted!

"Indeed," said Aldridge. So that explained it! She had help—from lawyers, no less. One of these days he'd tell Jeff Simmons that over drinks. The Agency's people must have just missed her.... He was satisfied, finally. "I appreciate your candor, Ms. Darcy." He meant that sincerely. It was clear she was being reticent about names and places, but his bs detector, honed with countless perps over many decades, was telling him she was being frank with him. If only he could get a photograph for his office! But there was no way. "If I may ask, what are your plans for the future?"

"I would like to live quietly, sir. I would like to continue the studies of earth that I began in the moon base, comparing my language to those of earth, reading history, and studying earth's cultures. As I told Mr. McLauphin, I am not an official envoy of my people, but I do feel a responsibility to introduce our two societies to each other. The McLauphin news conference is one attempt to do that. In



future years, I am sure my people will send official representatives. I'd like to help make sure all goes well when they arrive."

"What a fascinating episode in our history, Ms. Darcy. You are quite a pioneer. I am glad to have been a small part of it. Thank you again, and my very best wishes to you, ma'am." He stood and offered his hand. She stood and took it.

"You're welcome, Mr. Aldridge. The pleasure was mine."

Hartley Braithwaite stood as well. He looked at her affectionately. "I'll show Agent Aldridge out, Ana. I'll be right back to take you to your next appointment."

She had no next appointment. Braithwaite clearly intended to close out the encounter definitively. That was fine with her.

## CHAPTER 9



Darcy was waiting for V.T. at the appointed time in front of the hotel she had never checked into. She had her backpack with her. He was on time, arriving with a flourish in a bright yellow sports car with the top down. Even though she had no idea what kind of car it was, and didn't care, she told him it was beautiful. He seemed pleased.

It turned out to be as easy to keep V.T. talking as it had been Petty Officer Miller, on the airplane. The difference was that even though V.T. knew who Darcy was, he was more eager to explain how the family trust fund had provided him with the car, a house, and a salary twice what the law firm was paying him, than he was to possibly learn what life was like on another planet.

Darcy was happy to let him talk, though. He didn't seem to notice that she said very little, and she learned a many things about him, his politically connected family, and upper-crust life on Cape Cod. She could see why a law firm might find him employable.

The Stratemeyer home was an imposing structure set on a large lot on a curving drive somewhere near the water—Darcy had no idea where. Charlene met them at the door, wearing khaki slacks and green sleeveless shirt with the tail out. She showed them through the house to the patio in back, talking all the way.

"I had no idea you'd met Michelle!" she said to Darcy.

"Michelle?"

"My daughter. She said she met you at work. She raved about you!"

"Oh! I didn't know she was your daughter. I never learned her name. I'm sorry."

"You could have knocked me over with a feather! She actually apologized for getting sent home! She's never done that! What did you tell her?"

"Gee, I don't remember. Not much. She seemed nice, though."

"Nice? Maybe you didn't meet my daughter after all! She's a real handful."

"Is she here?"

"Yes, she's up in her room, I think. She may come down and join us later."

They stepped outside to a flagstone patio shaded by trees of some kind—Darcy had not learned to identify trees beyond the ones in New Mexico. In the distance an inlet twinkled in the setting sun.

Charlene settled them in chairs and brought them drinks—a martini for V.T., white wine for herself, and lemonade for Darcy—just as the doorbell chimed, and she excused herself and headed back inside.

"This is beautiful," Darcy said. She'd said the same thing about V.T.'s car.

"Yes, it is," he replied. "The view is lovely from ground level. But it's nice from higher up, too. You should see it from my penthouse. You can almost see the curvature of the earth, out over the ocean."

"Wow." She was remembering the countless hours she'd spent watching the entire planet revolve slowly, into the sunlight.

The glass patio door slid back and their hostess emerged with two more people, Hartley and Audrey Braithwaite. Darcy liked Audrey immediately. Both she and her husband were large, imposing people, yet warm, courteous, even courtly. Audrey had the directness and the sweet, musical inflection to her speech that she remembered from her months on Barbados.

"I'm so glad to meet you finally, Ms. Darcy!" she said. Her voice went up nearly an octave. "But you so small! How you win all those medals and you so small?" Her eyes twinkled.

"Please, just call me Ana. Sometimes small is good! It's easier to be fast if you are small!"

Audrey laughed. "I'm sure I wouldn't know. But I'll take your word for it!"

The new arrivals were settled, provided with drinks, and passed a pleasant hour and a half touching on a wide variety of subjects. There were a lot of questions about Darcy's homeland, which she answered minimally, mentioning her upcoming online press conference as a better source of information. For the most part, she found turning the conversation back to others worked wonderfully well. Everyone loved to talk.

The most universally popular topic they discovered, oddly enough, was music. Everyone liked one kind of music or another. Darcy learned that Miami was a hotbed of Cuban music. The Braithwaites turned out to be well versed in African

music, which Darcy had not known much about, and they explained to her that Cuban music owed a great deal to Africa.

Finally, just as hunger pangs were causing Darcy to wonder if the food had been forgotten, the discussion was interrupted by someone at the door, a young Asian man bearing several large bags.

Charlene moved them inside to the dining room ("The bugs will drive us crazy," she insisted.) and began setting dishes out and passing them around.

As they were eating, Darcy coughed and put her hand to her mouth.

"Oops!" said V.T. "I was going to warn you about that. I'm sorry!"

"What is that?" she finally gasped, pointing to a small styrofoam cup.

"That's wasabi—Japanese horseradish. You have to be careful with that!"

"Golly!" she said. She'd learned that word from Matt. "Wow! That's delicious!" She coughed again, and wiped a tear from her eye. "It reminds me of windmill sauce!"

"Ha, you right!" hooted Audrey, looking at Charlene. "Windmill sauce very popular on Barbados. People put it on everything. It's hot as fire! There's a windmill on the label."

She shook her head at Darcy. "You tough, girl. You a tough one!"

"Wow," she said. "All of this was so good! Thank you, V.T.!" V.T. beamed back at her as if he had cooked it himself.

"I bet we could use some ice cream," said Charlene, pushing her chair back and heading for the kitchen.

Once her palate had been cooled, Darcy finally thought to ask Charlene, "Where's Michelle?"

"She must still be up in her room. She doesn't eat much, and she isn't all that social anyway."

"Would it be all right if I went up and said hello to her?"

"Certainly! She'd be thrilled! Go up the stairs, and her room is the second door on the right."

Darcy excused herself and headed back through the front of the house. Every knickknack she saw on the way seemed to be in precisely the right place, and of very high quality. She wondered if Michelle appreciated them as much as her mother seemed to.

She took the incomprehensible mumble which followed her knock as permission to enter. The room was nearly dark, but she could see posters of musical groups (she assumed) on the walls, and piles of clothes and junk on the floor. A smallish person was lying face down on the bed.

"Michelle?"

"Huh?" The person on the bed jerked and her head came up. "Darcy?"

"Hey." Another one of Matt's words.

"How you doin'?" Another.

"Umm. OK., I guess."

"Are you sure?"

"Uh, yeah. Well, no."

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, it's a long story. I'm still in trouble. Never mind."

Darcy thought a minute.

"Michelle, do you know how old I am?"

"Huh? No, not really. Pretty old, I guess. Thirty?"

"Not close, Michelle. In earth years, I'm nearly a hundred."

"No shit?"

"No shit. And what difference does that make? Because I've seen a lot of trouble, Michelle. Whatever trouble you're in, I promise you I've seen much, much worse. So you can tell me about yours. I won't be shocked. Maybe I can even help, or maybe not. Maybe you'll feel better. But no matter what, I promise I won't tell anyone else."

Michelle sat up in the darkness and rubbed her sleeve back and forth over her nose. Between sobs, she blubbered, "I remembered what you said, about not having any power, except over yourself, and just doing the best you could do. But I'm not like that. I don't even have power over myself."

"What do you mean?"

"It's my boy friend."

"What about your boy friend?"

"He's not nice, and I want to get rid of him. But he's big, and he's mean. He's older'n me. When I told him I wanted out, he got mad. He's coming over to see me!" she wailed. "He doesn't care about my mom or anything. He's hit me before and I'm afraid of him!"

Darcy sat next to her and put an arm around her as she cried.

"When is he coming?"

"What time is it?" she moaned, and looked at the clock by her bed. "Any minute!" she squeaked.

"Will he come in a car?"

"Yes."

"OK. That means he has to come to the front of the house. Is there another way outside from here, that's not down the stairs?"

"Yeah. There are stairs in the back. Why?"

"Let me talk to him. I bet I can get him to understand you don't want to see him anymore."

"You can??" Her face brightened.

"Maybe."

"But he's mean!"

"That doesn't matter."

"You're not much bigger than I am. He's strong!"

"Maybe so, but I'm determined. Let's go. Show me the way."

Darcy sat on the front steps with Michelle in the dwindling light. A street light two houses away provided minimal illumination. The only sound was a plane making an approach to some distant airport.

"What's his name?"

"Justin."

"OK. Listen, Michelle. If you want Justin to leave you alone, it has to come from you. I can't make him leave you alone all by myself. I'll help, but you have to tell him and you have to mean it when you tell him. Then, once we make sure he understands it, it'll be over. Do you understand?"

"I think so."

"Can you do that? Can you tell him you don't want to see him any more and really, really mean it?"

"I'll try."

"Good. That's what it'll take. I bet you can do it, Michelle. That's how you get the power, you know? You just take it and mean it!"

They sat side by side for five minutes or more, the girl sighing every once in a while and Darcy patting her shoulder. Finally, tiny headlights at the end of the street grew into a pickup truck that came straight to the house, bumped over the curb, and stopped on the grass. There were two people in it. Both got out.

Michelle stiffened. Darcy patted her again and whispered "Is Justin the driver?"

"Yeah."

"OK. Follow me, but stay eight or ten feet behind me."

She got up and walked toward the two figures. Justin was a head taller than Darcy, but not huge. He wore torn jeans, a black t-shirt, and had spiked hair and a lip ring. His face shone in the gloom, as if he were hot. The other male was bigger and uglier, with mean eyes, meaty arms covered with tattoos, and a paunch that hung out over his jeans.

"Are you Justin?"

“Yeah. What’s it to you?”

“Michelle has something she wants to tell you.” Darcy stepped to one side and hoped for the best. She heard Michelle clear her throat.

“Uh, Justin....”

“What?”

“I’m through. I don’t want to see you any more. We’re finished.” Her voice had become tiny.

“You WHAT?” He stepped toward her, but Darcy moved in front of him.

“Say it again, Michelle.”

“I’m through. We’re through. Please go away.” She was a little louder this time.

Justin took another step forward, saying “Get outta my way, bitch,” and raised a hand to push Darcy aside.

In a flash she repeated the maneuver she had used playfully on Matt. She curled his fingers back against themselves, rotated his arm behind his back and spun him around, reached between his legs and grabbed his testicles, and pushed him into the pickup truck. His head bounced off the roof with a hollow thump.

“Fuck!” he roared.

Darcy saw the ugly one moving in from the side. She released Justin and without turning her body, snapped her left arm out sharply, catching him in his Adam’s apple with the edge of her hand. He stopped cold and his eyes widened as he realized he could barely breathe. He clutched his throat and froze.

Justin whirled around, blood slinging from his nose, and threw a punch at Darcy. She cocked her head to one side, avoiding his fist, grabbed it, and in a flash bent his little finger back until it cracked with a sound like a branch breaking under water.

Justin’s eyes started to get big as he began to feel the pain. Then she broke the finger next to that one. He made a guttural rumbling that grew in intensity and cocked his other arm to throw a second punch. Darcy chopped him sharply in his damaged nose. He howled and jerked his head to the side.

“Justin! Can you hear me? Michelle says it’s over, Justin. That means it’s finished. She never wants to see you again. I don’t either, Justin. Do you understand?”

He stared at her dumbfounded, anger gradually being replaced by pain. He said nothing.

“Try to concentrate, Justin. You have eight more fingers. How many will it take until you get it?”

She reached for his hand, but he cowered back against the truck.

"Tell me you understand, Justin. You have eight more chances."

All he could do was whimper and clutch his maimed hand against his chest.

"Eight left. Shall we try another?" She stepped toward him. He flinched and made a contorted grunting sound that sounded something like "I understand," or maybe "OK." Intelligible speech didn't seem to be a priority with him at the moment.

She stepped back and looked at the other guy, now on his knees staring at nothing and wheezing in panic. His priority seemed to involve oxygen.

"One of you drive the other to a hospital," she said. "Now. Or would you rather have the police do it for you?"

She opened the passenger door of the truck. Eventually, with his good arm, Justin, still groaning, pushed his ugly friend into it and went around the other side and got behind the wheel and clumsily started the engine with his off hand. Slowly, the truck disappeared down the street.

Darcy kneeled and ran the side of her hand through the grass, wiping off the blood. She put an arm around Michelle. Together they headed for the back stairs.

"Holy shit! How did you do that?"

"Martial arts, kind of. It's not hard. You can learn. There are classes. You're not too young to take one." The discipline would be good for her.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. You don't have to take that stuff, Michelle. You can be your own person. You just have to suck it up a bit." (Still another expression from Matt—thanks, Matt!)

When she rejoined the party, the guests were sipping some kind of golden liquid out of tiny glasses.

"Well, you were gone for a long time! How's Michelle?"

"She's fine. She's at that awkward age, that's all."

"Don't I know it. She drives me to distraction some times."

"We had a good talk. She might want to take some classes some time. I hope you won't mind."

"Classes? Michelle? Oh, Darcy, if you can get her interested in any kind of class, I'll be your slave. It doesn't matter what kind of class."

"That's great. She needs to feel it's her own idea, that's all."

"I swear, I don't know how you do it. If you could bottle it, I would buy it."

"I was that age once. I was a problem too. I bet we all were."

That set off a chorus of agreement and a host of stories, the best by far coming from V.T., who seemed to have had no limits, financial or otherwise, on his



youthful indiscretions. Finally, the Braithwaites announced that they had to get home, and, after hugs and promises to stay in touch and compliments to Charlene, they departed.

V.T. drained the last bit of liqueur in his glass and looked at Darcy. "I suppose we ought to head back too. I know a club where there's live Cuban music. Not only that, it's dark in the place. No one would pay any attention to either of us. Why don't we give them a listen?"

Darcy smiled. "That's tempting. But I have to get up early in the morning. Can we just go for an hour or so?"

"Your wish is my command!"

"I heard your wild stories just now. Should Charlene go with us as a chaperone?"

"Why, sure! The more the merrier!"

Charlene laughed and shook her head. "That's not going to happen. You're both on your own. Just don't do anything that'll make you wish you had a lawyer!"

Three hours later, her ears and brain still brimming with vibrant Cuban rhythms, V.T. dropped Darcy off in front of her hotel in his yellow sports car. She thanked him sincerely, said she'd see him again, gave him an awkward hug over the gear shift, grabbed her backpack, and got out. A final wave and smile, and he was gone.

She waited until the car was out of sight and then turned to the first taxi in line behind her. The driver perked up. "Yes, ma'am! Where to?"

"The airport," she said, as she tossed her backpack on the back seat.

## CHAPTER 10

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A peculiar beeping sound was working its way into Matt's consciousness. Dang! His cell phone! Where the hell was it? He threw the covers back and groped for the light switch, discommoding two cats who had been sleeping on his shins. There, on the dresser!

"Hello? Hello?"

"Hello, Mr. Méndez?" said a familiar alto voice. "This is the cat police. We have three complaints of cat cruelty from your address. What do you have to say for yourself, sir?"

"What? Oh, hell, I'm guilty, officer. Slap the cuffs on me. Take me to jail."

"Did I wake you up?"

"Not only did you wake me up, you also woke up Eleanor and Mork and Foosh. Talk about cruelty! Do you want to take their testimony?"

"Not necessary. Just tell them I said hi. And how are you, by the way?"

"Sleepy, but ok otherwise. No news from here. How are you? How'd your day go?"

"It went well. No problems." She was picturing the ugly guy in the front seat, concentrating on his breathing as he was driven away, while Justin's blood dripped off her fingers to the ground. "Guess what? We have a foundation now!"

"All right! Did you get the name you wanted?"

"Sure did. Pretty cool, no?"

"Very cool. Also cool to see if it can do some good in this world."

"Well, start thinking. You're one of its main advisors."

"And now what? Are you headed into the second day of your schedule?"

They'd agreed to not mention any locations or specifics on the phone, just in case.

"Yes. I'm waiting for the second part to start soon. I'm going to get a little sleep and then I'm off again. I'll call you tomorrow night. Say hi to abuelita for me. Pat our furry friends for me."

"I will. Please be careful. Thanks for calling. Sleep well, my love."

He was going to say he missed her, but decided not to. She'd only been gone a day, and besides, the normal response would have been for her to say she missed him too. He was afraid that wouldn't have occurred to her. She probably didn't miss him, and he'd rather not find out. He sighed.

In a dark corner of the Miami airport departure lounge, Darcy lifted her backpack into her lap, wrapped her arms around it and laid her head on top. A few hours sleep would be very, very welcome.

## CHAPTER 11

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Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina, was not New Mexico. There were freeways everywhere, and thousands of vehicles, all zooming down canyons cut through tall, skinny trees that otherwise blocked the sky. Large buildings and malls were constantly in sight. The energy of the place was almost palpable.

It was only 9:00 am, an hour early, but she paid the taxi driver the enormous sum necessary to drive her from the Raleigh-Durham airport to an address near the Duke University west campus, the home of Dr. Charles Hodge, eminent sociologist and friend of John McLauphin. Matt had explained about tipping, so she augmented the fare on the meter by the percentage he had recommended. It must have been about right: the driver wished her a good day.

She was thankful the address she was delivered to was a quiet, elegant neighborhood. It was a large, stately, two story brick building with flowers and ornamental plants all around it, surrounded by a wrought-iron fence. She opened the gate and stepped onto the short walkway as the front door opened to reveal a tall man with a surprised expression on his face.

“Good heavens!” he said, looking from side to side. “Would you perchance be, ah, She?”

“I am a she. That much is true.”

“Then be thee welcome, honored She. Please enter my humble abode.”

He stepped aside and ushered her in. He was an elegant, handsome man of about 50, with thinning, freshly trimmed silver hair, wearing navy slacks and a maroon blazer, over a yellow tie on a white shirt. He smelled terrific.

“I’m Charles Hodge, Ms. Darcy. I rather expected you to arrive with a full retinue of attendants, in a cortege, perhaps.”

"I'm sorry, Dr. Hodge. Had I known you enjoyed spectacles, I would have tried my best to provide one for you. Mostly, I'm sorry to arrive early. I took an early flight and I didn't know what else to do with myself."

"I am delighted that you solved your problem so directly, mademoiselle. That gives me a few minutes to get to know you. The technicians have only just arrived, and Mr. McLauphin himself is not expected for another hour. Please take a seat in the living room. May I get you some tea or coffee?"

"Some tea would be wonderful, thank you, sir."

He showed her to the living room and strode off in another direction after making a slight bow. Her own people bowed, but this was the first time she'd ever seen anyone on earth bow. It was an odd feeling. She didn't know his connection to John McLauphin, but perhaps she could find that out later.

The living room was of moderate size, but exquisitely furnished in a clean, spare style she'd not seen before. To her delight, the far corner of the room was dominated by a lovely harpsichord. It was painted a deep blue, with bands of gold around it top and bottom.

She was admiring it when Dr. Hodge returned with a tray.

"I see you have met Josephine," he said, setting the tray on a table and pouring tea into two cups. "Do you play?"

"Not very well, but I'm taking lessons. I love the harpsichord."

"So you recognize a harpsichord on sight, eh? Most people do not, alas."

"Oh, yes sir. I think this is a French harpsichord, is it not?"

"Indeed it is. How do you come to know the fine points of such a rare instrument, if I may ask?"

"I was enchanted by their sound, as well as their repertoire, long ago. Do you play? I'd love to hear it."

"Désolé, mademoiselle. You would weep to hear me try. It belongs to my companion David Schwartz. I am certain he would regret he is not here to meet you. He is performing surgery in Africa, je crois, that is, I believe."

"Je regrette beaucoup, monsieur. Vous parlez français?"

"Mais oui, mademoiselle! Et vous aussi?"

"Je suis étudiante, monsieur, de la belle langue français. Mais je ne la parle pas très bien."

"Admirable! And astonishing, ma belle! But English will suffice for now, surely. Do you know, David is a great admirer of yours?"

"You don't say!" Darcy had picked up Hodge's playful, ironic tone and was trying her best to reciprocate. It was a strain on her memory, though—so many novels, so long ago!

"I assure you it is the truth, my dear. In fact, now that I think of it, nothing would delight him more than to have you autograph Josephine for him. Would you mind?"

"You mean, write my name on his harpsichord?"

"Exactly. He treasures it already. Your signature would render it beyond price."

"Oh, my! Well, if you are sure, I suppose I could autograph it in an out-of-the-way place, very small."

Hodge produced an indelible marker and suggested a spot on the inside of the case where the tuning pins were. As Darcy leaned over—it was an awkward spot, to be sure—Hodge stepped out of the room.

When she finished, he was back, holding a small camera.

"And now, if you would allow me a picture of you holding that pen and standing in front of Josephine...David would be your devoted servant forever."

"I don't mind, but why don't you give me a minute to change first? I need to do it anyway, for the interview with Mr. McLaughlin."

"Of course. There's a rest room to the left, just outside this room."

When she returned, she was prepared for the expression of surprise most people showed when she traded her jeans and black hair for slacks, bright shirt, and flowing hair, but Hodge only smiled approvingly and waved her to the side of the harpsichord.

Darcy smiled and posed and Hodge flashed the picture. Then he stepped forward to look at her autograph.

"Hmmm!" was his only remark.

"Yes, well," she said. "I thought if it were to be authentic, I should sign my real name in our own script."

"Excellent! Remarkable! Thank you, Ms. Darcy. Vous êtes très gentille."

"De rien, monsieur."

They sat down to sip their tea.

"How does a sociologist become an 'eminent sociologist,' Dr. Hodge?"

"Ha! Good question! The term would seem an oxymoron, I agree. It is a tedious process, I have found. First, one parlays one's curiosity about the collective actions of groups of people into an academic degree or three. Then, one finds an unusual group to study and publishes something outrageous about that group that attracts notice.

"Then, one makes sure that one's telephone number is readily available, so that one can conveniently be reached when requested to appear on television as

an expert. The program of our mutual friend John McLauphin would be a good choice. The rest is, as we say gravy."

"Congratulations!"

"Thank you. It was nothing. In return—since we are speaking as one famous person to another—perhaps you would enlighten me as to how one goes about becoming a super-celebrity—in case I should ever aspire to advance, some day."

"Ha! Good question!" She paused for a sip of tea. "The process is amazingly simple. First, be from a planet other than earth. Second, discover something that threatens earth. Third, warn people about it. I can't yet say that the rest is gravy, but that's about all there is to it."

"Surely, you are too modest, mademoiselle. You neglected to mention the minor detail of some half-dozen Olympic medals, and the matter of..."

From somewhere in the house came the sound of something crashing to the floor followed by muffled exclamations.

"Pardon me, please," he said, getting up. "Apparently, the process of turning my house into a television studio has met with an obstacle. I beg you, sit down and try your hand at Josephine. David will be distraught to have missed it."

She soon lost track of time, running through the only Goldberg Variation that she had come close to memorizing. She was reveling in the silky action of the instrument when at some point she became aware of Dr. Hodge and another man standing silently at the doorway. She stopped and looked at them.

"My dear! That was lovely! I thought you said you started lessons recently?"

"Yes, sir. Two months ago."

"Incredible. We were transfixed! How I wish I could hire you to do your practicing here! Oh, this gentleman is Chris Anderson, Mr. McLauphin's crew chief. I am afraid he is going to take you away, the blighter."

Anderson shook his head. "I'm sorry, Ms. Darcy. If you'll come with me, we'll set the lights and the sound and be ready to start in five minutes."

Two hours later, Darcy and John McLauphin, looking as jowly and monumental as ever, ambled out of the study into the hallway. The TV lights inside cast their shadows onto the opposite wall. Hodge, writing something at a tiny secretary off to the side, took off his glasses and stood up.

"Did everything go satisfactorily?"

"Very," rumbled McLauphin. "Ms. Darcy is a joy to interview. Her only flaw is her decision to be on my show for a second time. Few others make that mistake." He cast a sidelong glance at her.

“*Au contraire*,” said Hodge. “I believe I know her well enough now to trust her judgment. I hope, *mademoiselle*, that you will have time for a little lunch with us. I have taken several liberties—the table is already set, for four—and as a surprise I have invited one of your oldest friends to join us.” He beamed at her.

Darcy was genuinely puzzled, and her glance must have revealed it. Hodge waved his arm toward the living room and raised his eyebrows invitingly. There, sitting solidly on one of Hodge’s delicate chairs, was Dr. William Sledd, Darcy’s friend from her days in Alpine and her linguistic collaborator.

“Dr. Sledd!” she cried, as he rose from the chair to give her an affectionate hug.

“Hello, my dear. John invited me to be here. I hope you don’t mind. Dr. Hodge was most gracious to call me.”

“It’s wonderful to see you again, sir!”

“Ms. Darcy, please. I am old enough as it is. If I understand you correctly, you are older than I am. You must call me Bill.”

“Very well, then, Bill. I’m so flattered that you came all this way just to see me.” She looked at Hodge. “I’d love to have lunch with you.”

“Then let’s get to it,” grumped McLauphin. “I could eat a horse.” His voice tapered off as they walked Darcy to the dining room. “It won’t be enough for you gentlemen to merely watch my show this week. You must dial up the internet and see my—our—new blog! ‘One Plus One’ makes broadcast history this week—the Darcy/McLauphin online interview, which will....”



## CHAPTER 12

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On the way to her hotel that afternoon, Darcy reflected that all in all, earth was turning to be an agreeable place, at least in her limited experience—and after her very discouraging beginning. The lunch had been a wonderful affair—such good food, and stimulating conversation!—and she could now add Dr. Hodge to her list of interesting friends. Friends notwithstanding, however, she had decided to keep to her original cautious itinerary, turning down a ride from Dr. Hodge in favor of another taxi.

It stopped in front of the hotel she had specified. She paid, got out, shouldered her backpack, and began walking. It was a pleasant day in a pleasant area near the university. There were students and tweedy-looking older people everywhere along a strip of small bookstores and restaurants. An ATM machine afforded her an opportunity to replenish her supply of cash. She wound her way through several small alleys, pausing to make sure no one was following her. Finally, reasonably sure no one was, she hailed another taxi and was driven to her real hotel, on a different side of campus.

She was looking forward to a hot shower and an early bedtime.

Matt was deep into a reverie at his computer, contemplating the best way to describe his first encounter with Darcy in the Sul Ross University library when his cell phone rang. Instead of saying “Hello,” he tried “Meow.” Very clever, Méndez.

The response was from the expected musical alto voice, but the words were gibberish, as though something was being played backwards.

“What?” he asked.

"Matt? Is that you? I thought it was Foosh. I guess that's why you and Foosh don't communicate that well—you don't speak his language!"

"You got that right. I only understand four things he says, and three of them have to do with food. The other is that he misses his mommy. How has your day been?"

"Very nice. No problems, everything according to plan. Except I met an old friend of ours."

"Yeah? Who?"

"You remember the doctor who lives on the mountain?"

"No kidding? He was there?"

"Yes. John called and invited him. He came just to see me. I was so flattered! We all had lunch together. It was very enjoyable."

Now say that you wish I had been there too, Matt thought. No, she isn't going to say that. "That's terrific. So, that means that tomorrow you start the third part of the trip?"

"Yes. It's the one I'm most worried about. I hope it'll go well. I really don't know how long it might take."

"I don't think I'd enjoy that either, but then you did set it up so you'd be able to endure it. You reckon they'll actually do it that way?"

"I sure hope so. How are you doing? What are you up to?"

"I'm working on the book, on the encounter in the library, actually. You remember that?"

"No, not really. I remember what happened later, when you stopped me on the street. I'll never forget that. I was frightened out of my wits. I'm glad you're writing. I hope it goes well. Thank you, Matt."

"Don't mention it. What are you doing the rest of today?"

"As little as possible. I didn't get a lot of sleep last night. I'm going to take a hot shower and go to bed and sleep ten hours, I think."

"Man, I wish I could help you do that. I miss you, babe. Listen, please don't say anything after I tell you what I'm going to tell you, OK? I'll just talk to you tomorrow...."

"What do you mean, Matt?"

"Just...just that I love you, babe. Be careful. Bye."

## CHAPTER 13

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The taxi dropped her off a block from the Duke Medical Center. With her jeans, sweatshirt, and back pack, she fit right in with most of the students who were strolling about. There was no set time for her to show up, so she took a few minutes to walk about the campus, looking at the buildings and flora.

Some of the buildings were of rough stone or rocks, and highly ornamented, giving parts of the campus almost a medieval appearance—which couldn’t be, she was nearly sure. She’d only seen pictures of buildings around the planet, but there was nothing medieval in the United States that wouldn’t be a replica...as far as she knew.

The landscaping was elaborate and lovely, and would probably be more so in the spring and summer. She passed a sign with an arrow that said “Duke Gardens,” but there wasn’t time to explore that now. The Medical Center building appeared thoroughly modern. She studied the directory on the wall and found the office of Dr. Frank Chen with little trouble. There was a cluttered outer office with no one behind the only desk, so she peeked into the inner office to see a slender man talking quietly on a telephone. He was wearing a white lab coat and had a shock of thick, black hair. He appeared younger than Dr. Hodge—perhaps in his forties—but instead of Hodge’s air of playful sophistication he seemed more reserved somehow.

He saw her and ended his phone conversation.

“Yes?”

“I have an appointment with Dr. Chen.”

“Ms. Darcy?”

“Yes.”

"I am Dr. Chen. Please take a seat."

"Thank you."

She sat down. Dr. Chen swiveled his chair in her direction and looked at her for a few moments. She didn't know what to say or do—was she missing some cue?

Finally, he said in a quiet voice, "You look human," and followed it with a minimal smile.

"For good reason—I am human." She didn't know whether to feel patronized or amused.

He didn't follow up his remark, instead changing the subject.

"We will proceed as you have requested, with the physical measurements first, then the medical, concluding with various scans. I expect it will take two days. All results will be reported to you, and the resulting paper will be published in the public domain, as you wished, most likely in *The New England Journal of Medicine*.

"I have kept the number of my assistants to a minimum. We are used to confidentiality, so that should not be a problem. We have set aside a secure area of this building for our purposes, although we shall have to do the scans and several other tests elsewhere. We have scheduled things so that we should cause no notice to be taken. We can begin by meeting the team. Are you ready to start?"

Once again she was nonplussed. Was she overlooking something subtle? She began to fear she was in for a trying two days. But she simply replied, "Yes." He punched a couple numbers into his phone, said "She's here," and arose and led her into the hallway.

It was a large building and their destination was on a different floor, requiring an elevator ride, but Dr. Chen never uttered another word, not even to acknowledge other people, some of whom looked to be doctors, and whom she imagined he would know, passing the other way. Darcy was feeling decidedly awkward when he finally stopped before a door marked only with a number and opened it for her. Was she to be a lab specimen? Would they pin her to a board?

It was a large, bright room, divided off by curtains into perhaps a half dozen smaller areas, with what looked to be various machines, cables, lights, stools, cabinets and so forth scattered everywhere. By her standards, it had a rather primitive look, like the silly mad scientist/Frankenstein movies Hleo loved so. Three people, all wearing white lab coats, were talking on one side, but they stopped when Darcy and Chen entered.

The oldest of the three was a jolly, white-bearded gentleman who strode over with his hand held out.

"Ms. Darcy, I presume?"

Darcy shook the proffered hand gratefully. At last! Someone who behaved conventionally! Had it been another like Chen, she was prepared to run for her life and never watch another *Frankenstein* movie. "Yes," she replied.

"I'm Dr. Jennings, Arthur Jennings. Welcome to the kingdom of Frank and Arthur! Delighted to make your acquaintance! Let me introduce our two assistants. This is Yvonne Yardley, and this is Albert Slinger. You will be gratified to know that both are highly trained in dealing with people from other planets!"

"I feel better already."

"Excellent! More seriously, we are grateful you have consented to be examined. We are one of the world's premiere institutions in human physiology research, as your legal representative Mr. Benning will no doubt have told you. Whatever we learn, whether it be new information of great usefulness to humankind, or whether it be that there is no new information at all, will be a tremendous advancement of knowledge. Again, we thank you for your cooperation. We promise to work as quickly and efficiently as possible.

"If you would like to have a seat, we'll go over the planned procedures and the sequence of events."

He indicated a chair in front of a plain metal desk. He sat behind it and picked up a clipboard and a pencil.

"You have doctors on your own planet, I presume?"

"Yes, sir, of course."

"Do they take blood samples?"

"Not very often. For most purposes, saliva or a scan of the ear is enough."

"Is that so? Interesting! Well, here we are going to want a little of your blood, but not much, and it shouldn't hurt...much. Besides, you can no doubt stand a little agonizing pain." He paused, adding, "That's a joke! Actually, if you showed up at the bloodmobile during a donor drive, we'd turn you away. You don't have enough—you're too small! But today, a few ccs will do. We'll take your height and weight, blood pressure, temperature...."

It took him ten minutes to describe the tests they were going to perform. While he did so, the assistants disappeared. She could hear them not far away arranging equipment and opening cabinets. Dr. Chen simply stood there with his hands behind his back, no expression on his face beyond basic alertness. She wondered if there were something wrong with the man. If she were left alone with him for any length of time, well, she had a book in her back pack.

It was past dinner time when the taxi dropped her at her hotel. She was starving. Instead of going inside she decided to walk down the block and see what might be available in the way of food. By good fortune she found a tiny hole-in-the-wall Vietnamese place little bigger than her hotel room, staffed by two busy Asian men. The place was two-thirds full of students, from the looks of them, happily talking and eating.

She stood back from the line at the counter to study the menu and see what people were ordering. The food choices on earth were a continual revelation. One particular combination meal, the “B-3,” seemed popular, so she ordered that.

It was stupendous. The soup, in particular, was amazing, delicate, unlike anything she’d had before. As she was finishing her meal, she realized that to fully blend in with the other customers she probably should pull out her cell phone and make a call, so she did.

Matt answered on the first ring. “¿Bueno?”

So, he wanted Spanish! “Hola, Matías. ¿Cómo estás?”

“Así, así. Te echo de menos.”

“I miss you too,” she said.

“No kidding?”

“No kidding. How are you doing?”

“Not bad. Staying busy. Pretty much like yesterday. How has your day been?”

“Ay de mí, Matt. You wouldn’t believe it. I don’t believe it myself. I can’t imagine what is left to be done, but they claim to have another whole day of stuff tomorrow.”

“Was it horrible?”

“No, not horrible. Just tiring. I think I’ve had enough traveling for a while. I’m looking forward to some peace and quiet.”

“I know just the place! That is, if you’re not allergic to cats.”

“No problem. In fact, I may be allergic to white lab coats.”

“There’s not a single white lab coat in sight here. Obviously, this is the place for you!”

“Hey, Matt, have you ever had Vietnamese food?”

“No, I don’t think so, but I bet you like it, right?”

“How did you guess? Sometime we’re going to have to find some together. I think you’ll like it too.”

“I’m ready, babe. The sooner the better.”

“Take care, Matt. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“I’ll be waiting. That’ll be the call I want to get!”

“Good night, Matt.”

“Love ya, babe.”

## CHAPTER 14

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Matt threw another couple chunks of wood into the stove. It was already getting chilly in the room—it looked to be a cold night. Could one be cozy and lonely at the same time? He might find out.

From under the dining table came a plaintive “Nnngaow,” Mork’s characteristic locution when he wanted something. Darcy was adept at reading his needs, but Matt was never sure, unless he wanted food. It couldn’t be food—they’d all just eaten.

“What is it, Mork? How may I serve you, little brother?” He’d taken to talking to cats. Terrific.

“Nnnnggggaow!” Mork had clean litter; he had food and water. What else could a cat want? On a hunch, he set one of the dining chairs near the wood stove, then a second, and then a third. Then he sat down at his computer and dialed up Darcy’s interview file.

*Q. Are your people religious? (Geoff Daniels, The London Times, London, England)*

*A. Yes, of course. It seems to be the nature of people to be religious. Our ancestors predated all your largest religious traditions—Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and so on. Apparently they (our ancestors) were animists, but since our translation, as we call it, we have become monotheistic. I won’t go into the details of our theology, but I can say—I like to think—that our people worship the same God your people do.*

*Q. What would you say is the basic difference between your society and that of, say, the United States? (Derek Stone, ABC News, United States)*



*A. That's a good question. There are probably many possible answers. But perhaps one of the main differences is that we, beginning as a tribal society, have preserved a collective identity. That is, we think of ourselves as members of a group, actually of a hierarchy of groups. What is best for the group is always a priority with us. The United States is a collection of individuals who group together, to be sure, but individuality is respected and even prized. That is less so with us. I think, though I am by no means an expert, earth still has some societies which maintain a strong group identity. I have noted parallels between our society and those.*

*At any rate, many of our collective decisions favor the group rather than the individual. Thus, for example, our economic and environmental policies tend to look to the long-term interest of all of us, rather than the immediate interest of a few of us. For another example, there was almost universal agreement on the effort which sent me to find earth. It was very expensive and difficult, and required considerable sacrifice, but it was thought essential to our whole society to try to find our place of origin.*

*Q. Do your people have art? (Etienne Regnier, Paris Match, France)*

*A. Of course! You might be surprised at how similar our art is to yours. We have music, painting, sculpture, poetry and fiction, just like here! I love your fiction, music and movies—almost all your art. Eventually, when our two peoples are in better contact, I'm sure we'll all enjoy exchanging it. Some of your classics will be classics for us, and perhaps some of ours will be for you, too!*

*Q. Do you have popsicles back home? (Johnna Zimmerman, Clarke Elementary School, Tulsa, Oklahoma, U.S.A.)*

*A. Not exactly. In fact, we don't have much in the way of sweets at all, not like you do. But don't worry: we have plenty of good food! You do too, Johnna; I hope you realize that. I have been amazed at all the different types you have. All the ones I have tried are delicious. You understand, I hope, that people in different countries have different foods, different spices, and different ways of cooking, don't you? We don't really have that much variety where I come from. Your spices, in particular, I think are great fun to cook with....*

A hot rod blasting down the highway jolted Matt from his reading. He raised his head, stretched, and looked around. Three cats were folded up on the chairs around the woodstove, three pairs of eyes shut in contentment.

## CHAPTER 15

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Darcy liked Yvonne Yardley. She was as professional and efficient as Jennings, Chen, and Slinger, but she also treated her like a real person, even telling her how she did on some of the tests. Dr. Jennings was perhaps a little too hale and hearty, artificially so, and Chen and Slinger acted as if Darcy was hardly more than a freak subject to be analyzed. Yardley, slim and blonde, was light-hearted with a warm smile that denoted genuine interest.

At one point, as Darcy was performing some task they had set her to, Yvonne's head poked up over the partition that set them apart. Darcy looked up.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing. I just want to watch you when you do that. Get ready. Here we go again."

Darcy looked down at the row of colored lights and buttons. One turned green and she slapped the button on the table next to it. A few seconds later another turned red and, as instructed, she did nothing. A third turned yellow, and she slapped the button twice.

"That's amazing!" said Yvonne.

"How so?"

"Your reaction time is two or three times faster than any I've ever measured before. I can't even see your hand move!"

"I'm going to slow down from hunger pretty soon. What time is lunch?"

"Oh! Let's see...we'll be done with this in about fifteen minutes. Would you be my guest in the cafeteria after that?"

"I'd love to. But while we're there, please don't call me your friend from another planet. Call me Ana, from Miami."

“Great! Let’s finish this up.” Her head dropped below the partition. “Are you ready? Watch the lights.”

They were the only passengers in the elevator to the ground floor. Yardley smiled at Darcy.

“I owe you an apology. When Dr. Chen told us who we would be testing, I didn’t know what to think. I feel bad for thinking otherwise, but you really are a normal person, most ways...except for your reflexes.”

“Thanks, I guess. I knew that all along. But I suppose others have to learn it.”

“I mean, I’ve been wondering. Did you have boy friends back home? And stuff like that? Was your life pretty ordinary?”

“It seemed ordinary to me. But it’s hard to tell what that means to someone else, you know? I had some boy friends. Nothing serious.”

The elevator door opened and they headed outside. Not wanting to discuss her pre-earth days where others might hear, she turned the conversation to her companion.

“What about you? Are you married? Or do you have boy friends?”

“Not married. I have several boy friends, too many, probably.”

“Too many?”

“Yeah, well, three, really. One is handsome and sexy and I’m crazy about him...but lots of girls think that about him, and I’m not sure he’s that crazy about me. Another is really fun to be around, but I never know what he’ll do from day to day. And the last one is serious and responsible, but so boring that sometimes I can’t stand him. One wants to move to Alaska and live in the woods, another wants to become a doctor and get rich and join a country club and buy a yacht, and the other just wants to sit around and smoke pot and watch basketball. I guess that’s why I’m still single.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah, wow. What about you? Have you met any interesting ear...uh, local, men?”

“I have, actually. I don’t know why, but they tend to be academic types....”

As they walked into the student center, Darcy provided her a slightly adjusted description of Matt, Dr. Sledd, John McLaughlin, and Charles Hodge, leaving out names and ages. She was older than any of them, after all, but it gave her something to talk about. Up ahead, she could see people lined up to select food. A student walked by with a plate full of pizza. When they got closer to the serving line, she’d ask Yvonne to recommend what was good. She dearly hoped it would be pizza.

The afternoon session was begun by Dr. Chen, seated behind the desk in the big room.

"It has gone very well thus far, Ms. Darcy. We have only the scans left to do, and a series of X-rays, and then, if you wish, we can give you a preliminary idea of our findings, probably late this afternoon."

"That's fine," she said. "The sooner we start, the sooner we'll finish. I'm ready."

Chen looked at Dr. Jennings, who took the cue.

"Excellent! We are ready! If you will follow me down the hall, we'll start scanning you six ways from Sunday. Eight by tens will be on sale in the lobby later!"

Seeing Darcy's expression, he added, "But I jest. This way, if you please, ma'am."

It seemed to Darcy that she spent half the afternoon lying on sliding tables inside narrow tubes, listening to things clank and whirl around her. Every time she was rolled out and saw the bearded face of Dr. Jennings, the image of Dr. Frankenstein came to mind. But except for the one time they asked her to think of certain words, she had her thoughts to herself.

Yvonne Yardley was a pleasant, desirable young woman, or so Darcy thought males would have found her. She, Darcy, had none of Yvonne's boy friend problems with Matt. So what was her hang-up? Was it that she dared not commit without her relatives' permission? No, clearly not. She didn't expect to ever see any of them again. She had become a resident of a different place and adopted a different tribe, more or less. She was on her own, which was fine with her. Besides, even at home she had had the same reluctance.

So it must be her. Was she too independent? Or too scared? Or too selfish? Too reluctant to open her heart to someone else? Was it that she couldn't make decisions? Well, not really. She made the decision to come to earth quickly enough. She decided to risk appearing in the Olympics. She decided she needed to make this trip, and even planned it for days. She could make decisions.

She hoped, if the scanner was measuring her brain waves, they weren't bottoming out completely. She sighed. Two seconds later, Dr. Jennings' voice came over the tinny speaker, "Please hold absolutely still, Ms. Darcy! Thank you!"

Finally, it was over. The five, subject and four testers, were seated around the metal desk piled with strip charts, paper-clipped stacks of printouts, and manila folders with colorful tabs. Dr. Chen scanned a clipboard.

"Much of what we found you probably already know, Ms. Darcy," he said. "Your reaction times are, by our standards, extraordinary. Your vital signs are within our norms, though they are those of a conditioned athlete. I refer to heart rate, which is exceptionally slow, and so forth. Your heart is roughly 50% larger than would be expected, but not unprecedented in a very few athletes. Your metabolism is exceptionally efficient, as is the oxygenation coefficient of your red corpuscles. Those were no doubt factors in your endurance events.

"Some of our data cannot be interpreted yet, of course. Your DNA, for example, is likely to be a matter of scientific and medical study well into the future. Other data, on metabolism, to mention one category, will take some analysis before conclusions can be drawn.

"Other findings may be news to you. Your reports of your chronological age do not tally with our medical estimation of same." (He actually said "same.") "You have been alive for something like 93 earth years, according to your own testimony. Yet we find from studying your bone mass, glandular tissue, and central nervous system that your effective age matches that of the typical person in her 30s. You are a normal, fertile female, with all the proper functions. And, somewhat to our surprise, you have no bodily anomalies which most people typically have. That is, your basic inner and outer conformation are almost textbook-normal. So, preliminarily, we would estimate that your extensive sleep schedules over the course of your life have had no deleterious...Yes...?"

Albert Slinger had just walked to Chen's side. He bent over and spoke in a low voice which everyone could nonetheless hear, "Take a look outside, sir, please."

"Eh?" He pushed back his chair.

Everyone moved to the windows at the side of the room. Below, five large trucks were parked in front of the Medical Center building, topped by telescoping towers thrusting antennas to the sky like giant metal daisies. Another dozen cars were parked haphazardly around them, people milling about them. A beleaguered half dozen campus police could be seen just outside the entrance to the building. As they watched, two more trucks, three cars, and another two campus police cars pulled up to add to the confusion. Two helicopters could be seen clattering overhead.

"Oh, nooo," sighed Darcy, stepping back from her window.

"Damnation!" muttered Jennings. "How did those bozos find out about this? What the hell are we going to do now?"

"I have an idea, if you could help for a minute," she said. They looked at her in puzzlement. "Could I borrow the video camera for a minute? Is there a map of the campus I might have?" Jennings nodded. "If you could ask one of those

policemen to step inside the first floor entrance and meet with me, I'd be very grateful."

Sergeant Dershon Morgan was a teddy bear of a man to his children—a giant teddy bear, to be sure. But when he wanted to be imposing, those he imposed on generally took care. He emerged from the front of the Medical Center with a bull horn and scowl on his face to scan the dozens of reporters and cameramen with their arrays of boom microphones, cameras, lenses, notepads, earpieces, and more. He looked at his watch several times. Finally, amid a sparkle of camera flashes, he pressed the button on the bull horn and put it to his mouth.

"Now hear this. All of you, every one of you, are on this campus without permission and are subject to immediate arrest and detainment. You have five minutes to pack up and leave. Beginning in five minutes we will begin arresting and cuffing all of you."

From one side of the horde came a cry, "There she goes!"

At the right side of the building, a small blonde person could be seen being escorted rapidly into a waiting police car. Instantly, half the crowd rushed toward the police car. The other half ran to their own cars or trucks and began loading up and getting under way. The police car, lights flashing, took off down the street leading off campus, followed by more and more cars and trucks. The police car slowed at the entrance to the university, turned left, and sped off, with the caravan in pursuit.

Sergeant Morgan chuckled fiendishly at the spectacle, patting the shirt pocket that held a blank traffic ticket with Darcy's signature on it. The dozen officers in front of the building began dispersing the remaining reporters, spectators, and hangers-on, some wielding cameras, cell phones with cameras, and other gadgets. One of these, evidently a student, with a backpack, handed a video camera to the nearest policeman. "Excuse me. Would you see that Dr. Jennings, inside, gets this back, please? Thank you."

The policeman held the camera in puzzlement as the student, apparently consulting a map of the campus, turned and walked across the grass.

The gas light on the gatepost was lit, as, in the gathering darkness, Darcy opened the gate and pressed the doorbell. Please be home, she prayed.

He was. The door opened to reveal Charles Hodge in a smoking jacket, dark slacks, and soft leather slippers. "It's a miracle!" he said. "The prodigal returns! Enter, honored lady!"

Darcy had never seen a better host. He shushed any explanation until she was comfortably seated and had a cup of hot tea before her. Dr. Hodge sipped sherry from a graceful snifter. "Now, my dear, but only if you care to, you may tell me why you have chosen to grace my poor house a second time with your welcome presence."

She hadn't felt so relaxed since, well, since she was last in his living room. "There was a problem, Dr. Hodge."

"Indeed. I know what it was. Although I had no idea where you went when you left, I found out tonight as I watched the evening news. You must have been at the Duke Medical Center. Such a lovely mess it was, too, earlier this afternoon!"

"Yes, sir. I submitted myself to some medical testing there. The results will be published somewhere eventually, they tell me. Somehow, word that I was there leaked out. You saw what happened then."

He smiled and sipped his sherry. His leather chair creaked companionably.

"They were looking for a blonde woman, so one of the medical assistants took my place as a, a decoy—is that the term?" Hodge nodded. "Her name is Yvonne Yardley. If you ever get the chance you can thank her for me. I was able to slip away in the crowd. But I wasn't sure where to go next. I need a bit of help, I'm afraid."

"Whatever it is, you have but to name it, my dear."

"I planned to fly out this evening, but I'm afraid I can no longer go to the airport, even in disguise."

"Indeed not. The news broadcast showed reporters camped out at the security checkpoint, scrutinizing each departing passenger. Unless you could disguise yourself as a professional football player, you would never get through undetected—and maybe not even then. What do you have in mind instead?"

"There have to be other airports not far away. But I have no idea which one might have connecting flights to larger airports where I could book an international flight. As an eminent well-traveled sociologist," she smiled, "you probably know such an airport. If you could direct me, I would take a bus to it and be 'out of your hair' tonight, as I think you say."

"That is half of a good idea, Ms. Darcy. And I shall continue to call you that until you begin calling me Charles, if you please. Winston-Salem is a good choice. You can catch a commuter plane from there to Atlanta, for example, which will make connections to wherever you might wish to go. But I will not allow you to leave tonight, and I will not allow you to take a bus or a taxi. No! You will sleep here tonight and have a good breakfast in the morning like a civi-

lized person, and then I will drive you to Winston-Salem. I beg you: do not deny me that pleasure!”

Darcy plumped her pillow and considered her good fortune. Her trip had been an adventure, though stressful. There had been compensations. For one thing, she was looking forward to getting home. She actually had a home to go to! Although she had learned to love silk shirts, thanks to Rhoda Williams, she’d never slept between silk sheets before. That might be a little too luxurious for her own home, but it was a delightful perk as a guest. For more good fortune, she had friends like Charles Hodge, her generous host, whom she’d met through John McLauphin, perhaps not delightful but remarkable in his own way. And she’d met McLauphin through Dr. Sledd, still another fine person. For that matter, she’d met William Sledd through Matt. You could almost say Matt had started it all. Oh, no! Matt!

She sat up in bed and turned on the small bedside light. It was too late to call him and anyway she didn’t want to start a phone conversation in the quiet house. But Matt would be waiting for word from her. Well, there was another way. She got her cell phone out and drafted a text message: “Slight delay. Expect to arrive tomorrow. Will call.”

Should she end it with the word “Love?” That was the usual form, but was that what she meant? If she said it, would Matt care? Would he even notice? Would he go completely crazy? Did it even matter if she said it?

Yes, it mattered. Matt would notice. But did she mean it? She hated to say something she didn’t mean. Hodge to McLauphin to Sledd to Matt. They were all friends and they all started with Matt. Well, it wasn’t like the decision to leave her moon base and move to earth. That had been a matter of life and death. This decision was hers alone. Or rather hers and Matt’s. Darcy and Matt. Matt and Darcy.

She mashed the buttons: “L-o-v-e,” added a “D,” and pressed send.



## CHAPTER 16

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Darcy saw Matt before he saw her, maybe because she was walking in a group of taller people charging toward the baggage claim area. She could tell the exact moment he picked her out: his face changed completely, from a furrowed-brow sort of anxious scanning to sheer open-faced delight, with a wide smile.

She felt completely enveloped in his welcoming hug, about to beg for breath, when he released her. He didn't say a word; he hugged her again, and held her shoulders and looked into her eyes.

"Five days! Seemed like five years!"

"Hi, Matt." A smile.

"Babe!" He hugged her again. She began to worry they were creating a scene. People were flowing around them on both sides. Some, at least, were smiling.

He didn't kiss her as she expected. Was this a matter of etiquette? Whatever, he seemed to be ecstatic. Finally, he picked up her back pack and they headed toward the exit, his free arm resting lightly over her shoulders, keeping her close. She felt happy. Or was she just relieved to be back on familiar ground? She didn't have much experience with people who were truly happy to see her—politely glad, yes, professionally glad, or perhaps awed in a good-heavens-look-who-that-is sort of way. Matt seemed genuinely joyful. It could only be for her herself. She couldn't remember that ever happening before. It felt rather nice, actually. Should she tell him that?

She could not decide. She put an arm around his waist as they walked out into the setting sun, their hips bumping lightly at each stride.

The shortest way back was over the Trans-Mountain Road. Matt pulled off at the observation area at the crest and they got out to watch the sky fade deeper and deeper purple over the desert. The Rio Grande was visible thousands of feet below, with scattered farms, orchards, feedlots, and developments visible along its length, the Interstate highway paralleling it a little higher up the mountain. Tiny dots of headlights crept along it. A chilly breeze was blowing, bringing the sound of a raptor higher up the mountain. They could easily see mountain tops a hundred miles away.

"Wow, that's beautiful. Not at all like Miami or Durham."

He put his arm around her. "Yeah. It puts everything in perspective. Hey, did they feed you on the plane?"

"No!"

"You hungry?"

"Yes!"

"I did a little checking. There's a Vietnamese restaurant near the university in Las Cruces. It's only a little out of our way. You want to try it out on the way home?"

"Sure! What a great idea! Have you ever heard of pho?"

"Nope."

"I guess it's kind of Vietnamese caldo. I hope it's on the menu. You might love it, Matt!"

"Maybe." He pulled her closer and rested his cheek on her head. "I know something I do love for sure, though. Let's go eat, so we can go home."

The Méndez family compound was totally blacked out when they finally pulled in at nearly 10:00 pm. Matt was so full he could feel his innards slosh. That place served a lot of soup!

"We can have breakfast with Abuelita in the morning," he said. "She missed you. She told me so three times a day. She's eager to hear a report of your visit with your Argentinian relatives in Miami."

"I'll give her the short version tomorrow. Right now, I think I can hear others who stayed up to wait for us."

Matt hoisted her back pack over his shoulder and listened. She was right—from the other side of the door came a chorus of faint mewing. How did they know?

Matt returned to the living room after turning on lights throughout the tiny house to find Darcy kneeling on the rug petting the cats parading back and forth against her thighs.

"Don't believe a thing they tell you," he said. "I didn't beat them, and I did feed them, and well."

"Maybe. But they say you didn't talk to them—not so they'd understand."

"Well, I guess that's true. I only speak two languages. But I'm trying."

"Hey, Matt, is there any of that wine left?"

"You bet! How about a nice, soft white?"

"That'd be great. I'm so tired. Would it be ok with you if we just had a little wine and I took a shower and went to bed? I'll have more energy tomorrow, I promise."

"Anything you want, babe. I'm just so glad to have you back home. Gimme a minute."

He went to the kitchen, located the wine and the corkscrew and poured two glasses, but when he returned the living room was empty. He found the cats stationed in the hallway outside the bathroom, the bathroom light on, clothes on the floor, and steam emerging from over the glass door to the shower.

"Hey, you want your wine?"

The door opened a crack and a slim, wet arm emerged. He put the glass in her hand.

"Matt?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm not sure, Matt, but I think there might be room for two in here."

"Say no more, babe! One way to find out!" He put his glass down on the sink and reached for his shirt buttons.

When he eased open the door he could hardly see for all the steam in the place.

"You in here somewhere?"

"Silly." An arm slid around his waist. "What'll I do with this glass?"

"Let me have it." He eased the door open and set the glass on the counter.

"Now...."

He wrapped both arms around her and hugged her warm, slippery, smallness against his body.

"You and me, girl. I missed you, amor. I missed you a lot."

"I think I can tell! I missed you too."

"Really?"

"Really."

“Say no more.”

Later, with Darcy snoozing softly in the crook of his arm, he contemplated the moonlit silhouette of the wine bottle on the bedside table. One cat or another shifted its position on the covers over his ankles. The bottle was less than half empty—it couldn’t have been the wine. It must be love! He eased her closer and kissed her ear. She sighed briefly and resumed her regular breathing.

His thoughts wandered. He had never been so happy. Therefore, it couldn’t last. He blamed his ancestors for their fatalistic view of life. Things went wrong and that’s just the way it goes. On the other hand, his direct ancestors, the ones who had left home and gone north, were the optimists, the ones seeking better things. He guessed he was covered, whichever way it went. He closed his eyes.

## CHAPTER 17

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Matt totally lost track of time, so deeply was he absorbed in drafting the story of Darcy's earliest days in west Texas. It bothered him that he was not the best companion to her, except that Darcy was similarly busy in her own projects. He took to jotting down questions to ask her during their meals together. He had not fully realized how isolated and afraid she had been at first, until she told him in detail about how she had been hunted and captured and how she had escaped without knowing what to do or where to go next. He was amazed all over again at her persistence and luck. There was no telling who would ever read what he was writing, but he was sure it would make a great true adventure story.

With Darcy's permission, he began a cautious email correspondence with Hleo, who proved to be helpful. Matt could tell Hleo was as nervous about their contact as he himself was. Darcy told him Hleo had been a quite high official. He was not one to be puffed up about himself, but she suggested a little deference on Matt's part should ease things considerably.

That turned out to be the case. Matt was careful to remain formal and couch his questions as clearly and tactfully as he could, and Hleo seemed to warm up to him over several weeks. In his brief career as a reporter, Matt had interviewed both a retired judge and a general, and Hleo responded fairly well to the same type of kid-gloves treatment.

Darcy spent some of her time adding to her blog on McLauphin's website. The first week it was up it was in such demand that the server McLauphin's provider used crashed on an hourly basis. That problem was finally fixed—how, Matt had no idea. Follow-up questions continued to pour in, some of which McLauphin's editors provided to Darcy for her to expand on if she wished.

Both of them devoted some time to getting the Second Planet Foundation off to a good start. Charlene Stratemeyer and V.T. Newbury had organized it nicely, even hiring a web designer to set up a website. John McLaughlin's mention of the foundation during the second interview with Darcy caused a surge of "hits" before it was fully operational.

They had been tempted to allow public donations, but Darcy finally decided to ask those who wished to contribute to make donations to other good causes instead. She didn't want even a hint that she or her foundation was interested in collecting money from the public. Money was not a problem, fortunately—the income of the foundation was increasing at a rate well beyond projections. Benning, Bynum, Caxton, Braithwaite, had signed off on a commemorative volume devoted to Darcy's Olympic performances, and that, plus a video documentary, were selling briskly. All the profits were directed to the foundation.

At her suggestion, Hartley Braithwaite and Charlene Stratemeyer had offered Darcy's good friend Cheryl Ford a position with the foundation in Barbados, to encourage and underwrite the education and athletic training of students there. Cheryl was in her senior year at Sul Ross, but Braithwaite told Darcy that Cheryl had been delighted with the offer, that she had contemplated something similar herself but had not had the means to do anything about it. He felt sure she would accept.

The mobile school for migrant workers' children was being arranged, and other projects were being discussed with several foundations and charities, most of which seemed to welcome the prestige of an interplanetary liaison.

All was not work, however. They exercised daily and continued to take their noonday meal with Abuelita Méndez. Darcy had her music lessons, and they took occasional breaks for diversion. On one such occasion, Matt was sucking the blood from the back of his hand where Eleanor had snagged him in play when he noticed Darcy looking at him with a decidedly unsympathetic expression on her face.

"What's so funny?" he huffed.

"Eleanor got you! She never gets me!"

"What? You think she's more gentle with you than with me?"

"No, silly. I'm faster than she is. You're slower!"

"Is that so? Well, let's see about that!" He began flicking the boot lace he'd been using to tease Eleanor with at Darcy. She fixed her eyes on the space between them, cocked her arm, and caught the end of it between her thumb and forefinger in midair four out of five times.

"Yeah, well maybe you are faster. Eleanor only snags it maybe once or twice out of five."

"Told you!"

"At least you don't have claws!"

"Rrow!"

She nearly caused him heart failure one chilly afternoon. She had gone out to exercise when his cell phone rang. She sounded shaken.

"Matt? Could you come get me in your truck, please? I'm by gate number 136 of the acequía."

"Oh, jeez, are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm ok. But I need a ride back please."

He grabbed his keys and bolted out the door, leaving the house unlocked. At first he couldn't find her, but then he saw her head just over the top of the levee, next to the big water valve. She was sitting on the side of the levee holding a bloody handkerchief to her leg, her bicycle on its side half in the water. She had scrapes on one arm from which blood was oozing.

"I'm all right, Matt," she said, in response to his panicked expression. "Just put my bike in your truck and help me in too, please."

"Slow down, Matt!" she said, on the return drive. "I'm not hurt that bad. I'll live, unless you drive into a tree!"

"I don't mind the sight of a little blood," he replied, "but *your* blood, that's different! That tears me up, girl!" She was probably three times his age and he called her "girl." He really was upset.

"It was only a stupid accident. I didn't notice the loose dirt on the slope and the bike just slid out from under me. I should have paid more attention."

She adamantly refused to be taken to a hospital. They didn't have much in the way of first aid supplies in their little house (he'd have to fix that), so they had to go to the big house where Abuelita Méndez immediately took over.

To his chagrin, Abuelita agreed with Darcy on the advisability of home treatment, fussing over her and dressing her wounds with hydrogen peroxide and pastes from several "hierbas" (herbs), telling Darcy "No hay curva mala pasándola despacio (there is no bad curve if you take it slowly)." She ordered him to take the hydrogen peroxide out to his truck to dab up any drips in the cab (and she was right—there were a few).

Darcy fiddled with her bandages and limped a bit for a couple days, but to Matt's relief she healed quickly enough with no complications.

## CHAPTER 18



# DECEMBER

*“Honored Sir,” Matt wrote, using Darcy’s suggested form of address for Hleo, “If you could help me to understand something, it would greatly aid my comprehension of the situation by which Ms. Darcy came to Earth. It is quite clear that her instinctive compassion for human life was the impetus for her precipitate departure from the moon station.” Matt was pushing the upper end of his vocabulary. “It was fortunate for us that she did so, of course. Yet it is not clear to me why only the two of you were sent on this important mission. When it began, she must have been a very young woman. How was it that she was chosen to be your only companion?”*

Within half an hour, Hleo sent his response:

*“Dear Mr. Méndez:*

*“There are two parts in answer to your query.*

*“First, as you can imagine, the mission was very long, very complex, and very difficult. (Indeed, it is not yet over.) An embodied human requires a great deal of support in the way of water, food, and other supplies. A second human would have doubled that amount; a third, tripled it. The additional burden on the mission would have been prohibitive. My own needs are much more modest, to be sure. It was decided that a combination of*



*one embodied human and one, shall I say, disembodied human (your language has no word for me, alas) would be chosen.*

*"Second, as to the choice of Ms. Darcy rather than someone else, several considerations were operative.*

*"The person chosen had to be young, in excellent health, courageous, resourceful, and psychologically stable for the rigors to be faced.*

*"Next, as you will know since you have read the basic information she has provided on her 'blog,' our society balances tradition with innovation, which is to say politics is usually a factor in most major decisions. The person chosen had to be acceptable to most factions, and of enough prominence to be beyond controversy. Ms. Darcy has told me she has explained to you that her father is the over-chief, that is, chief of our tribes. Given that, his choice of his eldest child for the mission met with general agreement.*

*"I hope this information answers your question. If you please, I would not like to add any further particulars at this time, leaving those to appointed representatives who I am sure will be contacting you some number of years in the future."*

Wow, thought Matt. A lot to think about! Darcy was typing away at her own computer, her eyes fixed on the screen in front of her. He jotted down a few questions as they occurred to him. He would ask her later, after figuring out the best approach.

Darcy was lost in her own favorite project, the attempt to place her language on the Indo-European family tree. Dr. Sledd, more of a philologist than a linguist, nevertheless shared her eagerness for the task. Much as John McLaughlin mediated inquiries about her life and society from people at large, Sledd acted as her go-between for a large group of linguists scattered about the world.

She had done her best to explain it to Matt. "What use is a long list of words like that?" he had wanted to know. She had been typing word after word for nearly two hours. "And what are all those funny symbols?"

"Those are from the International Phonetic Alphabet," she told him. "They allow nearly every feature of every spoken sound to be described."

"OK, but what about that list?"

She thought for a second. "Well, suppose you had a list of the 100 most common words in English. Then suppose, in the next column, you put the Spanish

words for the same thing. And in a third column, you put, say, the Japanese words for those things and maybe Arabic in a fourth. OK?”

“OK.”

“Then you compare the words, and see how many from one column resemble those in another. What do you think you’ll find?”

“Well, I guess you’d find that a lot of Spanish words resemble English words, but not that many Japanese or Arabic words.”

“That’s right. And the number of resemblances would give you a rough indication of how close the languages were. If we added columns for German words and Portuguese words, you’d find that most of the Spanish and Portuguese words resembled each other, which would indicate that those two languages are closely related. You’d also find that many English and German words were related, probably more than the number of similar ones between English and Spanish. That would suggest that English and German are closely related. So while Spanish and Portuguese are also closely related, you could tell that all four are related to each other, but not as closely. And Arabic and Japanese, which would have very few resemblances, are likely not related at all. That’s because they’re from a different language family, not Indo-European. Do you see?”

“Sort of. It sounds complicated. Even so, you’ve been doing this for days. How long is your word list?”

“It is complicated. It’s more than just lists of words. It’s also individual sounds and even families of sounds. It’s how the languages work, too—how questions are made, how negative statements are formed, and on and on.”

“Dang! I’m sorry I asked! No, I’m joking. Thank you for the tutorial. Seriously!”

“You’re welcome, Matt. I love this—I think we’re really getting somewhere.”

“Yeah? Like, what are you learning?”

“One thing I’m learning is that linguists love to argue. They’ll probably go back and forth over this stuff for years. Right now, the historical linguists are trying to decide if my language is a branch of Balto-Slavic, or maybe a whole branch of its own. It has some similarities to the Germanic sub-family too. Another reason it’s complicated is that Luvit, my language, has changed as much or more in several thousand years as the Indo-European languages have. That all has to be traced back as well.”

“That makes my head spin, babe. How about some popcorn?”

Gradually, they began to acquire social lives. Abuelita liked to invite several elderly friends for lunch every week, and Matt and Darcy enjoyed sitting around

the periphery of the group, listening to their conversation. The fact that they themselves were occasional subjects of gossip bothered neither of them for long.

Darcy invited Matt along on one of her music lessons. Since he always drove her to it, he figured he'd go inside and listen just once. The teacher, a forties professor named Dave Kirkpatrick, was not surprised to see Eleanor hop out of the shoulder bag Darcy was carrying and sit on the bench next to her during her lesson. It must have happened before, Matt guessed, since Eleanor frequently rode along with Darcy on many of her outings. Eleanor behaved perfectly; she looked as if she would have meowed an accompaniment if Darcy had asked her to. Darcy introduced Matt to Kirkpatrick as a friend who was curious about harpsichords and harpsichord music, which was true enough.

Kirkpatrick seemed to be pleased with Darcy's progress. Matt didn't know much about the music she played, but it sounded perfectly fine to him. Kirkpatrick, however, kept telling her to slow down, which Matt found amusing. Little did he know! Don't tell her to speed up!

## CHAPTER 19

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One afternoon shortly before supper Matt judged the time was right to ask Darcy to help him put together the ideas he had been saving. She had got up from her computer to gaze out the window, standing with her back to him, gracefully erect and balanced as always, seemingly relaxed, but fully alert, as he well knew. Sort of like a cat, he reflected.

“Hey, can you help me with something?”

“Sure.”

“I know you don’t want to give me an exact figure, but it would help me write this if I had a general idea what the population of your planet is. I won’t put it in the book, but I mean, is it, say, more than the population of the United States, or less? Than three hundred million?”

She studied him a minute. “More.”

“Wow. I had no idea. So...there must be a lot of tribes, then, right? What, a half million?”

“No, you’re thinking of family groups. The best English word for those is clans. Tribes are groups of clans. But yes, there might be nearly a half million clans. There are a lot fewer tribes.”

“OK. Thanks. That helps. Now, a different question—something from what you said in one of your blog entries. You said your government was a mixture of elected and hereditary officials, right?”

“Right.”

“And they sort of worked alongside each other, in ways you didn’t care to go into?”

“Right.”

"And your father was one of those?"

"Yes."

"Was his position elected or hereditary?"

"Mmm, hereditary."

Matt's skin began to crawl. Why had he never figured this out before? He was thunderstruck. "Hereditary. Hleo told me your father was the 'chief of all the tribes.' My God! Your father was king of the entire planet, wasn't he?"

Darcy looked stricken. Oblivious, he blundered on. "As his eldest child, that would make you the hereditary successor to the king...of three hundred million people! Right?" He kept his voice gentle, but Darcy looked crushed. She flopped down on the couch, her hands clasped between her knees. She couldn't look at him.

He pushed back his chair and moved to her side but she turned away and buried her face in a cushion. She shook his hand off her shoulder. He replaced it and patted her gently.

"Aww, sugar! I don't care! It doesn't matter to me! I shouldn't have said a damn thing! I'm such an idiot sometimes."

He kept rubbing her back as she began sobbing. He didn't know what else to do. She was shaking.

After a long while, she sat up. Her eyes were red and puffy, their normal sparkle gone. He felt like a monster, but he put an arm around her and pulled her to him. She felt soft, as if something had gone out of her.

"I told you," she sobbed into the hollow of his neck. "I wouldn't cooperate. I refused to get married. Sending me here solved two problems at once." She sniffled twice and rubbed her nose. "I never cared about any of that. I just wanted to be an ordinary person and live an ordinary life. I only wanted to be happy. I almost made it!" She began crying again.

He felt like his insides were being wrung out. He wanted to die.

"Aww...." He hugged her tighter.

"I'm sorry, Matt. I never should have pretended. That wasn't fair to you. I was selfish. I can't even ask you to forgive me!" She sniffled again. "But I have a plan B."

"A what?"

"Another place to go. Hleo helped me set it up. All I have to do is go there."

"What?" An icy fist smashed his heart. The skin on his face felt instantly tight. He held her face between his hands and spoke to her from a distance of inches. "Listen to me! I don't care about all that! I don't care if you're the next queen of the universe. I don't care if you glow in the dark and can microwave food with

your bare hands! I don't care! I love you! You! Just you! That's all!" He was shouting. He lowered his voice. "All I ever wanted was to be happy too. You make me happy. I want us to be happy together. I want you to marry me. Forget everything else! Do you hear me?"

Her eyes were dazed. He wasn't sure if she really did hear him. When he removed his hands from her face he could see where his fingers had been on her cheeks. He drew her to his chest, rocking her lightly back and forth.

Finally he picked her up and carried her into the bathroom. Foosh, crouched low in the kitchen, meowed as they passed. He set her gently on the clothes hamper and turned on the hot water. "Take a shower, amor. You'll feel better. I'll bring you your robe and fix us something to eat, OK?"

The closets in the house were small, yet hers wasn't half full. There were only five pairs of shoes on the floor, tiny shoes at that. The clothes hangers spread across the width of the closet rod, but there was room between each for more hangers. It wasn't much of an inventory for a princess. He was ashamed of himself all over again.

The shower door was closed and the water was running. He laid the robe on the hamper.

While the food was heating, he turned out the lights. It was getting dark outside, but bright lights inside seemed wrong somehow. Darcy liked candles, so he lit some and set them around. He thought back to when she had grimaced after he had told her she could live like a queen if she wanted. It didn't register with him then like it did now: she practically was one, but that was the last thing she wanted. She wanted to be "normal." He knew that, too, or should have. What a dolt he was!

She came out in the robe, barefoot and with wet hair, still looking solemn. She ate less than half of what he had prepared and moved to the couch. He put up the dishes and sat next to her, laying his arm lightly on her shoulders.

"Sweetheart, do you know the expression 'Wherever you go, there you are?'"

"Hm-um."

"It means you can't change things that much. You can try to run away from your problems, but when you do you just end up taking them with you. You still have them. If you do go to Hleo's Plan B, the world will still be the same, and you'll still be who you are. And I'll still be who I am...."

"Yes, I know. Oh, Matt. I never wanted to be important back home, Matt. I didn't understand that then. I'm sure I was a difficult person—I know I was often miserable. But once I was here, all that Olympic stuff made people go crazy. Once they knew I came from somewhere else, that made it worse, much worse.

"Being here with you, Matt, has been so wonderful, more than I ever dared to hope for." She hugged herself and leaned against him. Tears ran down her cheeks. "For the first time in my life I was really happy." Her voice shrank to a squeak. "But now I've ruined it."

"You haven't ruined it! Whatever makes you think so? No one around here knows who you are—they know you as Ana Del Arco, from Argentina, and they love you just the way you are!" He wrapped both arms around her and pulled her into him. "You told me yourself, you've changed tribes; you've moved. You'll never see anyone from back home again. I'm the only one who knows who you used to be, and it doesn't matter to me! Surely you know that! Don't you?"

"I guess. Yes, I do. Of course. Oh, Matt, I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I was afraid of what you might think—I was afraid you'd treat me like, I don't know, some freak. Sometimes I think I'm going crazy. I really am a freak."

"No, babe, you're not. Not even close. I know who you are better than anyone else alive. And I love you like you are right now. And if you don't believe me, I can prove you're not a freak."

"You can? How?"

"Simple. Do a study. Compare five women from different planets who have gone to live on other planets where they had to hide to avoid hunters, and see which one is most lovable. I promise, it's gonna be you!"

She dug him weakly in the ribs with her elbow. "Oh, Matt."

"OK, that was lame. But at least promise me you won't sneak off to Hleo's plan B, will you?"

"I promise. Not for a while, anyway." She pushed herself to her feet and took his hand. "I'm tired. Let's go to bed. Thank you, Matt."

He stood and hugged her. "No, thank *you*."

"I like the candles, Matt."

"Best money I ever spent." He hugged her again.

Once again, he was awake and thinking while cats and girl friend slept. That had been a close one. He had almost ruined things through his own stupidity. He remembered their drive to San Antonio when she'd flinched when he'd asked if her father were a chief. He'd thought she was thinking that her father might have passed away by now, but no—she was worried that he'd realized she was a VIP. What an oaf he'd been. There had been no real need to ask her about her identity. Her lineage was impressive, sure, but if no one knew it except the two of them, and they didn't care, what difference would it make? None that he could see. In truth, if her background became generally known, he would lose her.

If she decided she didn't like him, or was unhappy living where she was, or if she'd clearly be better off without him, he hoped he could understand that. Her departure would leave a hole in his heart the size of a canyon, but if it were really best for her, he could never stand in her way. But if she was unhappy because she was having her own private identity problems, she'd have those no matter where she was. And with him there, maybe he could help her deal with them. But how?

He wasn't a psychologist. She seemed perfectly sane to him. She had a fine sense of humor; he'd never forget how she laughed until she cried after she goosed him that time. She just didn't laugh often. But then, she was always working on something. They didn't take a lot of time off, really. They seldom played. Maybe he could change that.

He'd start tomorrow.



## CHAPTER 20

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The next day was one of those beautiful winter days in the desert, dry, with a deep blue sky, a few high clouds, and a breeze that was just a little beyond gentle out of the north. Darcy had a music lesson in the middle of the afternoon. After he dropped her off at the edge of the campus he drove to a hobby store he remembered in the older section of town several miles away. When he returned, she was waiting on the bench at the bus stop, her bag of music on one side and the bag with Eleanor in it on the other. Eleanor's head and shoulders were out of the bag and they were both watching the world go by. He wished for a camera. They were adorable.

"This isn't the way home, Matt. Where are you going?"

"Hang on a minute. We're almost there." He parked at a municipal soccer field and came around to open the door for Darcy. "Do you know what kites are?"

"Kites? Wait...aren't they're birds? Right? And also some kind of toy? Is that right?"

"Yeah, they're birds, but I don't know anything about those. This is the other kind. I got us a toy!"

"A toy? Really? Why?"

He pulled a long box out from behind the seat of the truck. "Surely you had kites on..." he looked around at the empty field, "...back home?"

"I guess some children had them. We didn't. Why did you get a toy?"

"So we can play with it, you goose! Help me put it together."

Two hours later, they dismantled the kite and stowed it behind the seat.

"That was neat, Matt! It looked like a giant bird, hovering up in the sky!"

"It did. Didn't you like the way the string felt like it was alive? You controlled it very well, by the way."

"It may be a toy, but it's kind of a scientific toy, isn't it?"

"Sort of, yeah. Scientific." He was remembering her delighted expression as she learned to make the kite work with the wind.

"This still isn't the way home, Matt."

"What are you? Henry the Navigator?"

"Who?"

"Never mind. I know it's not the way home. It's the way to...well, look up ahead."

"Pizza?"

"Sure, why not? It's getting late to go home and cook something. Let's take some home and see if the cats want to share it with us!"

"Pizza!"

---

*Dear Dr. Sledd,*

*I am writing, with Darcy's permission, a more detailed account of her early days here than the newspaper article I wrote several months ago.*

*One of her favorite activities since then has been to pursue the history of her language. I know you have collaborated with her on this. I wonder if you could give me some idea of the nature of her contributions to that investigation....*

---

*Dear Mr. Méndez—*

*Ms. Darcy did indeed tell me you were compiling a chronicle of her activities so far. That is good news, not least because it implies that you are in regular contact with her. I always thought you two made a handsome couple.*

*There is no reason that you should have known, but Ms. Darcy in my opinion has the makings of a first class research scholar. It is one thing to be a quality informant, that is, a person who supplies linguistic information, and she is most definitely that. But in addition she has accumulated a*

*good working knowledge of the principles of linguistic science, so much so that she is able to offer suggestions about processes and forms that other scholars have found extremely innovative and useful. No doubt this is partly due to her innocence of preconceived biases inherent in all advanced scholarly pursuits. But no matter: I think the monograph which will most likely be published next spring will be a landmark work, one that will reorient and refine our whole notion of Proto-Indo European. A great deal of the credit for it will lie with her.*

## CHAPTER 21

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Dr. Jorge Silva, associate professor of literature in the Spanish department at New Mexico State University, ran into his boyhood friend Matt Méndez on campus by pure chance one afternoon. They had lost track of each other after college. After a warm handshake and double abrazo, it took them fifteen minutes to catch each other up. Matt had to be a good deal more circumspect about his history than George (which was what his oldest friends called him), feeling slightly inadequate by comparison, but only outwardly. To the world, he was an unemployed newspaper reporter. But to himself, well, the world could go whistle in the wind.

George had married and he and his wife had a young daughter.

“¿Y tú, Matt? You got a wife yet?”

“No, not yet.”

“A girl friend?”

“Sí.”

“A serious girl friend?”

“Simón. Serious. She’s taking a music lesson right now.”

“Excellent! Let me check with Charo on a good time and we’ll have you all over for supper! It’s Christmas, hombre! Let’s make it special, ¿qué dices?”

“Great idea, hermano! Let’s do it!”

“Hey, Darcy, why don’t we go Christmas shopping this morning? You’ve never been Christmas shopping. It’ll be a real cultural experience!”

“OK, sure! What will we shop for?”

“Well, we need a Christmas tree, and we need ornaments and lights and decorations. We need presents for each other and for Abuelita Méndez, and maybe for

the cats...and I want you to help me pick out a couple of things for yourself, too."

"You mean you want me to help you choose presents for you to give to me?"

"Right."

"Aren't presents were supposed to be surprises?"

"Most of the time they are. But in this case, I need your help to make sure I get the right presents."

"That sounds mysterious! What kind of presents are they?"

"Clothes."

"Clothes?"

"Yeah, you know: soft things, made out of textiles, that you put on your body and wear. Clothes."

"I know what clothes are. I have clothes. Why do I need more?"

"Don't tell me you didn't have special clothes for special occasions."

"Of course. But what 'special occasions' do we have?"

"Saturday, for instance. We're going to visit the Silvas."

"I have clothes to wear for then."

"No, you don't. This is Christmas! You need special clothes for Christmas. It's a special occasion! You even need special shoes!"

"I do?"

"You do. Trust me."

They were walking through the mall parking lot on their way to the truck as Matt carried their second load of bags of the morning, containing Darcy's first dress and two new pairs of shoes. He couldn't tell if she was eager or apprehensive about owning a dress and fancy shoes, but at least she was excited.

As they walked past a dumpster, a movement on the far side of it caught Matt's eye. "Hold it," ordered a voice. "Set down the bags and give me your wallet."

It was a kid, a good-sized kid, wearing a sweatshirt, old jeans, and with a bad complexion and a worse haircut. He had squinty eyes and held a small automatic pistol pointed at them. The muzzle wavered back and forth ominously.

They both froze, Matt's mind racing. Darcy was closest to the guy. If he hurt her.... The clothes and his wallet were worthless by comparison.

"OK, no problem," he said, setting the plastic bags on the ground.

"Now the wallet."

"Right." He eased his wallet out of his back pocket, glancing at Darcy. She was motionless, her face devoid of expression. Far from showing fear, she looked

like a raptor measuring a rodent. Please, please, don't do anything stupid, he prayed.

He held out the wallet, adding, "Here." The robber had followed his glance to Darcy. He looked at her a second, his eyes cut to his left. When his eyes shifted back to the wallet several things happened at once. There was a blur to Matt's right, the pistol flew up in the air, and there were several sharp thumps. The robber doubled over and fell on his face, the pistol clattering to the pavement behind him.

Matt's mouth fell open. He was still holding his wallet out like an idiot. He lowered it to his side. "Jesus! What the hell happened?"

"I stopped him. He'll be all right. Let's go, Matt."

"Holy Pete!" He looked around. There was no one close. Calling the police would be awkward. He pulled his handkerchief out of his other back pocket, picked up the pistol, and tossed it in the dumpster. The kid was curled up like a boiled shrimp, rocking slightly from side to side. He picked up Darcy's bags and put an arm around her shoulders. "OK. Let's go."

As they neared the truck, she murmured, "I really am a freak, aren't I?"

"No, ma'am! More like an angel!" He gave her shoulder a little squeeze. "If everyone could do that, there'd be no such thing as robbery. You were great, sweetheart. It just scares me to see you take chances."

"I didn't take much of a chance. You people move so slowly...."

"Oh? We'll see about that. Wait till I get behind the wheel! Let's go get us a Christmas tree."

On the drive home with their tree in the back and the space behind the seat full of shopping bags, Darcy seemed subdued. "You're not still thinking about that robber, are you?" he asked.

"No. He'll get over it. I think, anyway. I just don't like being reminded that I'm different, that's all. It makes me sad."

"Different? Oh, sugar! There's different and then there's different."

"What?"

"I mean, that robber might have stopped someone who'd have dropped everything and run away. Or he might have found someone who screamed or tried something else stupid and got shot. Or he might have held up someone who knew some martial art, and got his clock cleaned anyway. All people are different, Darcy, you included. What?"

"Oh, uh, 'martial art' reminded me of something. Never mind."

“You are different. You are you! That’s why I love you! Because of that difference! Don’t you see?”

“I guess. If you say so. Thanks, Matt.”

## CHAPTER 22



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*Dear Darcy,*

*Yes, Michelle gets email. She would love to hear from you. I will attach her email address below. You'd be amazed how often she talks about you. She's been a lot less difficult since you were here. She even has your Olympic video and says she wants to be on the high school swimming team!*

*Thanks again.*

*Charlene*

---

*Hi, Michelle!*

*I've been thinking about you. How are you doing? I'd love to know how things worked out with you and what you've been doing lately.*

*Best wishes,*

*Darcy*



---

dear darcy,

im sooo glad you emailed me! ☺ i found a karate class to take and im taking it now. it's hard but i like it. im trying to get in better shape for it, but the hardest part is the thinking part. i have a good sensei and hes' helping me alot. justin hasn't bothered my anymore im so glad!! thank you!! :-) im going to high school next year and i want to be on the swimming team. do you think i can do it? what can i do to do good in high school? ive been reading youre blog its so neat. its just amaizing. i hope you'll come visit soon. ☺

lol,

michelle

---

Dear Michelle,

I'm glad to hear that Justin is no problem any more. Good for you! You have found that your own mind is your best friend, haven't you? With a good attitude, and some practice, you can do things that you thought were impossible.

I can't say if swimming is perfect for you. It might be. The important thing is to do something you like and that you want to do. If it makes you happy, then it's right.

I'm glad you want to do well in high school. I hope you don't have any more bitchy teachers! Since you asked, I think the best thing you can do, and the most fun thing, is to read. It may not be easy at first, but if you stay with it you'll find your mind works better and doors will open for you. That's what I did on the moon, for a long time. Did I tell you that? I read everything I could.

Please stay in touch. If you will tell me what you like to read, I will be glad to suggest some books that I enjoyed.

Take care. Say hello to your mother for me!

Best wishes,

Darcy

“Do what makes you happy,” Darcy read. “Good advice. I hope that’s what I’m doing myself.” She pressed “send.”

## CHAPTER 23

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“It’ll be fine, Darcy! He’s a great guy, and I’m sure his wife is too. Don’t be nervous! You’ll have a wonderful time!”

“It’s easy for you to say ‘don’t be nervous.’ They are going to ask me questions about my background. There are a lot of blanks in my background, Matt.”

“I know, sugar. But just think about it. It’s true, these are the kind of people who might know something about Argentina. But you’re an orphan, right? Your parents died when you were young, and you came to, uh, Alpine, Texas and went to high school there, ok? That’ll explain why you know so little about Hispanic literature and why your Spanish isn’t perfect and stuff. It’s sad, but that’s the way most of our schools are.”

“Oh, I guess it’ll be all right. I’m just...I’m feeling, how do you say, when you’re going out in public and you’re a little scared?”

“Stage fright?”

“Yes. Exactly.”

“Well, it doesn’t show, babe. You look absolutely terrific in your little black dress. Stunning! ¡Fenomenal!”

“Thanks. I can’t wear these shoes, though. I’ve only had them on twenty minutes and they hurt and I can barely walk! How do women wear them?”

“Hey, you got me. I know I couldn’t, but lots of women do. They do look great on you. They make you taller! But that’s ok—try the black pumps instead.”

The Silvas lived in one of the modestly upscale developments that were blooming around Las Cruces, old enough to have real trees on their street. Matt parked on the curb and opened the door for Darcy. She got out and smoothed

the front of her new 'little black dress.' Matt expected her to ask "How do I look?" but she didn't. He said "You look gorgeous."

"Dresses are drafty," was all she said. She had absolutely refused to have anything to do with stockings.

"I'll take your word for that," Matt responded, and then added, "Don't the women, uh, back home wear dresses?"

"Some do. It's just me. I don't like them. I like to be able to move fast when I need to, you know?"

"Do I ever. I hope you won't have to tonight, though."

George met them at the door, took their coats, and introduced his wife Rosario, a tall handsome woman with an animated face and sparkly earrings who asked them to call her Charo.

"Matt says you're from Argentina, yes?"

"Yes. But I left when I was ten. I've lived here ever since. And I understand you are from Spain!"

"Yes, I'm from Santa Maria, a little suburb near Cádiz. My father is a film director there, for a television station. That's how I met Jorge...." Darcy followed her to the kitchen, thankful that Charo was so willing to carry the conversation. That would make the evening much more relaxing.

As it developed, Darcy's first conventional social function was very enjoyable. Her questions yielded a flood of information about Spain, and George and Charo were only too happy to suggest reading material to help her remedy her lamentable unfamiliarity with Spanish literature.

Her enthusiasm for the Spanish food Charo had fixed gratified and amazed the Silvas: tapas (appetizers) of various kinds, fresh olives in a piquant brine, queso viejo (a hard cheese), and a Spanish tortilla which was unlike any tortilla Darcy had ever seen—it was actually an omelet of potatoes, egg, and onions. She accepted thirds when Matt had stopped at seconds. And of course, there was Spanish wine, in abundance.

Cristina, the Silva's precocious six year old daughter, was the unexpected delight of the evening. A wee thing with big black eyes, a tiny voice, and a sly smile, she took an immediate liking to Darcy, sitting next to her most of the evening, including at the table, and taking part in some of the conversation. At other times, when drinks were being poured or tapas passed around, she and Darcy would whisper back and forth, Cristina keeping a hand on Darcy's arm or playing absentmindedly with her fingers.

Matt knew Darcy had enjoyed herself—she pushed up the center armrest in the truck and buckled herself into the middle seat, leaning against him and resting her arm on his thigh.

As they drove away he repeated one of Abuelita Méndez' dichos: "Panza llena, corazón contento" ("full stomach, happy heart").

Darcy replied with another: "Valen más amigos que dinero" ("friends are worth more than money").

"So, you think you might enjoy a little social life from time to time?"

"Mm-hmm," she said dreamily. "Such a cute little girl...."

When they got home the stars looked like tiny diamonds in the dry, cold sky. The house was perfectly quiet. Darcy clung to his arm all the way to the bedroom, where Matt kissed her tenderly. She reciprocated, her palms on either side of his neck. He helped her out of her coat and tossed it over a chair, following it with his.

She was standing with her back to him, having shaken free her real hair. For some reason, he understood perfectly. He pulled the zipper on her little black dress all the way down, hooked his fingers under the shoulder straps, and gently tugged it over her upraised arms. Then it was time for another kiss.

She began easing his shirt out of his pants, undoing the buttons slowly and deliberately. He added the shirt on top of the coats and stepped out of his pants. Darcy had her back to him again. It was an invitation to help her with her underwear—silly but thrilling at the same time. He parted the hair hanging down her back to reach the clasp underneath. When she turned around, he kissed her belly button softly, feeling her tummy moving in and out as she breathed.

With her fingers on his shoulders she sat on the bed and lay back. It was cold in the room, but she felt so warm he almost expected her to glow. Slowly, he lowered himself over her until they combined. Wrapped together, he was sure they did glow. Probably cats could see it, anyway.

After a few minutes, sliding his hands up and down her ribs and flanks, worried that he was mashing her, he eased to the side and pulled her on top. She kissed him twice, slowly, and rolled off in his arms, placing him above her again. They repeated the maneuver several more times, left or right so as not to roll off onto the floor, smiling but saying not a word. Her hair fell onto his face each time she was above him. Eight or ten strands caught in a corner of her mouth and quivered as she breathed. He caught them with a finger and moved them back behind her ear.

She was in the same dreamy mood he had sensed on the way home—sweet, gentle, relaxed yet concentrated. Finally, her smile faded. She shifted her shoulders, placed her hands on his hips, and opened her legs under him. He shifted his own hips, and they were united. They clasped hands and stretched their arms to the headboard. The contact was unbearably delicious.

He stood it as long as he could, moving minimally, until finally biology took them over.

Darcy sighed through her nose in a low “Mmmmm,” her smile back again as she rocked gently back and forth under him, arms around his back.

He was breathing like he’d run a hundred yards. It felt like summer in the room. With his lips brushing her ear, he whispered “Wow.”

Ten heartbeats later, she whispered back, “I love you, Matt.”

## CHAPTER 24



# MARCH

Darcy's first anniversary on her new planet was approaching. Neither had mentioned it. Matt wasn't sure whether she would want to observe it at all, much less celebrate it.

She had experienced her first spring dust storm—actually two of those and one sand storm—and Matt's hypothesis that there would be at least one kind of weather that she did not like was confirmed. No one, no animal or plant, come to that, liked dust storms.

Public interest in Darcy continued. The national news covered the publication of her physical exam in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, setting off debates among the informed and the uninformed alike over whether or to what degree she was human. The uninformed were not swayed by an entire issue of *The Linguistic Journal of America* devoted to the comparison of her language with others in the Indo-European family, though that too merited mention on network news and in newspapers. The world's linguists enjoyed their fifteen minutes of fame.

Russia had successfully launched a nuclear-tipped space vehicle targeted at one of the meteorites which threatened earth. American and European rockets were still being prepped, and were scheduled for launch in the summer, as was that of the Japanese/Australian/Chinese coalition for the following fall.

The blog had grown to book length. McLauphin had had it published in book form, and it was selling well. Darcy's share of the profits was sent to the Second Planet Foundation.

They worked diligently on their foundation and Matt's book, still reserving time for recreation. Darcy had discovered the pleasures of regionally famous fresh cherry and apple juices, piñon nuts, and pecans from the giant commercial orchards along the Rio Grande. Matt had signed himself and Darcy up for dance lessons through the university's continuing education program. She loved music, and no one was better coordinated.

They tried camping in the desert under the stars, but Darcy didn't like it. She told Matt she needed walls around her, and after a little reflection, it made sense to him. They made a long weekend at the Grand Canyon (where they stayed in a motel) and they visited Carlsbad Caverns, which didn't bother Darcy a bit, though it gave Matt the willies.

What gave Darcy the willies was finally having her ears pierced. Charo had asked her why they hadn't been. When she mentioned it to Matt later he had pointed out that nearly all the women around them, and many of the men, had pierced ears, that it was a simple business, and that it might be yet another detail that would help her to fit in with those around her. She steeled herself and they had it done at a mall. Matt rather enjoyed the tiny gold spheres she wore at first, and told her so. She liked them herself.

Abuelita Méndez had had a cold which threatened to become something worse until Matt shamed her into seeing an actual doctor. The doc, a Hispanic woman no older than Matt, had the wisdom to praise Abuelita's home remedies, while suggesting only the humble addition of one of the world's most powerful new antibiotics. No one could be sure which agent was responsible, but Abuelita was soon up and around as before.

One lovely afternoon with no dust storms in sight they decided to take advantage of the weather. Matt trimmed Darcy's hair on the back porch, regretting every fraction of an inch of dark golden tresses he cut off. After sorrowfully sweeping up the sparkling, shimmering fluff he pulled out a chair to read the newspaper while Darcy went inside to check her email.

Not more than five minutes later, for the first time in his life he heard Darcy scream, a sharp "Ooooh!" followed by a crash. He threw down the paper and raced inside to find her computer chair overturned and her standing at the front window, her arms crossed, one of her knuckles at her mouth. He could swear she was muttering "Shit, shit, shit," but that couldn't be. He had never heard her swear at all.

Except for being upset, she looked to be all right. He put a hand on her shoulder.



"Darcy?" There was no reaction. Her head was down and her eyes were shifting from side to side. The hand at her lips was trembling. "Darcy!"

She gave him a startled glance, tossed her head in the direction of her computer, and turned back to the window.

The computer screen was no help. It was email from Hleo, evidently. The words looked like they'd been through the frappe cycle of a blender. Back to Darcy.

"What is it? Sugar? What??" He shook her shoulder.

She blinked several times, swallowed, and looked at him, her eyes wide. "They're coming."

He didn't have to ask. It was perfectly clear. "Oh, jeez."

He sat on the couch and tried to sort it out. Where to start? Oh, boy, oh boy.

"When?"

"Don't know. Four years, maybe five."

"How? New technology?"

"No."

"Well...how, then? Or, why?"

"They must have got the first reports Hleo and I sent back. Those must have been enough to convince them this was our original home. They sent a second mission not long after."

"Ay yi yi." He thought for a minute. "Let me see. Let's say it took you 25 years to get here, give or take. You collected information for five or ten years and sent it back. It took 25 years to reach them. They launched a second mission, and that'll take 25 years to reach here? Is that about it?"

"Something like that."

"And...and say they send word that they're coming, while they're on the way. That message will travel at the speed of light, which is only a little faster than they are traveling...so they're chasing their own message and they'll arrive not long after the message does. Right?"

"Yes."

"Whew!" He sat back and thought some more. The excitement over the arrival of Darcy would be nothing compared to a whole contingent full of distant cousins dropping down through the sky. How would they be received? And what would they want, anyway? Who were they? Darcy's father? No, probably not. He was the head honcho. He wouldn't leave. But it would be someone big. Hell, Darcy was his daughter. You couldn't just send an astronaut and a couple researchers to meet up with the daughter of the king. Besides, if they thought earth was their home planet, they'd send a pretty spiffy delegate...or delegates.

¡Ay, Chihuahua! That was another thing! If they headed this way based on Darcy's early reports, they wouldn't yet know that she had disobeyed orders and left the moon base. She said she'd probably be banned from the tribe. And here they were coming to meet, a what, a rebel? A defector? A dishonored and disinherited woman? Or would they already know that?

Darcy had never said as much, but he'd always assumed Hleo had sent reports back on the meteoroids and Darcy's departure...and probably about much of what had happened since then. Would they have received those reports? He thought they would—the reports were speeding toward their planet as they were coming this way. Let's see...he should have paid more attention in that elective physics class...all Hleo's reports were headed out like beads on a string. The travelers were coming the opposite way, collecting those beads as they encountered them. So they'd likely know what had happened more recently, in the vehicle, at least. The messages would take much longer to reach the home planet. Would the travelers have the authority to issue her orders? And if they sent orders, when might Hleo get them? And what would those orders be?

He awoke out of his reverie to notice that Darcy was right there looking down at him. Then she sat on his lap, something she never did, and put her arms around his neck. Astonishing!

"Matt."

"Yes?"

"I've been thinking."

"No kidding?"

"No kidding."

"What have you been thinking, *mi vida*?"

"About Abuelita."

"Abuelita?"

"Sí. Remember? She told you to quit fooling around and marry me. So, Matt, will you please quit fooling around and marry me?"

For a fraction of a second his heart stopped, and then it overflowed. He crushed her to him.

"I will. I damn sure will. I thought you'd never ask." He squeezed her harder, until he felt her grunt for breath. She pushed back a bit, a thoughtful smile on her face. He kissed her softly and gazed at her again.

"There's more, isn't there?" he asked. "Why now?"

She sighed. "I've been considering it for a long time, Matt. You know that. I just couldn't make up my mind. I thought something was wrong with me. I still don't know about that. But now...now, this has helped me decide." She sighed

again. "See, when our women marry, they change tribes. They come under the protection of their husbands' tribes. It's automatic; there's no questioning it. So..." She paused.

Matt continued, "So, if we are married, you'll belong to the famous Méndez tribe, of earth? That's a big step for you, isn't it, sweetheart? That'll make your move here complete and final, right?"

"Yes. There'll be no going back. Plus there's a little more to it than that. Your tribe will have ties to the Darshiell tribe, but...but, I don't think there could be very many obligations, considering that the two are over 25 light years apart."

"It's just as well. You gotta remember that I'm the only member of our tribe who knows that the bride was destined to be the queen of a whole planet. I'm not sure Mom or Dad could get their minds around that. Abuelita could probably handle it."

She laid her head on his chest. "Yeah. I don't know if we can ever tell them. If we eventually do, it will probably be years and years from now, once things have settled down, if they ever do. For now we'll have to continue staying out of sight. I'm going to have to minimize my contacts with my own people, once they arrive, assuming they want to have anything to do with me. We can't have them visiting us on weekends."

"Oh, man, it's complicated! But hey! You know what?"

"What?"

"I don't care! No matter what happens, it'll be you and me, babe! You and me! I love you, girl!" He wrapped her in another tight hug. The hair on the top of her head tickled his nose.

One small step for a man (and woman)? A giant leap for mankind? Maybe they would find out.

## CHAPTER 25



Matt was torn: on one hand, he wanted to load Darcy in the truck immediately and haul her to the nearest justice of the peace and marry her. On the other, it might be wise to try to think things through a bit first. So he compromised: he discussed it with her. As usual, he was glad he had.

Clearly, it would never do for local records to show that Matías Méndez had married Ana Darcy on such and such a date. Yet it had to be formally recorded; that was part of the reason they were getting married. At the same time, Darcy agreed that they should not delay. She didn't want to risk complications in the form of further messages from their approaching visitors.

They resolved the matter by enlisting the assistance of Hartley Braithwaite. Discreet, knowledgeable, well-connected, and delighted to help his favorite client, he set up a plan which they followed almost exactly, and which resulted in an unforgettable week for the both of them.

They were married on the island of Dominica, a lush, not-too-developed Caribbean nation not far from Barbados. Largely Creole speaking, the islanders saw their share of tourists, and it was not unknown for two of them to marry. Who knew why, or cared? If they paid the fees, the ceremony would be performed and the deed recorded by hand in a huge, dusty, cloth-bound ledger which would eventually take its place amid stacks of other huge, dusty ledgers in the back room of the main police station in Roseau.

The second part of Braithwaite's itinerary was his wedding gift to the newlyweds: a honeymoon on the nearby island of Grenada. He had called in a favor from a lawyer friend who lived in the capital, St. George's, but who spent most of

his time in Washington, D. C.. For a modest consideration to cover food, utilities, and service, he secured the use of his friend's house for a week.

Matt decided he could grow to love the Caribbean. He and Darcy had so many questions for the taxi driver as they swayed through the lush jungle from the airport that the man gave them an impromptu tour, showing them cacao beans growing on the tree (cutting one open so they could see the dark meat inside, the first stage of chocolate), groves of nutmeg trees, and several cinnamon trees, whose bark yielded one of Darcy's favorite spices.

It was late afternoon when the driver let them out at their address in St. George. They accepted his offer to return for a tour of the entire island three days later. The house, several streets above Wharf Road overlooking the old harbor, was a comfortable, concrete block building painted a pale pink and set amid the most incredible array of ornamental trees, shrubs, and flowers. A maid in a uniform, no less, met them at the door, showed them to their room, and then brought them glasses of cool fruit punch as they sat on the front gallery to take in the view.

The extravagant scenery clearly merited several warm kisses. Matt complimented Darcy on the tiny diamond studs in her ears. They wore matching gold bands on their fingers, from a jeweler in Miami.

"The world looks different to me," Matt said. "Does it look different to you?"

"Yes, it does," she said softly. "It looks beautiful."

No one on their gallery could have denied it. To their right, through trees and vines, could be seen the high crenellated stone wall of a fort, no doubt originally intended to defend the entrance to the old harbor. Below them was a horse-shoe-shaped harbor, too small for modern commercial vessels, but full of yachts, fishing boats, and modest inter-island transports. Several tiny boats were buzzing between the yachts.

It looked like a picture postcard. Except for the motorized boats and the cars fighting their way around Wharf Road, the scene would have been the same two hundred years earlier, Matt figured. He knew from studying the map of the island on the airplane that further down the coast on both sides were large tourist hotels, nightclubs, and cruise ships. He was certain Darcy would want to avoid all that, and he did too. What they had right around them looked utterly lovely.

That evening they walked down to the harbor and found a tiny restaurant on the second floor over a warehouse. From their table on the balcony they could hear sailors on boats moored across the street joking with each other and stevedores unloading bags from a small freighter.

Their supper was simple yet magnificent: pumpkin soup, langouste (lobster), and several plates of local vegetables and fruits they could not name. Darcy was in heaven.

“I can’t get over all the different flavors, all the different foods, all the recipes. You people are really amazing sometimes, you know that...husband?”

He liked the sound of that. He squeezed her fingers. “Occasionally amazing, if you say so. As for your people, well, I only know one. But you know what? That one is amazing—all the time! Wife! ¡Esposa de mi corazon!”

## CHAPTER 26

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The world still looked different to Matt when they returned home. Darcy was a shade or two more tan than she had been, her skin a deep buttery color, since they both had run on the beach and swum in the sea to their hearts' content. They had toured, explored, talked to people, and eaten wonderful food—even flying fish, something Matt would never have tried without a waiter's encouragement—until late in the evenings, when the fun began all over again.

For three days after their return, the cats couldn't get enough of her. "What's the matter?" she asked them. "Didn't Abuelita spoil you like I do?"

They debated telling Abuelita Méndez of their marriage. It would please her immensely, but there was also an excellent possibility that she could not keep it to herself, which might cause problems. They decided to tell her later, but as soon as they possibly could.

Their former routine reestablished itself within a week and lasted a second, until the afternoon Matt was making a batch of salsa in the kitchen, dicing tomatoes, while Darcy checked her email. She had been for a jog and then showered. When Matt glanced at her she was focused on the monitor, one heel on the chair seat under her, her chin on her knee, playing absently with her toes. He couldn't have sat like that on a bet. Her hair made a damp spot on the back of her t-shirt.

He dumped the tomato pieces in the blender and started cutting up another. When he looked back at her she was leaning intently toward the screen, one hand to her mouth. He rinsed and dried his hands and stood behind her. He couldn't read a single word.

"What?" he said.

She shook her head and kept reading. When she got to the bottom she scrolled to the top and started down again.

He laid a hand on her shoulder. Without taking her eyes from the screen she felt for his hand and held it to her breast. When she had scrolled to the bottom again she got up, gave his hand a squeeze, and began pacing around the small room. He decided to let her pace until she was ready to talk. He sat on the couch and began rubbing Eleanor.

Despite her turbulent thoughts, Darcy realized she should be thankful for Matt. How many men would wait patiently for her to sort things out enough to speak coherently about something vitally important to both of them?

And there was important news—Hleo had received another message from the travelers. There were four of them, a vastly bigger and more expensive mission than her own original one, including her Uncle Rothan, who would be well past middle age by now. At the time they had sent the message, they were still unaware that Darcy had left her base. She had little idea how pleased or displeased they would be about that, never mind her excellent reason for doing so. They had clearly agreed with her assessment that earth had been their original home planet, and they were fully intending to make themselves known and to establish relations as soon as possible.

Their message directed her and Hleo to make all preparations they could to that end—they couldn't be specific, but the general intent was clear: "do everything practical and reasonable," the message said. It appointed Darcy and Hleo officers of the diplomatic corps, with full authorization to act on behalf of the Tribal Council if they judged it necessary. Momentous! Had that instruction been received only a month earlier, Darcy, even though she might have felt under a cloud for having disobeyed orders, would nonetheless have had to step forward as an agent of her government.

Now, however, she could no longer act on behalf of the Council, though Hleo still could. She had changed tribes, to her husband's tribe, which was not a member of the Tribal Council. All the same, she could not be indifferent to her people. If she could, she would willingly help smooth the coming reunion.

She paced over to Matt and gave him a quick kiss on the top of his head.

"Thanks, Matt."

"What for?"

"Never mind. Let me tell you what was in that message...."



## CHAPTER 27

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Darcy spent most of the next two weeks frantically busy. For the most part, Matt kept well out of the way, following what she was doing only generally. She was certainly burning up the internet with Jack Benning, Hartley Braithwaite's chief law partner, and with Hleo.

Finally, inevitably, the day came when once again he had to drive her to the airport and wave goodbye. He would never get used to that, and he prayed that it would never happen again. As long as he was at it, he might as well pray that her return would go smoothly. Getting there was easy. It was getting back that might be difficult.

The next day it made the newspapers and the network news: Ana Darcy would address the United Nations. There was all kinds of filler with the basic story, depending on what group was doing the reporting, nonsense about "lost tribes" and recaps of Darcy's Olympic career and such. McLauphin's blog began crashing again from the hits it was receiving. The most solid news Matt found came from Jack Benning, looking cool and professional before the cameras in front of his building. He announced that Ms. Darcy was still a private citizen, but that she had finally decided accept an invitation to greet the people of earth on behalf of her own people. He claimed not to know much beyond that about what she would say, but he suggested that the broadcast would be a good opportunity for people to see history being made before their eyes.

Matt agreed. The following night he tuned in early for the network's special report. It too was preceded by a good deal of fluff. Finally, fifteen minutes after the hour, the picture showed the familiar General Assembly chamber of the United Nations with its green marble backdrop. As the news anchor's voice

tapered off, an elegant, gray-bearded man entered through a doorway with Darcy at his side. He was not tall, and Darcy only came up to his shoulder. The tv screen was small, but Matt thought she looked crisp: black slacks and a white blouse under a dark blue jacket. For once she seemed to be wearing a little makeup, perhaps to bring out her face under the television lights.

“Whoa!” Matt thought. “Go, wife!”

The gray-beard introduced her and stepped out of the picture. Matt wondered if they had some kind of hydraulic podium. Darcy’s height was just right, but she hadn’t taken a step up that he noticed. He punched up the volume on the remote. She spoke without notes.

“Mr. Secretary, Ambassadors, Everyone:

“Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to greet you formally tonight. This is the first time I have spoken to a large group, so please excuse me if my language is not quite perfect.” She gave that shy smile Matt knew so well and glanced to both sides. That had to be a rhetorical device to get people on her side—her English would be fine, he was sure.

“Many of you will have read the information about me and my people that I posted on the internet. Now, therefore, I will give only a very brief recapitulation of who I am and why I am here.”

A meow from his left distracted him. It was Eleanor, staring at the television. Then he noticed Foosh, newly hopped up on the arm of the couch with his ears swiveled forward. Mork evidently didn’t care to hear history being made. Darcy continued.

“My home is a planet which we call Thomo. The word means “home” in our language, and I think it might be related to the English word “domicile,” which also refers to a home. It is a little over 25 light years from here. Our society is only several thousand years old but our legends tell us we came from another place. Not long ago, we developed the technology to search for our original planet. When we discovered promising signals coming from this direction, our people decided to send a mission to investigate. It was very difficult for us and expensive. The original plan was for it to take as much as 100 years to complete.

“It was my good fortune to be chosen for the mission. Going with me was Mr. Hleo Ap Darshiell, the former Secretary to the Chief of our Council of Tribes. He passed away of old age before our mission began, but he allowed his memory to be copied into digital form and stored. He is in charge of the moon station, and handles all communication and maintenance there. I realize it sounds strange to you, but he is a real person, although in electronic form.

"From our small base on the moon, we soon realized that earth almost certainly was our original home, and we sent that information back to our people. I expected them to be pleased with the news, and to send another mission eventually, to make contact and establish relations.

"In the meantime, however, my station manager discovered earth was threatened by two meteoroids which will collide several years from now. I decided I could no longer follow our orders to observe earth only. I came to earth to bring that warning, and you know as well as I what has happened since then. It has been very gratifying to see the quick, cooperative action you have taken to divert those meteoroids.

"Recently, however, I have had contact with my people for the first time since the mission began so long ago, and that is why I am speaking to you tonight."

There was a rustle of murmuring in the hall at this, and Darcy paused briefly before going on.

"I have just learned that, based on our earliest reports, our leaders agreed that our ancestors came from earth, beyond question. They immediately assembled and sent a second mission. Like the first, it will take about 25 years to make the trip. But note! It left Thomo about 20 years ago! That means that they will reach the base on the moon in around five years."

She paused again to let the chattering subside.

"There are four people on the mission. Their leader is Rothan Darshiell, Vice-Chairman of the Tribal Council. I remember him from when I was a little girl. He would not be a young man any more, but he is a good man, capable and serious. I think you will enjoy meeting him when he eventually arrives.

"In his message to me and Hleo, he asked us particularly to extend his best wishes, and those of our people, to the people of earth. We live too far apart for us to ever have much commerce in anything except perhaps information.

"To that end, as what one might call a 'welcome home' gesture, Rothan has asked me to deliver to you a complete description of our people's hydrogen energy technology, for your possible use. The early data that Hleo and I sent back to Thomo included data showing that fossil fuels were creating a problem with carbon dioxide loading in your atmosphere. Hydrogen fuels are non-polluting and nearly infinite, and also within the capability of existing earth technology, or nearly so. Rothan hopes that soon, increasing use of hydrogen as an energy source will help alleviate many environmental problems on earth. Tomorrow, all this information will be posted on the website of Mr. John McLaughlin. The information is yours with the best wishes of the people of Thomo.

"I have provided the Secretary-General with a means of contacting the station manager, Hleo Ap Darshiell, in order to make contact with Rothan Darshiell and his associates. That will be the channel for official communication. Hleo speaks our language, which we call Luvit, and English also, so interpreting will not be a problem.

"I ask you to remember that I am not an official representative of my people. I was just an astronaut, if you will, and now am a private citizen here on earth. You have a beautiful planet. It does feel to me, in a strange and wonderful way, like home.

"Thank you for allowing me to stay here. I plan to continue to live quietly and privately as I have up to now. I look forward to your reunion with your long-lost relatives. Thank you again for your hospitality, and my best wishes to you all."

She smiled that shy smile again and stepped back from the podium as applause mounted in the hall. Maybe she used a teleprompter, Matt thought. If she spoke from memory, she did a good job. She spoke in short sentences, she never mentioned being married or changing tribes, and she made it sound like the visitors would have only friendliness in mind. Apparently, they would first stop on the moon before coming to earth. That sounded wise.

The announcer eventually stopped repeating what Darcy had just said (why did they do that, anyway?) and called in several commentators. Matt got up to fix a snack but left the TV on, concentrating more on microwaving caldo than on the physicist explaining travel near the speed of light, time and distances, sending messages back and forth, and the like.

Mork had appeared from wherever he had been to wind around his ankles in a demonstration of furry solidarity. Clearly, food was more important to him than history. Matt carried his caldo to a place on the table where he could keep an eye on the television. Darcy was in a reception hall of some kind, shaking hands with a crowd of notables, all smiling and looking important. The special report cut back to the physicist, who was winging an explanation of the production of energy from hydrogen. Eleanor and Foosh had gone to sleep on the couch.

About the time Matt finished cleaning up after himself, Darcy was shown being escorted by a group of large men Matt could have sworn were Secret Service agents, complete with earpieces and sunglasses, to a limousine which glided down a boulevard in a caravan of other vehicles and police escort.

Now we'll see if she can get away from all that, he thought. Be careful, guys! That's my wife! The announcer was introducing yet another expert on something or other, but Matt turned the TV off. He had some serious fidgeting to do.

He didn't sleep well. It didn't help that most of the night there was a parade of restless cats tromping over him and hissing at each other. The next morning he did something he normally never did: he turned on the TV to check the morning news programs. In no time at all he found a report of Darcy's UN speech the previous evening, a quick shot of the procession of limousines, and then a shot of her waving from the top of a stairway pushed up to a large jet. He stopped chewing and turned up the volume.

"...announced that Ms. Darcy will be spending a few days at the Montana ranch of country western singer Rocky Wilson, watching cowboys at work and seeing some of the western United States, after which she'll return to her private retreat, at an undisclosed location."

The camera pulled back, revealing a large private jet, a stairway and several trucks backing away. The next shot showed it lifting into the air. He turned the set off. Cowboys at work, indeed. Now it was really time to fidget.

He couldn't concentrate on his writing. He didn't feel like waxing his truck. Cooking wouldn't take that much time, and he wasn't hungry anyway. Before she left, Darcy had bought three gallons of pale yellow paint, saying that she might paint their second bedroom some day. Well, that would keep him busy and near the phone. He would surprise her. He got several old drop cloths and began covering furniture.

He tried to do a good job—he was mostly killing time anyway—so it wasn't until just before lunch the next day that he rearranged the furniture and tossed out the stiffened paint roller and washed up. About 1:30 pm his cell phone beeped. Hot damn!

It was a text message: "Deming a/p, 2:30 pm." Bingo! He grabbed his wallet and his keys, ran to the truck, and sprayed gravel all the way to the highway.

He made it to the tiny Deming airport by 2:40. Darcy was nowhere in sight. A handful of people were wandering around, but he saw no one obviously in authority to question. What would he ask, anyway? There were two cattlemen in western-cut suits, three or four oil field workers, some teenagers at the snack bar, a couple of janitors, three airport security people, and that was it. Damn!

He wandered the length of the small airport twice, getting more and more desperate. The only thing he could think to do was call her on the cell phone. He got it out, flipped it open, and was punching in the number when a hoarse voice behind him whispered "Pssst. Mister! You looking for a real good time?"

He gaped in astonishment—had a janitor just propositioned him? No...was that Darcy? In a white uniform with a ball cap and glasses and a stick-on mustache? She pursed her lips and wiggled her phony mustache at him, mischief in

her eyes. He was about to hug her clean off the ground when she said “Shhhh!” and looked down the long hallway.

He froze in confusion as she grabbed his elbow and started walking him toward the exit, giggling all the way. When they got outside, she broke into shrieks of laughter.

He was about to say something sharp but then he started laughing too. He put an arm over her shoulder and walked her to the pickup like a long-lost buddy. That’s what she was, after all, the best he’d ever had. And more.

They were nearly out of the parking lot before her laughing abated.

“Damn, girl! You totally, completely blew my mind!” She was still giggling.

“That was fun, Matt!”

“I don’t know. Funny, maybe, but I don’t think I’d call it fun, exactly.”

“No, I meant the whole trip back was fun. Did you see me wave as I got on that plane?”

“Sure did.”

“As soon as I went inside, a man had this white uniform for me. I changed and went out the opposite door onto the platform of the food truck, which took me to a hanger where Mr. Benning had a little plane to fly me to Tennessee. Then I took several commuter planes and here I am! No problems! I can do it!”

“Really! What about your visit to Rocky Wilson’s ranch?”

“He was sweet. Sexy!” She wiggled her mustache again, then pulled it off. “He smelled weird. I promised I’d come visit him later. I never got to his ranch.”

“Well, I’ll be. How come it took you so long to get back, then?”

“I made another stop. I’ll tell you about that later. Wow, Matt, the United Nations was really exciting! It was sort of like our Tribal Council, except for all the different-looking people. Thomans look pretty much alike, by comparison. The best part was there was no politics! I was just a visitor and I could leave when I was through!”

“If you say so, babe. Your speech was terrific; I know that.”

They spent the hour-plus trip back talking over her impressions of New York City, meeting some of the world’s biggest big-wigs and being treated like a head of state. It had felt exciting to be in the middle of situations she had seen before on television, from the moon, but she didn’t think she wanted to make a habit of it.

When they got home, he pulled around the side of the house. “I’d rather Abuelita didn’t see me bringing home a janitor,” he said. “She thinks you were taking tests in El Paso.”

He held the back door open for her.

"What's that smell?"

"Huh? Oh. Take a look in the second bedroom."

"You painted it! It looks lovely!"

"Come here, wife. Let me see what looks lovely!"

"Oof! Don't squeeze us so hard, Matt!"

"Say what? WHAT?" He held her at arm's length and looked into her twinkling eyes, a smile spreading across his face.

"Oh, my gosh! Oh, me. Oh wow! That was the other stop you mentioned!"

"Yes. I saw a doctor."

He shook his head, amazed. "Oh Darcy! ¡Que milagro! That's so wonderful! When is it due?"

"The middle of September. She thinks."

"Boy or girl?"

"I don't know. Don't want to know."

"Let's have that hug, sugar." He hugged her, but tenderly this time. "Let me see! Show me!" He pointed at her janitor's shirt.

"I want to get out of this anyway," she said, undoing the buttons. She pulled up her t-shirt, exposing her tummy. "See?"

"Hmmm," he said, rubbing his hand lightly over the skin. "It looks the same to me. Are you sure about this?"

"I'm sure. Just wait another couple months."

"Is this how you'd do it back home? I mean, well..."

"No, Matt, it isn't. We'd go to a vending machine and put in some money and pull a lever."

"Funny. Ok, so I'm an idiot. Wow! We're gonna be parents! It's history, isn't it? Interplanetary history, no less!" He gave her another hug and added a kiss over her ear.

"True."

"Maybe we can finally tell Abuelita."

"Yeah...but not about the interplanetary part."

"No, not for a while. Hey, mamacita-to-be: could the two of you use a snack?"

"I thought you'd never ask! We're starving!"

An hour later they were settled companionably on the couch, Darcy's head on a pillow, her feet in Matt's lap. A glass of wine stood near Matt and a tumbler of orange juice with a splash of wine was on the floor at Darcy's hand.

He couldn't stop smiling, thinking about them becoming parents, hoping that their lives would remain peaceful, suitable for raising a little one, and that they would do a good job. They might soon need larger quarters....

Darcy could almost read what was on Matt's mind. She was thinking much the same way. Should she tell him that women back home routinely had twins? Should she mention Uncle Rothan's plans for the eventual reunion? Should she share his suspicion that their people might not be the only transplanted tribe in the universe?

No, not now. There's no hurry, no hurry at all. First things first.

They laughed about baby names and personalities of world leaders, verbally arranged the baby furniture in the yellow bedroom and where they would put the harpsichord, how babies and tribal politics mixed, on and on, late into the night.

On the arm of the couch just above Darcy's head, Eleanor snoozed in peace, a mound of orange and white fur, her tail occasionally twitching against Darcy's hair. Foosh was draped over the other arm, content with the rubbing Matt could spare him from Darcy's arches. Mork was nowhere to be seen.

Outside, a gentle wind shimmered the leaves on the trees around the house. Every object glowed softly, in the pale blue light of the full moon, floating high across the night sky.



# BOOK III

## CHAPTER 1

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# APRIL

The day Darcy disappeared was the worst day of Matt's life.

Shortly after breakfast he had gone to get the oil changed in his truck and buy some ink cartridges for their printer. When he returned two hours later, the house was profoundly quiet, eerily quiet. The three cats, crouched in odd places about the living room, were twitching their tails and looking at him with wide eyes. He called out to Darcy to announce he was back, but the hoped-for cheery reply from one of the back rooms didn't happen. Something felt wrong. Feeling foolish, he called again.

He made a circuit around the outside of the house, and then more quickly around the whole family compound to see if she might be in the garden or the greenhouse. Her bicycle was still on their back porch. She always told him when she was going out for a run—they usually ran together. He looked in the main house, where Abuelita was taking a nap. She wasn't anywhere on the grounds.

A cold, gnawing fear bloomed in his soul. He flashed on future conversations with patrol officers, on images of people in white coats making plaster casts of tire tracks and dusting for fingerprints.... Hold on, Méndez! Control yourself! Before he lost it totally, he ought to search the house thoroughly. Almost immediately, he saw the note next to the computer, weighed down by the cordless phone. Jesus! He yanked it from under the receiver and sat down and tried to hold it steady enough to read. His armpits were sweaty. He felt cold.

*Dear Matt, he read, the words shaking on the page, Something has come up, an emergency I have to attend to. I can't tell you about it now. I don't know how long I'll be. I won't be able to contact you for a while. Please don't worry about me. I'll be fine. Love, Darcy.*

Oh, Christ! What the hell did that mean? Shit! He jumped to his feet and began pacing. Shit! It didn't make any sense. She'd never done anything like this before. OK, she'd been a little on edge recently. She still worried about whether or not she was "normal," and occasionally seemed a little downcast. He had figured that might be because of her pregnancy. Despite that, she had seemed receptive to his efforts to cheer her up. He'd certainly not sensed she was upset enough to run away. 'An emergency?'

What kind of emergency? He ran through all the possibilities he could think of. Was there trouble with their foundation? Had someone in the media located her, and were platoons of them on their way to their house? Could one of her friends be in trouble? Nothing he could think of was so drastic that she'd drop everything and take off without explanation...unless maybe it had something to do with *him*. Damn! Had he done something so incredibly insensitive that she'd made a complete break and headed for Hleo's Plan B, whatever the hell that was? He didn't think he had, but could she have *thought* there might have been something? No, no, no—that was getting nowhere.

Why couldn't she contact him? He read the note again. She had said 'Dear Matt,' not 'Dearest Matt.' Did she even know that convention? Or did she know it and mean to be a little chilly? Nothing was making any sense. Her name was printed like the rest of the note, not signed. She had never liked the way her handwriting looked in English, but...*had someone else written that note?*

He went through the house more carefully, looking at everything, everywhere. Some of her clothes were missing. Several pairs of her shoes, her toothbrush, her laptop, cell phone, and back pack were gone. It looked as if she had packed before she left, hastily. That made him feel better, but only a little.

And anyway, *how* did she leave? She knew how to drive. Teaching her had been one of the thrills of his life, and maybe hers. She had a Barbados driver's license, courtesy of the law firm...but she didn't have a car. There were no car rental places in the area. Abuelita's sedan was still under the shed. Had she literally run off on foot?

He flopped on the couch and looked at the cats, which were looking back at him as if they were waiting for the answer. Shit! He'd be damned if he was going to wait around for her to return. He was an investigative reporter. He knew how

to check things out. Let's see: first, he should try to learn how she'd left and where she'd gone. He would find her or die trying—goddammit, she was carrying his child—their child—carrying it literally! He grabbed some leftovers out of the fridge and chewed them cold while he made notes to himself.

The first thing he did was call her cell phone number—no answer. Next he checked on Abuelita again, awake now and puttering around in her sewing room humming to herself. When Matt walked in she blurted, “¡Ay, pobrecita! Y pobre de Matt!” Abuelita told him Darcy had looked in on her before she left and said her aunt and uncle in Argentina had been in a bad accident and needed her help. She had told her to tell Matt not to worry and that she'd be back as soon as she could.

So that was a clue—except for the minor detail that Darcy didn't have an aunt and uncle in Argentina. Still, it suggested she hadn't been abducted—the possibility of that had been scaring him to death. Abuelita added that she had been picked up by a taxi, a blue and orange taxi. Matt excused himself as soon as he could and drove to the cab company in Las Cruces, where the dispatcher, for \$20, told him she had been delivered to the Las Cruces airport. For another \$20, the dispatcher radioed the cabby and gave Matt the name of the flight service where she had been dropped off.

The secretary at Carson Air Taxi told him the charter pilot would be returning in an hour. He checked his watch—the round trip should have been roughly four or five hours, so she didn't go to El Paso, which was barely a hop. Matt cooled his heels impatiently until the pilot, a beery middle-aged fellow ambled in. This time it cost Matt \$100 to learn that he had flown to the airport outside Alpine, Texas, and his charter had been met by a young Hispanic woman.

That was information he could act on. He gassed up his truck, drove home and fed the cats triple rations, threw some clothes into a duffle bag, made an excuse to Abuelita, and was on the road by 8:00 pm. While he drove he kept thinking. If she had told Abuelita she was going to Argentina, she must have contemplated more than a three or four day absence. But what could there be in Alpine (or Fort Davis, or the McDonald Observatory, or all three) that would occupy her that long? No answers suggested themselves. At least his new truck was a joy on the highway. Cruise control! Yes! At 2:30 am the next morning he checked into a motel in Alpine and, to his surprise, slept soundly until 8:00 am.

After a fast-food breakfast, he headed straight for the main residence hall at the university. Luisa Delbosque was not in her room, but a student directed him to the theater, where he finally found her in a classroom talking with a group of

other young people and surrounded by piles of costumes. He stood at the door until she noticed him. She excused herself and joined him in the hall.

"Hi, Matt. How've you been?"

"Good, Lou. Nice to see you again." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "We did this before, didn't we? I'm looking for the same person I was last time."

"Yeah." Louisa lowered her voice to match his. "Only this time you're not trying to find out who she is. It's weird, you know. I never expected to see her again, and then she turned up here only yesterday. Did you know that?"

He tried to keep his voice neutral. "I did, yes. I know you picked her up at the airport. How did she seem to you?"

"Sort of, I don't know, preoccupied. Friendly, you know, but not making much small talk, like about where's she's been and what she's been doing. She barely asked about my family. Mostly she was quiet, like she was thinking or worried about something, or maybe scared...." She paused for a sip from a water fountain. "What has she been doing? Do you know?"

"Oh...living somewhere, I guess. She has that foundation, you know, the Second Planet Foundation. Probably working on that. She and Dr. Sledd published a book. I got a tip that she was coming to Alpine, and I wanted to see her, you know?"

"Yeah. I bet you miss her. I do. That was pretty exciting for a while."

"So, where is she now?"

"I don't know, Matt. That was the strangest thing. She called yesterday, almost at this time, and asked if I could pick her up at the airport without telling anyone, and I did. Then she had me drive her all the way through Fort Davis, past my parents' house halfway to McDonald Peak and just let her out and leave her there. Can you believe that?"

"You mean, you let her out on the highway?"

"That's what she wanted. She said she'd call if she needed to be picked up. That was the last time I heard from her."

"Well...I don't think a cell phone would work in those canyons up there."

"That's right! I didn't think of that! What if she's up there and needs help?"

"She could go flag down a car, I guess, or find a door to knock on. It isn't that it's completely deserted up in those canyons. Don't worry about her—I'll drive up there and look around."

"What's going on, Matt? Is something wrong?"

"I don't know, Lou. If I find her, I'll ask her. I'll probably be back before long. I might see you later this afternoon or tonight. Thanks for your help, ok?"

"Sure, Matt. No problem. Good luck, huh? I hope you find her."

"I do too, Lou. I'll really try." Putting a hand on her shoulder, he kissed her lightly on the cheek and headed for his truck in the parking lot.

He didn't find a damn thing along the highway where Louisa let Darcy out. He couldn't identify the exact spot, but even so he stopped a couple of times and got out and scanned the canyons above and below looking for something, anything. He drove as far as the visitors' center below the three observatory domes, but it was hopeless.

On the way back he stopped at the Delbosque house. Only Gus was there, shaping the ends of some cedar posts with an adze. Matt told him he was just visiting friends in the area and wanted to say hello. It didn't take long for Gus to mention Darcy, and that allowed Matt to ask if he'd seen her lately. The question seemed to surprise Gus. He hadn't seen her.

Now Matt was driving up the winding road to Dr. Sledd's house. It looked just the same as it had a year ago except for the piles of tumbleweeds that had collected here and there at fences and against walls, no doubt from the last sand storm. Matt felt bad about playing dumb with Dr. Sledd, but there was no other choice. So far, no one knew he and Darcy were married except Hleo, Hartley Braithwaite, and a bored policeman on the island of Dominica.

"Matt Méndez! By the frost!" said Sledd when he opened the door. "Come in! Come in!"

"Thank you, sir." Matt used to be leery of Sledd, Alpine's prickliest intellectual, but he no longer was. Had Sledd changed, or had he? Or maybe it was Darcy who had changed both of them....

"It's been a long time, Matt, if I may call you that. What have you been doing lately, young man?"

"Yes, sir, too long. I live in New Mexico now. I've been doing some writing, for one thing. Currently I'm writing an account of Darcy's early days here."

"Splendid! A fascinating story, as we well know, and in need of telling. I'm sure it will be well-received."

Matt changed the subject. "I've been reading the book, or I guess, the monograph, that you and Darcy did. It's slightly over my head, but it's truly interesting."

"So glad you like it! Actually, we had three other co-authors on that little volume. It has been quite successful in its own way. The next time you see a chart of Indo-European languages, you might notice there's a new branch on it! That's thanks to Ms. Darcy. What an amazing and revolutionary development! You must convey my continued appreciation to her, next time you see her."

“Um...I will, for sure. Actually, it's been too long since I have seen her. You might have seen her more recently than I have.”

“Oh, my, I hope not! The last time I talked to her in person was, let me see, late last year when we met in North Carolina.”

“Golly!”

“We used email for our collaboration, almost exclusively. I trust you've seen her more recently than that. I hope I wasn't wrong when I detected some little affection between you two, eh?”

“Uh, well...a little, yes. I've seen her this year. A couple of times.”

He was defeated. He flopped on the bed in the motel and stared absently at the print screwed to the opposite wall. It was no doubt a cheap copy of some famous painting, a huge tree, a barn, and a blacksmith by a forge hammering away. Shit. Short of hiking over every square yard of those interminable rocky canyons, Alpine and Fort Davis were dead ends. He'd bet his new truck that a thousand people climbing over that ground wouldn't find any clues either. Darcy was good at not leaving tracks.

Well, he had a nice truck and he had money, thanks to Darcy. He'd check out of Alpine, drive to Fort Davis and splurge on a room in the Limpia Hotel. Then he'd have a terrific meal, a night's sleep, a good breakfast, and drive back to New Mexico in the morning. Assuming Darcy wasn't there, damned if he wouldn't email Hleo. He wasn't done yet. He had friends in high places.

## C H A P T E R 2

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This had to have been the longest day of her life. More accurately, it had been the longest, most stressful waking period she'd ever had, given that she'd lived so many "days" that weren't "days" at all. She had spent substantial parts of her life in two different solar systems, each with its own "days," and then another part in between solar systems, with no days at all. Not that it mattered now. After entering a few more commands, she could sleep at last.

It seemed ages ago she had had that communiqué from Hleo which began everything. Had it been only this morning? One of these days maybe she would have a crisis where she could think ahead a bit. This business of leaping into action out of the blue, without time to consider the possible ramifications, was exhausting. Well, no, that wasn't completely true, she realized in her foggy mind. She had thought ahead for the Olympic Games. She had trained months for those. But didn't the very definition of a "crisis" imply lack of time for thinking? Oh, forget it. She wasn't thinking terribly clearly.

At least the escape pod was functioning well enough, thank heavens. Worrying about that had been a terrible source of stress. It hadn't been all that easy to find again, but the stars had been with her, not only for hiding it in the first place, but doing so in such a way that she could reactivate it later. There were very few bodies of water near the McDonald Observatory, but this one, upstream from a stout stone dam, was big enough and deep enough that the escape pod had been able to rest on the bottom, deep under the green water, completely out of sight, for over a year. Some day maybe she could leave word for her fellow Thomans who designed it—they did well, much better than they knew. Bless them!



She had retrieved it at dusk and worked feverishly to clean it and check it over as darkness fell. The gravitation engines came silently to life perfectly, and the pod powered up nicely after that. It was about the size of an American SUV, and shaped so that radar would not detect much of a blip from it, or so she hoped. A year ago it had been detected dropping out of orbit easily enough, but then it had been hot and moving fast, and there were radars scanning the skies looking for just such objects.

The commercial airplanes she had flown on had cruised at altitudes of 10,000 meters or more. She would hold the pod to 1,500 meters or less and keep its speed slow enough that there would be no sonic boom. She knew from bitter experience that military radars scanned the high skies and were linked together, but if there were similar networks scanning aircraft at lower altitudes she had never heard of them. The engines were completely silent, fortunately. It had been horribly expensive for her people to build, the only one of its kind. She felt an increasing affection for it.

She had almost reached the Gulf of Mexico by midnight when she remembered—how could she have forgotten?—that she had brought no food. She desperately needed to do something about that. She was about to starve.

From her low altitude the gulf coast of Texas at night resembled the map she had printed out to take along, with the small towns lighted up brightly and the areas in between in darkness, occasional vehicle headlights revealing the connecting highways. She landed the pod in a field near one such town and walked to a service station/grocery store where two highways intersected on the outskirts. She bought enough food to make the clerk smile in amazement, but Darcy only thanked her without explanation as she struggled out the door carrying four large plastic bags of edibles, two in each hand.

Under way again, working her way through the conversions to earth longitude and latitude that would set her course, she thought about poor Matt. She felt terrible about leaving him so abruptly. She was sure he was upset and miserable, and she was too, thinking about him feeling that way. But there had been no choice. It was just another one of those blasted crises! It was too important—if she had explained it to him, and then he let something slip, it could have meant disaster. There was no way she could contact him until it was over. She had even turned off her cell phone. She knew enough about them to know that when they were on they constantly announced their location to the nearest cell phone tower. She couldn't have that!

Not that there would be that many cell phone towers where she was going. The course she punched in would take her south over the Gulf of Mexico, across

southern Mexico to the Pacific Ocean, and then all the way down the western coast of South America, and finally east over Chile and Argentina, to, and she checked Hleo's numbers again to make sure, 59.03 south, 26.58 west: Bristol Island, in the Southern Georgia Islands, an uninhabited, volcanic, ice-covered rock. Some day, she promised herself, she and Matt would take a real, planned-for-enjoyment, non-crisis tour of this planet. If she lived, of course.

In the meantime, the spare flight suit stowed aboard the escape pod was a joy to put on. It felt wonderful, like a part of her, which in a manner of speaking it was. With the various legs of her course set into the computer and the pod humming along comfortably, she eased back from the pilot's seat and fished in one of the bags for a package of jerky and an envelope of dried fruit. She was ravenously hungry. She began gnawing the bag of jerky open. After some food, she would stretch out for an overdue nap. Seven thousand miles to go—time for a long, long nap. Maybe two!

## C H A P T E R 3

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Matt got home in the middle of the afternoon. He hadn't expected Darcy to be there to greet him, and she wasn't. Instead, he was greeted by a chorus of demanding cats. He dished out the kibble, cleaned the litter boxes, and went to tell Abuelita he was back. Abuelita had lit the candles on her little altar, which Matt thoroughly endorsed even with no aunt and uncle in Argentina to receive the spiritual support. Surely the effort was not in vain. He'd light some candles himself, later.

Abuelita was full of solicitude but she didn't have any more news than he had. He spent the remainder of the afternoon visiting with her and helping her fix supper, and then went back to his own house, his and Darcy's, to finish planning his email to Hleo.

He wondered if Hleo knew what Darcy was up to. Or had she gotten into something that left them both in the dark? There was no point in contacting him if he was outside the loop, so when he emailed him he had to assume that he did, in fact, know something. He didn't know a lot about Hleo, but Darcy had said that he was very old, respected, resourceful, and a loyal soldier. Did that mean loyal to Darcy or loyal to his people? Matt recalled that after Darcy had disobeyed her orders against coming to earth, Hleo had eventually disobeyed his orders too, helping her deal with nutritional problems during her Olympic training and setting up secure lines of communication afterwards. Since he had risked all to help her risk all, it might be productive to assume he would still want to help her and avoid creating trouble for her on earth if he could. That was how he would couch his initial email to him.

Eleanor had settled on the computer desk next to the mouse, hunkered down over her folded paws and breathing imperceptibly. He rubbed her under the chin absentmindedly, combing out the extravagant orange and white fur under her cheeks for a minute. Then he turned to his keyboard.

When Darcy awoke, the pod was bumping along gently through a thick layer of clouds. Its ground speed was steady but the weather was jostling it a bit. That shouldn't matter to the pod, which was tough as a hammer, though her stomach might become a problem if it got worse. It was giving her a few twinges. The trip from the moon hadn't bothered her, even though the last half hour of the descent had been considerably more turbulent. But then she hadn't been pregnant. The instruments told her she was over the Pacific Ocean, west of Peru.

She selected some sweet rolls for breakfast and opened a bottle of orange juice to wash them down. The food tasted decidedly artificial and preserved, but it wasn't exactly terrible. Being very hungry helped.

She was stiff from inactivity, but there was no help for it. She stretched as best she could and slipped off her shoes to massage her arches. Matt could have helped her with that.

For a brief spell she had time on her hands. She wanted to enter some flight programs into the pod's memory, to save time in the future and cover the most likely eventualities she could think of. She'd also reformat the little remote control unit (curiously similar to the one with Matt's DVD player), which she had hidden by the dam near Fort Davis, allowing her to raise the pod from the bottom. Now that she had had time to study the pod's control system she was beginning to appreciate how adaptable it was. It had never been designed to be a planetary runabout, but after tinkering with the navigation and flight control computers, it was doing just fine. She could even protect the remote control with a password, which might come in handy some time.

The most important item on her agenda was to think through her upcoming time on the ground, on Bristol Island, which promised to be nerve-racking, complex, and exhausting. What little she could find out about the island suggested that it was anything but a vacation spot. But that was all right: what she was headed for was anything but a vacation.

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*Honored sir:*

*I write you on a matter of extreme urgency, and in a state of great worry. My wife, Ana Darcy, disappeared approximately thirty-six hours ago, leaving behind a note saying that an emergency had come up, that she could say nothing about it, and would be out of contact with me for an indefinite time.*

*This was most unlike her. I am terribly afraid for her and consider it my duty to do all I can to locate her and be of whatever assistance possible.*

*I plan to file a missing persons report with local, state, and possibly federal law enforcement tomorrow or the next day, but before I do that it occurred to me to ask you if you have perhaps heard from her and if you know her situation.*

*If so, I would be most grateful to hear it.*

*Respectfully,*

*Matt Méndez*

OK, mi muy estimado Hleo, that ought to do it if it can be done, Matt thought. He slipped on his loafers and made his way through the sand blowing around outside to go have a bite with Abuelita. Hleo never slept as far as he knew, so maybe there'd be an answer before bedtime. If all else failed, he could, in fact, contact the police. Hell, he could contact Homeland Security. If he wanted, he could raise one hell of a stink. But no matter what he did he was relatively certain that no one could find Darcy if she didn't want to be found. Dammit, anyway.

After supper he walked back to his house through the darkening evening. The tops of the trees were still whipping back and forth in the wind as the afternoon dust storm played out. There'd be a layer of dirt on his pickup in the morning, but for once he didn't care. He had email to check.

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*Dear Mr. Méndez:*

*Thank you for contacting me before calling upon local law enforcement entities. I can tell you your wife has embarked upon a matter of highest importance. Unfortunately, it is also a matter which requires complete*

*secrecy, and that is why she cannot explain any further—nor can I. I must beg your continued patience and confidence. Law enforcement personnel would be of no possible assistance and might very well needlessly complicate matters.*

*You may be certain that her welfare is as dear to me as my own, and that I will let no harm come to her insofar as I am able to prevent it. That is my promise to you, sir.*

*Sincerely,*

*Hleo ap Darshiell*

Hoo boy! thought Matt. There's a lot between the lines there! So, the two of them are into something together, apparently. He felt a little better about that. Darcy had taken her laptop, so maybe she was in touch with Hleo wherever she was. But he still couldn't stop worrying. For one thing, what in the flaming hell were they up to? It was "a secret matter of great urgency"...but was it also dangerous? Hleo had carefully not said anything about that, he noted, although he said he would watch over her "insofar as" he was able. But hell, he was on the moon and she was down here. There were all kinds of things he'd be helpless to avert, jillions of things. Trying to avoid listing them was likely to keep him awake for days. He prayed it wouldn't be for weeks.

## CHAPTER 4



The clock on the instrument panel told her it was time to try the pod's one remaining major system she had not yet checked. They were working their way south down the long coast of Chile, well out to sea, and the moon had risen into the sky in the west. Sending silent prayers to the vessel's circuitry, she hesitated a second and then switched on the communication system. The power lights indicated it had come on.

She set it to one of the moon station's emergency frequencies, entered an encryption code, and quickly keyed the microphone three times. She counted the seconds: nine, ten, eleven.... Just as she was about to conclude that the transmitter had failed, three answering bursts of static came from the speaker. She sighed in relief, patted the side of the console in silent thanks, and plugged in a headset.

"Hleo? Hleo? Are we secure?"

There was another multi-second delay before a familiar aged voice, slightly scratchy, sounded in the speaker.

"I certainly hope so, my lady. It's very good to hear your voice again, finally. How do you do, this lovely evening?"

"I am well, dear counselor, and likewise happy to hear your voice." Their speech had been more intimate when they were both at the moon base, but now, after a long separation and some major life adjustments, she found herself speaking more formally. "We are well, the escape pod and I. It reactivated very nicely, and it seems happy to be in a friendly atmosphere. When I asked if we were secure, sir, I meant secure from other than local ears."

"I understand, my lady. I have encrypted this channel with a unique algorithm. I think you need not worry."

"Very good. Thank you, counselor. Why such a remote location, sir?"

"It was my suggestion. An approach over the South Pole is practically free of radar and electromagnetic scanning. Plus, of course, it is well away from civilization, which I thought would be a good thing. How has your progress been so far?"

"There have been no major problems. I should arrive in roughly eight hours."

"That is good news, my lady. I hope you are preparing yourself for what is sure to be an awkward encounter."

"I am trying, sir. Your message of the day before yesterday was, well, cryptic. However did they manage to arrive so early?"

"Captain Darshiell told me it was due to an improved propulsion design. They achieved 99%, instead of the 97.5% we did, if you follow me."

He meant 99% the speed of light, she grasped immediately. The ever-cautious Hleo couldn't bring himself to speak openly even on an encrypted frequency. She would take her cue from him and be similarly indirect, if that was how a wise person chose to talk.

"Yes, I understand. That's excellent, of course. The more important question is why they decided not to remain longer with you. Why come here immediately?"

"I rather think they did not entrust me with their complete agenda, my lady. That was the reason I alerted you as soon as possible. They told me they were overcome with delight at arriving 'home,' if you follow, and simply could not delay a personal visit. But I suspect there is more to it than that—though just what, alas, I cannot say."

"Delight seems an insufficient reason for so rash an action, Hleo. I am terribly worried that such a premature appearance here would be seen as threatening, and could be a terribly bad start to a crucial relationship."

"I quite agree, my lady. I absolutely agree. If your 'new people' take this action as in any way aggressive, or even excessively forward, the damage may never be repaired. It may set impressions that can never be changed. The entire purpose of the mission—amicable unity—will be imperiled."

"Exactly—that is my worry also. Hleo, I just don't know what I can do about it! You know I'm no good at politics. That's why I was chosen to come here, to keep me away from it. This mission was supposed to be easy! Only it's anything but! I'm so afraid I may not be able to do anything to forestall a disaster!"

"Of course you are worried, child, of course you are. It is perfectly understandable. I have known you since you were a little girl, and you have always underrated yourself. Yet you have always risen to the occasion. Remember, my



lady: you saved an entire planet, by yourself and in the face of great difficulties! Do not despair. You will do the very best you can, and that will be all anyone could ask. If we are lucky, we may be seeing big problems where there are really few. Also remember that I will assist you in every possible way. Our people deserve our best efforts."

"Of course they do, Hleo. Of course I will do my best. Both of us will. Which reminds me, does there happen to be another disembodied crew member with the new group, like you?"

"There is not, my lady. I remain unique! I would imagine the expense of creating another like me was found to be too great. After all, you and I were to be here for centuries, if necessary. My cost was justifiable! This new group has no such need."

"Yes, that's true, and excellent news. That means you will be the single person coordinating all of us, will you not?"

"Indeed I will, my lady. You may be amused to know that the new arrivals have little familiarity with such as me, and have so far treated me as something of a machine or automaton, not capable of original thought. I have not disabused them. You may note, whenever our speech is not private in the days ahead, that I might sound a bit mechanical. This will be by design. I saw no reason to insist to them that I am the same person I always was however different my form now is."

"Understood, dear counselor. I shall not worry if you begin to sound like an answering machine!" She paused to remember one more question. "Hleo, I'm so worried about the task ahead, trying to think of all I might need to know—tell me one more thing, please, before I prepare for landing. Did you tell our guests that I am married?"

She could swear Hleo chuckled, but perhaps it was just static. "I did not see fit to impart that bit of information to them, no, my child. I told them only what they could confirm from the media coverage that was previously sent to them."

"Good for you, Hleo. Thank you, wise counselor. Then as far as they know I remain my father's daughter. I still outrank all four of them."

"That you do, dear lady. That you do."

Besides being worried, Matt was desperately lonely. It surprised him to realize that. He never had been lonely like this before, not even in between girl friends, not even when Darcy had taken her five-day trip to the east coast. Living up to his elbows in cats was small consolation. He didn't think a dog would have helped either, and anyway Darcy had vetoed the idea of getting one. She said her planet had had huge, carnivorous dog-like creatures which had been a terrible

problem and she simply could not overcome her revulsion for canids in general. But it was Darcy he missed.

He felt incomplete, somehow, in the silent house. Darcy's pencils by the computer, her t-shirts in the clothes hamper, a strand of hair on her pillow, the last of her leftovers in the refrigerator, all filled him with anguish. Where could he go, though? What was there to be done?

He'd wiped down his truck with his California Car Duster (as seen on TV), gone for a run, taken a shower, cooked a pot of beans, and straightened the living room. He was out of things to do and out of patience. He was ashamed of feeling helpless, and embarrassed to feel ashamed.

He sat down at the computer. *Esteemed Hleo*, he wrote. But he was thinking dammit! I got your esteem!

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*Thank you for your reply. I shall take your advice and hold off contacting local authorities for the time being. Might as well leave a deferred threat there, ¿que no?*

*I am relieved to know that whatever my wife is doing, she is doing it in at least partial association with you. I am sure you will do your best to protect her from harm, if there should be danger involved. (Perhaps he would confirm or deny this.)*

*Since you are in contact with her (might as well assume that, even if he didn't know it) may I ask you to relay greetings to her from me, and assure her that all is well here, that I would be delighted to help her if there is anything I could do, and that I await her return with great eagerness?*

*Thank you.*

*Sincerely,*

*Matt Méndez*

After consuming a bowl of frijoles and two tortillas, there was an answer from the esteemed, venerable Hleo, whom he'd like to throttle, if he could get close to him, if he had a throat.

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*Dear Mr. Méndez:*

*Again I must apologize for the absence of your wife. Eventually I trust all will be explained to you, but for now know that she is in hardly more danger than any random person would be.*

*I will tell you that I have indeed been in contact with her and that she is fine. Next time I will by all means pass along your greetings.*

*Thank you for your continued patience.*

*Sincerely,*

*Hleo ap Darshiell*

Well, that was chatty, Matt thought, petulantly. Still, if one were as desperate for news as he was, there were a few tiny revelations between the lines. “In hardly more danger than a random person” did not make him feel any better at all. One could just as accurately say she would be in somewhat MORE danger than any random person, goddammit.

At least Hleo had been in contact with her. That was good news. She probably was fine. She probably hadn’t done anything dangerous, yet. Evidently Hleo had not told her that her husband had been going nuts worrying about her. She would know that, though. And Hleo would tell her next time anyway. Hooray.

He was grumpy and he knew it. He gave the cats fresh water and went to bed.

## CHAPTER 5

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The pod had reached 55 degrees south and turned east, over the tip of South America. She had instructed it to slow slightly over land and maintain an altitude of 500 meters over the ground, following the terrain. It would be bumpy but she should be below most radar, if there were any radars that far south. She hoped her stomach could stand the swooping up and down.

Her final task was to mentally prepare for what she might find when she finally encountered her own distant relatives. It was incredible to think she was actually going to be reunited with two of her favorite family members. The pre-launch farewell dinner with her family, so long ago, had been almost more than she could bear. Ever since, it had been too painful to think about her past, but now she allowed the memories to come flooding back, of Rothan Darshiell, her father's brother, a jolly, gentle man, and Ianthe, her sister and the youngest of her father's three daughters. Barely a teenager when the original mission had been launched, Ianthe had been a quiet and reserved child. It would be interesting to see how she had grown up. Hleo had told her that Ianthe had married the man she herself had declined, Herecyn Cymred. Darcy shook her head. She had liked him least of her three suitors. There would have been enormous pressure for the marriage, since it would have united two of the biggest and most powerful clans, but on a personal level she felt sorry for Ianthe. Ceremony would require them to hold their emotions in check, but it would be difficult.

Herecyn was the third of the four new arrivals. She remembered him, not fondly, as acquisitive and keenly political, clearly interested in her only for the status she would bring to the marriage. He was probably wealthy beyond measure by now, but to what end? Rather than marry him, she would have preferred to

have died...or to have been launched into the galaxy never to return, which was what happened.

She didn't know the fourth person. All Hleo had been able to tell her was that his name was Bennec Vianogh and he was a lawyer. She wasn't sure what a lawyer was doing on a goodwill mission but she hoped he at least had humanitarian leanings.

There was a further layer of complexity that she would have to deal with, the one she liked the least: the political aspect. Her people prized balance and harmony above all and tried to build that into their government, by dividing it into two assemblies. On one side were the representatives of the clans, of the people as a collection of relations. They tended to look after the common welfare and to seek consensus, usually by compromise, on matters affecting everyone, or at least the majority. Most of her life her father had been the presiding official of the Council of Clans, as they called it. Before him, her grandfather had served. Uncle Rothan had been, and probably still was, a senior advisor to the Council. And Ianthe, as a daughter of the chief, would count as another member of that group. The Council of Clans was considered the highest embodiment of her people.

Herecyn, on the other hand, was a senior representative of the Peoples' Congress, those who came together based not on family clans but on economics, occupation, or personal affiliation. At the village level a citizen would belong to both, and would balance the interests of his clan against his or her individual interests. For a person working at the upper levels of government one interest or the other tended to dominate, making compromise a major art form. She remembered Herecyn as a devoted Congressman, firmly wedded to the notion of pure self-interest. That may have been why she had never taken to him.

Thus, with Uncle Rothan and Ianthe on the Clan side, and Herecyn representing the Congress, it was highly probable that Bennec would be a representative of the Congress. That would make two and two, a typically Thoman effort to achieve balance on this crucial second mission to earth.

Ianthe was the complicating factor as Darcy saw it. She was from a Council of Clans family, but also the wife of a Congressman. If she were overshadowed by her husband her weight in the equation would be lessened. If so, then the Congressionals might control the mission. That could account for their unannounced early visit to earth. She was certain Uncle Rothan would never have proposed such a thing. But if Ianthe had any influence with the two Congressionals, then the Council of Clans might have the edge. Ianthe could be the key. The fact that they were coming here to earth, on their own initiative apparently, was not a good sign.

Their original message to Hleo had implied that they would first land at the moon base and make the preparations for their eventual arrival on earth from there. That was what she had relayed in her address at the United Nations. As far as she could tell, most people on earth were eager to meet and get to know their long-lost relatives. But now it looked as if these lost relatives would suddenly be found, as it were, in the living room when the homeowners came down to breakfast. They would not be pleased. They might even feel threatened. Darcy thought she would feel that way, if she were in their place. Matt probably could have kept the secret if she had told him, but if it got out, she could envision spreading panic about the “aliens among us.” Her mission would have failed, and the relations between two huge groups of humans would be irretrievably soured. She felt sorry for Matt, but it was better that he not know, at least for the moment.

Why the new arrivals would risk ruining everything was beyond her. And what she should do about it was even more beyond her. It would have kept her awake at night, only she didn’t have a night—she had about an hour.

She really, really hated politics.

The navigation display indicated Bristol Island should be fifty kilometers ahead. It would be good to be on solid ground for a while, if for no other reason than she would not have to hurry back to the tiny head aft to throw up. The bumpiness over land hadn’t been severe, but it was too much for her delicate stomach. Another long nap would have been nice, but there was no time.

At least it was smoother after increasing the pod’s altitude to 1500 meters once back over water. There was nothing to be seen through the small windshield except dark, streaming clouds. She switched off the computer navigation system and took over the controls. The ocean came into view at 900 meters, gray and stormy, whitecaps visible even from this height.

In a few minutes an island could be made out against the horizon. It had the proper profile, dominated by a volcanic cone. She slowed the pod as it approached and banked around the island, scanning the beaches as she went.

She wasn’t sure what to look for. She made another circuit at 400 meters. One side of the island, no doubt the windward side, had few beaches, many rocks, and ice and snow everywhere. The lee side had several rocky, narrow beaches, and on one of them, finally, she spied a man-made object that could only be her visitors’ vessel.

Very gradually, as much to give notice to them as to be careful herself, she slowed the pod and descended, setting down gently about 100 meters from the strange vessel, in the shelter of some large boulders. There were several soft crunches as the full weight of the pod settled. Then there was silence.

She felt oddly excited—anticipation? dread? or perhaps a combination. It would be best to wait a half hour before emerging. Visitors never barged in back home, so that those being visited would have time to notice and prepare. On a ceremonial occasion like this, she should dress formally, but she had no formal garb—the flight suit was the only choice. She sent a text message telling Hleo she had arrived and that she needed him to collect some information for her, straightened up the cabin, and wormed her way back to the tiny head to use the facilities and run a brush through her hair. She selected two token gifts from her stash and put them in a pocket.

Pressing the “Open” button on the remote control produced a hiss as the seal cracked and pressure equalized. The hatch swung open slowly. There was a stiff, icy wind outside. For the first time in a long time there was the comforting sensation of the fabric of her flight suit adjusting all over her body. The icy air refreshed her spirits though it was impossible to walk in a dignified fashion. It was all she could do to stay upright against the wind and struggle ahead, her hair whipping behind her.

Their vehicle was huge compared to hers! It looked about as large as one of the house trailers she had seen in Alpine. She could only imagine the size of the vessel for which this had been the escape pod. The expense must have been stupendous! Clearly, this was a great deal more than an exploratory mission.

It had a double hatch that opened top and bottom, providing a short flight of stairs which she hurried up. She found herself in a small, dark vestibule before a beaming Uncle Rothan, who swept her up in a giant hug.

“Honored Uncle!”

“Anneyn!” He used her Thoman name. “Dear, dear honored niece! I hope I see you well!”

“Very well, dear Uncle. And you? I hope I see you well also!”

The hatch whined shut behind her.

“Very well, my child, and thank you. Oh, me! I mustn’t call you child any longer, mustn’t I? My stars, that we should meet again! It’s a miracle! You look hardly a day older, dear one!”

“And you, sir, look but little older yourself. But more prosperous!” This was a small fiction. He looked a good deal older, thicker around the middle, and most surprisingly, wore a neat beard which emphasized the roundness of his face. He wore a handsome Thoman overcloak over a flight suit similar to hers.

He chuckled good-naturedly at her poor jest. “Prosperous is relative, dear niece. But we will talk of that tomorrow. For now, please come inside and meet our company.”

Thomans never hurried any negotiation. Her uncle's remark revealed they intended to follow custom: in a major conference, the first day was always for socializing. The second day they would get down to brass tacks.

He smiled as she unconsciously put a hand to her throat. "All will go well, my dear. Your sister has grown into a fine, sweet woman, and is most eager to see you again. You will see that she and her husband are devoted to each other. And you will meet our fourth member also, a young man who is most keen to know the renowned First Daughter Anneyn Darshiell, savior of worlds!"

"Oh, Uncle. I hope you are joking." She thought a second and added, "So, you know about the meteoroids, and my disobeying the Council's orders?"

"Of course, honored niece. Such courage! Such initiative! You have acted in the highest tradition of our people. I have recommended you for the Medal of Valor to the Council, in fact. I hardly exaggerated when I said our fourth member is anxious to meet you. Indeed, he is quite overwhelmed, and perhaps smitten."

"Dear me. I shall steel myself." She took a deep breath and smoothed her hair. "Very well. I am ready. Pray lead the way."

He turned, spun a small wheel, and pushed open the inner hatch. Stepping to one side, he ushered her through. They were waiting in line, exactly as they would have at home. First was Ianthe. Darcy's breath caught as she stepped forward and hugged and kissed her long-lost sister warmly. Ianthe's eyes were shining and Darcy felt hers watering as well. Ianthe was taller than she was now! Her rich brown hair was coiled in an elaborate braid, and like the others, she wore an overcloak over a flight suit.

"Sister! Dear Ianthe!"

"Sister Anneyn!"

"I rejoice to see you!"

The formal phrases came back to her readily, sounding almost musical to her ear.

"And I you! First Sister, you look well!"

"And you, Third Sister, look better than well! Clearly, your life agrees with you! Congratulations on your marriage!"

"It does. Thank you, sister."

"And esteemed Herecyn! I give you joy, honored sir!" They exchanged a more ceremonial hug and an air kiss (Darcy loved that English expression). Herecyn had matured into an imposing man. As tall as Matt, with black hair graying at the temples, and with the vigor and posture of many Thoman men, he would stand



out in a crowd of men on Earth. His penetrating eyes gave little away. With his dark eyebrows and thin lips, he would be a ferocious negotiator.

"And I return your joy, honored sister-in-law," he said, with the slightest of smiles. "Please accept my warmest congratulations for your exploits on Planet Earth on behalf of the people of Thomo."

She noted his choice of the word "exploits," and his hint that what she had done out of basic humanity was no more than an attempt to ingratiate Thomans with the people of Earth.

She gave it back to him, with a similarly weak smile. "It was nothing, honored Congressman. In my place, I am sure you would have done no less."

With that she turned to the fourth person as her uncle, at her elbow, said, "First Daughter of Clans and honored niece, allow me to introduce Mr. Bennec Vianogh, Deputy Counsel to the Minister for Commerce, and fourth senior of the Prahen Clan."

Darcy had already noted the young man out of the corner of her eye. The smallest of the four, only a half a head taller than she was, he was blond, trim, and nervous. She guessed his genes had been tuned for speed like hers had been, but somehow his movements were jerky and with little grace. He immediately dropped to one knee, seized her hand, and blurted "I am deeply honored, my lady. I pray I see you well!"

She was astonished. Such formality would have been a little much even back home, but here it was outlandish. Still, it couldn't be ignored without insult. With her hand clamped between his, she could only reply, "The honor is mine, Bennec Vianogh. Blessings upon you, honored sir."

He arose, still clasping her hand and staring at her in wonder, as if she had two heads. She broke the spell by withdrawing her hand and giving him a pro forma hug and the two air kisses required in a fully formal greeting (which this wasn't), noting over his shoulder the smiles on the faces of her uncle and sister.

"I...I never dreamed to meet you, honored lady!"

"Nor I you, sir!" she smiled. "May I call you Bennec?"

"Oh! My lady...please! I, I would be...."

"Please call me Anneyn, won't you? Now," she looked around, "is anybody hungry?"

"But of course!" said Uncle Rothan. "Let us adjourn to the dining table, shall we?"

It was another Thoman custom: visitors must be offered food, and the visitors must bring food, even if both parties did so only with tokens.

The compartment they were in appeared to be just behind the bridge of the vessel, which was probably behind the closed door to her left. Elegantly appointed, the room seemed the size of a barn compared to her tiny pod. Ianthe opened the door on the right and led the way to a table in the center of what was practically a dining room. Darcy was thunderstruck.

"This is beautiful! There must have been a revolution in escape pod design!"

"In a manner of speaking, dear niece," replied Rothan. "This vessel can indeed function as an escape pod if necessary, but its main function is to be a ferry between the moon base and earth. For that reason the entire after third is the propulsion system, which delivers sufficient thrust to escape Earth's gravity."

"Amazing," she said. And providential! That meant that the visitors' early arrival might be undone! She hadn't expected that might be a possibility. They could return to the moon to await a more favorable, prepared time for a formal arrival. They wouldn't want to wait, she was sure, and it might require great maneuvering on her part to bring it about, but at least it was theoretically possible. Tomorrow she would deal with that. Right now she was starving.

"Yes, truly amazing," Rothan replied. "This is a wonderful machine. Just aft is a head on one side and a galley on the other, and beyond those are the sleeping compartments and freight bays. All the way aft are the propulsion spaces. After we eat, you may have a tour. Please, your ladyship, be seated!" He indicated a chair at the round table, as Ianthe stepped back to the galley.

Hardly were they seated before she reemerged bearing a tray which she set in front of Rothan.

"Shlepa!" she exclaimed, upon seeing the loaves. "Oh, how I've dreamed of real shlepa!"

As Rothan sliced, Ianthe returned again and again bearing drinks and more traditional dishes which, like the bread, Darcy had not realized how much she had missed. Everyone partook, but she soon realized she was eating three times as much as anyone else. Under the circumstances it would be taken for enthusiasm and good manners, which was true enough, but it also came from hunger. She restrained herself out of embarrassment, but the bread was heavenly. It settled her uneasy stomach like a miracle medicine.

After everyone was well started, she patted her mouth with her napkin and looked around the table. It was the visitor's turn in the sequence.

"This is so delicious! Your hospitality overwhelms me. I am in your debt. I am ashamed that the escape pod did not allow me to bring comparable fare with which to reciprocate. Still, I have brought several samples of food which is popular here that you might find of interest."

She set two cellophane bags on the table. "This one," she said, indicating the first, "contains a type of grain enjoyed by nearly everyone, in many, many different forms. The grain is called 'corn.' Each kernel of this particular type is fried and salted and eaten as an appetizer."

She picked up the bag of corn nuts, cut it open and poured the contents in a bowl, and passed it to her right.

"And this one I think you will find extraordinarily interesting. It contains thin fried slices of a tuber that grows underground, and is a main staple in many countries, though it is not always fried like this. It can be steamed, mashed into a paste, and even fermented to make an alcoholic drink called 'vodka.' I think the word may be related to our word 'wolkha.' The tuber is called 'potato.' But the interesting thing about this appetizer is not the tuber but the spices dusted onto the slices: chili powder. You will find it an entirely novel taste, and quite a revealing sensation in the mouth. I suggest you begin with only a small piece. You may or may not like it, but I promise you have never tasted anything like it before. I happen to love it. Chili powder can be used in many, many dishes, always producing the same interesting sensation. Enjoy!"

The corn nuts occasioned great approval and disappeared quickly. The chili potato chips caused universally raised eyebrows, but otherwise received a varying reception. Ianthe didn't care for them. Rothan did. Herecyn had two, and then stopped for a drink. Bennec ate three, coughed, ate one more, and passed the dish to Rothan, who finished them.

Per custom, as everyone relaxed Darcy moved to matters of family.

"Honored Uncle, if I may ask, how did you leave my father and second sister?"

"Both well, dear niece. We left your father in good health, even as the years build on him. The tribes were all in good order when we left, and in full support of our second mission. But many years will have passed on Thomo. I pray your father yet retains his vitality. Your second sister Onela sends her fondest greetings, as I am sure Ianthe will relay in detail. Onela was well, and was engaged to the senior member of the Khazere clan. She has been judged completely ready to follow in your father's footsteps when the hour arrives."

"Wonderful news, Uncle. And tell me, I pray, of your voyage here. Was it smooth?"

"As far as I know, it was, esteemed niece. You must remember, we slept through it! Ha, ha! In truth, I think only Bennec reported any effects, but I believe he has recovered, have you not, sir?"

“Oh! Uh, yes, I have, of course! It was nothing serious, nothing at all. But my lady! If I may be so bold, I am most eager to hear more about Earth, our mother planet after all. How have you taken to it and what has impressed you about it? And where do you live, and how do you live, and...and, like that....”

“I understand, dear sir. For now I can give you only the briefest of impressions. Please remember that while I have studied Earth for many years from the moon, I have only lived here for a single year, and have experienced only the smallest part of what it offers in person.

“I remind you, I am here in an unofficial capacity only, born of an emergency. No one on the planet knows my actual rank.” Except Matt. Matt will not be mentioned! “Accordingly, I live anonymously under an assumed identity on a small estate owned by an elderly lady. There is a handyman there as well who takes care of the place.”

She neglected to add that she was in regular contact with Hleo or anyone else. They might know about the Second Planet Foundation and Dr. Sledd’s book, but she need not go into that. She went on: “I think you will be struck by the immense variety of everything on Earth, and by what seems to us as disorganization. After all, we are basically one culture, but here there are thousands of cultures, and thousands of languages, histories, cuisines, and schools of art, literature, religion, music, and so forth. You could study them the rest of your life and never get beyond the beginning. They are endlessly fascinating and revealing.

“In general, the people of Earth are organized into nation-states, more or less independent of each other. There is an assembly of nations, but it is nothing like our Council of Clans, being more of a loose confederation with few powers of suasion. Thus there tend to be conflicts of all kinds, and resolving them is often extremely difficult. In addition, the people often act hastily, based on sentiment. We do this too, of course, but our Congress and Council of Clans usually moderate any rashness. Here, hasty initial impressions can cause things to go either very, very well, or very, very badly. Perhaps for that reason the managing of public information and opinion formation is a high art, much higher than negotiation.” She stopped abruptly and looked around the table.

“Forgive me. I’m afraid I’m beginning to sound like a professor. Let me just add that the planet is spectacularly beautiful in spite of its problems. You will have seen many pictures, but seeing it in person, if you will pardon the expression, really brings it home. You should definitely not judge the whole planet by the place where we are now!”

"Well, that's a relief," remarked Herecyn. Neither he nor Ianthe had said much during the meal, but Darcy noted he paid close attention to everything being said. She imagined he'd remember it, too.

Bennec had an endless supply of questions, some of them good, and the group chatted on into the afternoon until Darcy pleaded exhaustion and begged to be excused.

"Sister," she said to Ianthe as they stood, "you would honor me with your presence tonight, in my most poor accommodations, assuming the assent of your honorable husband, to be sure."

"Certainly," agreed Herecyn, with a bow. "My wife and I have spent the last twenty five years sleeping together! Of course she may visit her beloved first sister, and with my blessings!"

"I thank you, husband. Shall we join you for breakfast, in the morning?"

"By all means. After which, we shall sit down to discuss our upcoming arrangements. Shall we not?" He looked at Darcy.

She smiled sweetly at him. "By all means."

When the sisters emerged from the ferry vessel, they found it still very cold but the wind had fallen off to nearly nothing. Darcy estimated there was another hour of light before it became difficult to see the rocks on the beach.

"Sister, would you walk with me and take the air before we shut ourselves up in my tiny vessel?"

"Gladly. The air here is delightful." They linked arms and headed slowly down the beach, stepping around the larger rocks.

"Yes, it is, isn't it? I think that was the first thing I noticed when I first landed. The air is delicious. I trust the cold does not bother you."

"No, of course not. My flight suit has adjusted already."

"Did you know, the men who captured me took my first flight suit away? I missed it dreadfully. Thank heavens the escape pod carried a spare."

"That must have been humiliating! However did you stand it? They had no idea who you were?"

"None. They thought I was merely a crazed young Earth girl. They questioned me roughly and then locked me away in a tiny cell."

"How horrible! Had they only known, they would have treated you with the respect that is due you!"

"Yes. Perhaps. But they didn't know. They still don't know. No one here knows. I don't want them to know."

"Indeed not? I should think if they did, you would be treated more in accordance with your station."

"It's more complicated here than on Thomo, sister. Here, fascination with status is not tempered with respect. The result is that celebrity becomes stifling, a terrible burden. One only has true freedom as an anonymous, independent person."

"Why, that is terrible! What a mob of brutes these people must be!"

"No, no, that is not completely the case. As I mentioned at the dinner table, people where I live are curiously divided. The same person can be completely irrational with respect to larger issues or persons of note, but will behave perfectly decently toward his neighbors. I live as a neighbor, and as such, I live content."

"How bizarre! Are there no important people where you live?"

"Oh yes, of course. But the more important they are, the more they must be insulated from daily life, with servants, private transport, guards and barricaded residences. It is not a life I desire."

"Hmmm. Well, if one can afford it, I do not see the problem."

"Yes, well." She changed the subject. "Sister, you have grown so beautiful! I love your hair! How long did it take you to braid it?"

Ianthe laid her free hand affectionately on Darcy's arm. "Oh, not long. Perhaps an hour. I'm pleased you like it. I did it for you, after that machine of yours, that Hleo person/thing, told us when we might expect you."

"How sweet! I can only dream of having such hair to braid! Judging by your loveliness, marriage must be a wonderful state. Is that how you have found it?"

"Oh, as to that...one adjusts. I have found...I have found there are advantages."

"Ah. I see. I ask only because I had so few prospects on Thomo. But I might have a few here. I have such a bad record with men, as you well know. Poor Herecyn and I were ever on the ins and outs. Yet you and he seem content. Whatever is the secret? Can you tell me?"

"The secret? You ask me for advice? I'm flattered! But oh, my...I don't know."

They stopped and turned around and headed back. Darcy would have lingered, but Ianthe showed no curiosity at all about the surf, the plants, or the clutch of penguins they had approached.

"The secret," she repeated. "Well, perhaps...perhaps you expect too much of a marriage, first sister. I mean, I'm sure it would be wonderful to be in love with one's husband. I...I love Herecyn, some of the time. I respect him. He's a very capable person, a good provider. Our marriage did unite our two clans, and I'm proud of that. That was important. At least I think it was."

“Oh yes, I do too,” Darcy said. “I felt terrible about refusing, terrible that I had let father down. But it would have ruined my life. I would have been miserable. Still, I could never forgive myself if you are miserable in my place...are you truly happy, sister?”

“We are fine. Please have no regrets, dear Anneyn. I’m not miserable.”

## CHAPTER 6

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The meeting the next morning was considerably more direct and less formal than the social occasion the previous day. Darcy expected this. As the highest-ranking person present (as long as no one knew of her marriage outside the clans) she was expected to open the session. It seemed best to keep things pleasant as long as possible.

"I can't tell you how wonderful it is to be reunited with my dear friends, unexpectedly and after so long an absence! Clearly, this second Earth mission was designed to be a very large, very serious undertaking. Our people deserve all honor for it!

"Indeed, I feel a great responsibility to them—I'm sure we all do—that we do everything in our power to carry out the precise wishes of the Council of Clans. Thus it seems fitting that we begin by reviewing the operation order which is our current command document. Do you have it handy, Secretary Rothan?"

"I do, my lady." He pressed several keys and the document appeared on a large monitor built into the bulkhead on the port side of the room.

"Thank you, Uncle. I am sure all of you are quite familiar with it, but I have not seen it before. If you will allow me a few moments to read it..."

Out of the corner of her eye she was aware of Bennec fidgeting in his seat.

"Most impressive," she said, when she finished. "I see the mission has a double function. First, friendly relations are to be established, and once that is done, commercial and professional exchanges may be pursued. The details are left to us, to arrange according to circumstances.

"I wonder," she added, turning back to the group, "what your thoughts might be about how to best put these orders into effect?"



There was a moment of silence, and then Rothan spoke. "The first goal was assigned to the Council of Clans representatives, myself and Councilwoman Ianthe. Briefly, we have determined that we need to do several things, including hire legal and media representatives, and rent or purchase a suitable embassy in a suitable location. Publicity, public appearances, cultural exchanges and contact with appropriate officials would follow as advised. It is too soon to be more specific than that, but those are our basic ideas. Congressman Herecyn will outline the second goal."

"Yes, thank you, Secretary Darshiell," said Herecyn, sitting up even more erectly in his chair. "The People's Congress believes that contact with Earth will become the most significant development in the history of Thomo, not only culturally but also economically. Despite the immense distance between the two, we foresee that commercial agreements in both directions will be of highest importance to the populations of both worlds, and offer exceptionally fruitful opportunities for development."

"To that end, Congressman Vianogh, who is a trade lawyer, and I, will establish ties with business, legal, scientific, and manufacturing entities, to begin with. We will set up modalities whereby those interested—investors and others—will be able to work productively and with confidence."

"Like Secretary Darshiell, I cannot be more specific at this early stage. But those are our intentions."

"I see," said Darcy. "Thank you both for your remarks. It would seem that the process of carrying out both the Council's goals is in good hands." She glanced around the table and then looked down at her hands. Rothan had set up an audio link to Hleo, who was the sixth member of their party in every sense, and she hoped he was paying attention now. She had to proceed carefully. How would her father do it? She plunged ahead.

"You will remember that I addressed the United Nations of Earth at the request of the Council a little over a month ago. The reason was to announce the approach of the second Thoman mission to Earth, as you know. Have any of you seen that address, by chance?"

No one had.

"Very well, then. I think it's worth watching, partly to get a first look at representatives of nearly 140 nations on this planet, and at their assembly hall. Secretary Darshiell, if you will ask Hleo to send that to us now, and to add Luvit subtitles to the picture, I would appreciate your putting it on the screen."

"Certainly, my lady."

Hleo must have been waiting for just such a request, because the video began streaming in less than a minute. Bless you, Hleo! thought Darcy.

When it was over, she asked if anyone had any questions. There were several, mostly from Bennec, and she patiently allowed the random discussion to continue quite a few minutes. Thomans never hurried such matters. Finally it was time to get to the point.

"I would ask you to note a couple things," she said. "First, I am sure you were struck by the variety of the delegates, both in their faces and in their costumes. That may give you some indication of the great differences between them in culture and behavior. The ways business is conducted, to give one example, vary a great deal from one group to another. It would therefore be prudent for us to not only employ intermediaries, but to spend some time studying the best methods of working with the most likely business associates.

"Second, no doubt you noted their excitement to hear of the approach of our second mission. Perhaps you could tell from what you saw of the reception afterward that for the most part they are curious and eager to meet us. That is a positive thing, and I'm sure the Council of Clans would be pleased by it.

"By far the majority of the informed population of Earth is looking forward to our arrival, but there is a significant minority which is not. Counselor Hleo has prepared a montage of some of the more public examples. Would you ask him to transmit them, please, sir?"

For the next ten minutes, Darcy watched in amazement with the others. She hadn't seen it herself, since Hleo had only put it together at her request in the last hour. Bless him and his data banks! There were preachers, politicians, union organizers, physicians, and more, one after another warning of or even predicting disaster. Phalanxes of extraterrestrials were coming! They would bring diseases! They were agents of Satan! They would take our jobs, our land, our women! They would ingratiate themselves and then steal our natural resources, our valuables, our very souls! On and on they went, moaning a veritable litany of misery.

When the video ended, no one said a word. Finally, Darcy cleared her throat.

"Let us not forget that the people we have seen are not unlike the doomsayers among our own people. You remember there were those who said these missions were madness, a waste of money, and so forth. They are minorities in both worlds. But I remind you that people here are less organized, more given to emotion, and less subject to the wisdom of their leaders. They can easily fall into mass hysteria. We must not give them reason to fear us!

"Allow me to mention an example with the potential to affect all of us right now. All land on this planet belongs to one nation or another. Even this desolate

island we are on right now, uninhabitable and worthless as it is, is the property of a government. Wars have been fought over less valuable land than this! We are not on this island legally—did you realize that? We are actually in violation of a nation's customs and immigration laws. The chances we will be discovered and called to account are small, at least I hope they are. But the point is we are running a terrible risk simply by being here. If we should be discovered and the incident publicized, all those critics you saw will instantly be believed, and our chances of a friendly reunion will vanish immediately. Our mission will have failed. And we will have failed our people."

She let that thought soak in a minute.

"I told the people of this planet, in my address at the United Nations, just what you advised me to say: that the second mission would arrive 'in about five years.' I do not know why that figure turned out to be wrong." She glanced at Herecyn, who was staring at the table in front of him. "But I do know this: if this vessel were to appear now, to drop out of the sky into a city somewhere with little or no time for people to be prepared for it, it would spark a reaction that we would never overcome.

"This must not happen. Our people would never forgive our haste. After spending a stupendous amount of money and effort for over 100 years to get to this point, to ruin it in an instant, because we couldn't wait another five years, would be unforgivable. Our names would become synonymous with catastrophe.

"This vessel must return to the moon base. We must make careful preparation for a formal arrival in good time that will be welcomed by the people of Earth. That is my counsel."

Her expression stern, she looked around the table. Then she slowly sat back in her chair.

A discussion followed that was vigorous even by Thoman standards. It soon became obvious that Herecyn and Bennec thought the risk overblown and were in favor of staying. From their arguments, Darcy suspected their motivation was money, the more and the sooner the better. Rothan, red-faced and seemingly embarrassed, was in favor of waiting. Ianthe would probably have a sore neck tomorrow from looking one way and then the other, but she said little. Hleo kept quiet.

Darcy sided with Rothan, and since she had the considerable advantage of knowing the natives, as well as supposedly outranking everybody, the two of them eventually managed a compromise with the others: the ferry and its crew would return to the moon for one year, which was what Darcy had decided she could accept before the meeting started. In the meantime, she was to begin

arrangements with a law firm (probably making Hartley Braithwaite's career), hire a public relations company, and have the Second Planet Foundation scout out an embassy.

She was exhausted.

Ianthe broke out a bottle of Thoman wine to celebrate their agreement (her most worthwhile contribution so far), and as Darcy sipped it cautiously she realized she missed Matt terribly. She wanted to be home, where she could relax with him on their couch, laugh and play with their cats, go running, and talk about babies. Babies! She looked down at her middle. Was that a bulge under the flight suit? She sneaked her hand to the control on the belt and loosened the fabric a bit.

They agreed to depart in the morning. The afternoon was cold and breezy, but a weak sun made it worthwhile for everyone to step outside for some fresh air. Darcy realized she could contribute to the festivities, always a friendly gesture, so she retrieved a large jar of dry-roasted peanuts from the pod. The peanuts, like the corn nuts, were well received. If Herecyn wanted even more wealth than he had already, it was too bad Thomans didn't live close enough for snack foods to be exported to them, she mused. On the other hand, Thomans were generally healthy. Maybe it was just as well there were light years between them.

Darcy was explaining to Rothan the little she knew about penguins when Ianthe and Bennec approached, kindly offering her the remains of the bottle of wine. She was genuinely touched, especially since Bennec had evidently had his share and a little more. Darcy passed, but Rothan volunteered to finish it off.

"I shall miss you, Anneyn dear. We only barely began to catch up."

"And I shall miss you too, fair Ianthe. A year is not a long time, though, and in the interim we can use Hleo's email services."

"Dear my lady!" interjected Bennec, in a rather too loud voice, "Would you allow me to, to email you myself? If it wouldn't...if you would allow..."

"Certainly, sir. I would be delighted to communicate with you all. I am sure we will have much to talk about, now that we are so close."

"Oh, yes!" His eyes were wider than ever. "Yes! Much to talk about! You...you do me too much honor, my lady! The meeting, my lady! The meeting!" Darcy glanced at Rothan in confusion. "May I compliment you on the meeting? Your side was outnumbered, yet you prevailed, and with such grace that now we are toasting a triumph! Masterful, my lady, so...worthy! Of your father, I mean! Your...my..." Ianthe patted him on the shoulder and guided him to the stairs, shooting crossed eyes back at her sister.

That was the second good thing Ianthe had done that day. She really was a loving sister. The evening before she had brought a loaf of shlepa bread when she returned to spend the night with her in the pod. Darcy begged to save it for her return trip, and Ianthe, for whom it was nothing particularly special, agreed. She much preferred sisterly gossiping to eating anyway. Darcy dared not mention the bread's soothing effect on her stomach.

## CHAPTER 7

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Four days! Four damn days! Four miserable, lonely, frustrating, freaking days, and nary a word from her! He was going out of his mind. Even the cats were sulking, engaging in some sort of hunger strike to express their unease. One of them, he wasn't sure which, had taken to barfing on the floor in the middle of the night. He was certain it was meant as a sign of displeasure. In the cat's place, he might have done the same thing himself.

Was she in desperate trouble? Had she left him? Had she freaked out over being pregnant? Would she contact him? Would she ever come back??

Enough was enough. He was going to rattle Hleo's cage as best he could and then do something. He didn't know what, but he'd figure it out. Something had to be done. When he decided what that was, he would do it.

---

*Esteemed Hleo:*

*I am increasingly alarmed over the prolonged absence of my wife. I have heard nothing from her, nor from you, for that matter.*

*I have learned that she was last seen in the area of McDonald Peak, near the observatory, three days ago. Accordingly, at this time tomorrow, I shall notify law enforcement personnel in the area and suggest that they conduct a thorough search of the area.*

*If that fails, I intend to pass the matter to the Department of Homeland Security, which will be able to conduct a considerably wider investigation.*

*If you have any further ideas, I shall be happy to hear them.*

*Respectfully,*

*Matt Méndez*

In less than fifteen minutes, he had a reply.

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*Dear Mr. Méndez:*

*By odd coincidence, I was going to email you within the hour with the good news that your wife has concluded her business and should be back with you within approximately 24 hours.*

*I apologize for my recent silence, but there really has been nothing of substance that I could communicate. No doubt your wife will explain more fully when she can.*

*There is no need to contact any authorities. It might be best if you remain close to your computer for the next day. I shall contact you immediately as soon as I learn anything relevant.*

*Sincerely,*

*Hleo ap Darshiell*

Hot damn! A flood of emotions surged through him: relief, anxiety, suspicion, anger, joy, and more. He couldn't sit still. He'd go for a walk—but around the compound, around and around. He didn't want to get too far from the computer.

Their leave-taking was simple enough. It wasn't a ceremonial occasion for a grand departure, exactly, although Uncle Rothan did seem slightly emotional, hugging her a little harder than he might have otherwise.

"And Bennec?" she said, looking around.

"He put himself to bed," Ianthe replied. "He said his head didn't feel well." She leaned in closer to her sister and whispered. "He said he found you amazingly beautiful!"

"Ah, spare me," was all Darcy could bring herself to say. "When he recovers, please give him my best regards and tell him to remain on the moon. Have a safe trip, dear friends!"

She stood off a short distance in a cold, spitting rain as the hatch closed. Several minutes later she felt rather than heard a low humming. As it intensified the ferry floated several meters into the air, rotating toward her slowly. She could just make out Rothan's hand waving through the windscreen. She waved back. The hum intensified yet again and the ferry began to rise, slowly at first, then faster and faster, dwindling to a dot against the clouds and finally disappearing entirely.

Well, that's that, she thought, not a bad conclusion to an affair that could have been a disaster. Now all that's left is to get home without further incident.

She fancied a short walk down the beach before confining herself in the tiny cabin of the pod for a full day. She pulled up the hood, smoothed her hair under it, and went to take a final look at those penguins.

There was a surprise waiting for her when she got back to the pod and opened the hatch.

"Bennec?"

"My lady! Anneyn! You said to call you Anneyn...may I call you Anneyn?"

She stared at him in utter amazement. "What in the world are you doing, Bennec? Did Captain Darshiell approve your absence from his vessel?"

"He doesn't know I'm here, my lady...Anneyn. It was my idea! I shall return with you as your assistant! There are many things to be done, and it is certain you will need help. The two of us can work together! You will see! We will be a team!"

She almost asked him if he had lost his mind, but she realized that his fidgeting and nervousness might indeed hint at some degree of instability. There was no point in upbraiding him anyway. She couldn't leave him here. She would have to take him along...but take him where? And do what with him?

"For heaven's sake, Bennec. Don't you think you should have at least asked Captain Darshiell?"

"You are senior to him, my lady. If you allow me to go with you, he must agree!"

The illogic of that defeated her. Could he be unbalanced? Rothan mentioned Bennec had had "some symptoms" upon awakening after the long trip...well, no matter. They needed to leave.

"Listen to me, Bennec. This pod, small as it is, is my ship. I am the captain. It is difficult to fly and we have a long, dangerous trip ahead of us which will



demand my full concentration and your complete obedience. Do you understand?"

"Of course, my lady...Anneyn."

"If I need your assistance I will call upon you, but you must let me operate this vessel without distraction. I hope that is clear. And Bennec, since I am the captain it would be better to address me as 'my lady' rather than as 'Anneyn.' A commissioned vessel is ultimately under the Council of Clans. It is not a private conveyance. Now, please move to the passenger's seat and let me get us on our way."

The first hour of the flight Darcy was busy reprogramming her navigation points from two days before in reverse order, adjusting the trim to allow for the extra weight of her passenger, and checking the other flight systems. Bennec behaved, in his seat immediately behind her, though she could tell he was still jittery. She could see his reflection in several of the dials on the instrument panel.

The second hour he began talking, almost babbling. The two of them were going to be great pals, a team to end all teams, and they would become famous for getting interplanetary relations off to a sparkling start. They might even grow fond of each other, and this could be further good fortune because his clan and her clan, united, would profit immensely in many ways he was only too happy to enumerate. When he started explaining the advantages their children would have, she managed to interest him in lunch instead.

She estimated she had barely enough food to get them through 24 hours, provided they paced themselves. She decided not to tell Bennec about the loaf of bread which she had tucked under her seat. He had stopped talking in order to concentrate on opening and consuming all the novel items she offered him. He made no comment about what he ate, but she rather enjoyed watching him struggle to tear off pieces of jerky and chew them enough to swallow. It occurred to her that jerky would make a fine joke to present at a ceremonial meal. She made a mental note to herself for the future.

At the three hour point, although it could not be seen through the dense cloud deck above them, she calculated the moon would have risen above the horizon. She switched on the radio, still set to Hleo's secure frequency, and slipped on a headset. A scant second later, she felt a hand grip her shoulder.

"What are you doing?"

"Contacting Counselor Hleo."

"Don't do that!"

"I beg your pardon?"

“Don’t do that! You’re going to tell on me!” His voice was almost shrill. Barely thinking, she keyed the transmitter, to keep Hleo’s voice from sounding through the speaker as much as anything else. Whatever they said might be heard by Hleo too.

“Tell on you? What are you talking about?”

“You’re going to tell him I disobeyed orders!”

She turned in her seat and stared at him. “Bennec, I remind you that first, I am the captain of this vessel, and as such I am solely responsible for deciding the best way to operate it. Second, I am not going to ‘tell on you.’ I am going to have Hleo assist with our safe navigation. And third, you may be quite sure that Captain Darshiell has already notified Counselor Hleo that you were missing from his vessel. He would be remiss in his duty if he had not. He probably thinks you are still on Bristol Island. He needs to know that you are well, and with me. I told you before we departed that you must not distract me. Now stop distracting me and let me navigate this thing. Do you understand?”

His eyes would not meet hers.

“Yes. I just don’t want you to tell on me,” he grumbled.

Oh, for heaven’s sake, she thought. He really is unhinged. She was beginning to be frightened. There was no weapon or drug of any kind in the pod. He was just as quick as she was, perhaps more so, and probably stronger as well, being male. She could not expect to overpower or surprise him. Being authoritarian wouldn’t work very long if he continued to be delusional, but if she catered to his marriage fantasies he might become even more divorced from reality and more demanding. She needed to tip Hleo off that she had a big problem aboard, but she had to do it without letting Bennec know that she was doing it. Perhaps he knew it already: with any luck, he would have overheard their last exchange.

She faced forward, adjusted the boom mic, and spoke, much more formally than usual. “This is Captain Darshiell calling Counselor Hleo. Do you hear me, Counselor Hleo?” In the reflection on her instrument panel she could see Bennec behind her, leaning forward to listen.

“I hear you Captain.” His voice did indeed sound uninflected and mechanical, like an answering machine. She allowed herself a small breath of relief. He was aware she had company.

“We are in the third hour of our return flight, Counselor. By ‘we’ I mean myself and Congressman Viangoh, who is with me.”

“Very good, Captain. The other Captain Darshiell, your honored uncle, suggested he might be.”

“Unless you advise otherwise, we plan to fly the same route north, Counselor.”

"Very good, Captain. I will scan the military channels and recommend a final course of approach in approximately twelve hours. There seems to be a lot of radar activity over the Caribbean Sea and the Gulf of Mexico at the present time. It would be best to schedule your pass over southern Mexico as darkness falls."

"I shall do that, Counselor. Would you please notify Matthew, the maintenance man at our home base, of our estimated arrival time? He is to have our accommodations ready for us." Alert as Hleo was, surely he would get her hint that he warn Matt of the difficult situation that might present itself...if they made it that far.

"Certainly, Captain. Have a smooth flight."

"Thank you, Counselor." She leaned forward and turned down the volume on the cabin speaker, hoping that Bennec would think she had turned off the radio altogether. She slipped off the headset, leaving it keyed on, and hung it beside her seat, with the boom mic facing backwards. If only Hleo had picked up on the situation! She had no idea what he could do to help, but she felt better knowing that he was listening.

To take Bennec's mind off Hleo, she spoke to him over her shoulder. "We're going to be passing over some mountains for the next hour or so, and I'm dropping altitude to follow the terrain and avoid detection by radar. It may be bumpy, but that's all right. If it's too bumpy, we should probably fasten our seat belts, all right?"

"I don't like bumpy. I like it smooth."

"I do too, Bennec. It shouldn't be all that bumpy, but we have to do it to avoid being detected. We're not supposed to be here, you see. We're tracing the same path north that I took south, and I got through just fine. I expect we'll get through all right now, as long as we follow the same course. Here we go."

She punched in the new altitude and the pod quickly dropped 1000 meters. She could see the reflection of one of his hands gripping his arm rest. Excellent! Maybe being bounced around would keep him quiet for an hour or so!

## CHAPTER 8

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Matt didn't get many emails that first required a receipt, but this time he gladly clicked "send return receipt" and sat down to read.

*Dear Mr. Méndez:*

*I have just communicated with your wife and I can tell you that she should be arriving home in approximately 16 hours, shortly before dawn tomorrow. Thus, you will not need to go anywhere to meet her.*

*She will be accompanied by a young man who may need accommodations for an indefinite, but probably short, period.*

*I hope to be back in touch with more details soon, surely before you go to bed.*

*Sincerely,*

*Hleo ap Darshiell*

Holy Pete! He was hyperventilating. She was coming home! Soon! He read the brief message again. 'A young man?' What the hell could that be about? Who could it be? Why bring him here? He knew most of the people she knew, as far as he was aware. There was no particular reason to bring any of them here—both he and Darcy had gone to great trouble to make sure no one who knew who she was had any idea where she lived. So why bring someone here?

Well, that could be handled when the time came. At least she was coming home! "Before you go to bed...." As if he could sleep!

Darcy was having a harder time with the turbulence on the return flight than she had had on the flight down. It was embarrassing to throw up in the plastic bag she'd set aside for the litter, but what choice did she have? She turned up the fan that circulated fresh air in the cabin, and in her rooting around for a wet rag to mop her face and mouth she managed to pinch off several handfuls of bread from the loaf under her seat and munch them in secret. It helped, a little, but she still felt wretched.

Bennec hadn't said a word since they'd started bumping around. She could stand it if he started yammering again, as long as that were all he did. Mainly she didn't want him to get so worked up that he might interfere with the flight or even try to hurt her. She still wasn't sure whether firm treatment or indulgence was the better course. Perhaps a combination....

But whatever would she do with him once she got home? He spoke no English. He knew nothing of the customs. He thought she was unmarried and eligible and interested in him, or soon would be, or could be made to be—(shudder)! How would he and Matt react to each other? Not well, she suspected. How could it be otherwise? Even worse, Matt would have no idea how dangerous a person like Bennec could be. She felt trapped, almost like she had when those soldiers locked her in that tiny cell. She wanted to go for a walk, or run, or cry, but none of that was possible.

Bennec was still quiet. If she were smart, she'd try to sleep.

She awoke four hours later. It took several minutes to try to clear the fog from her brain. The pod was slipping along smoothly, for which she was thankful, faithfully following the commands she had programmed, 1500 meters over the Pacific, paralleling the long profile of Chile. A look over her shoulder showed Bennec was awake, drumming his fingers on his thighs.

"Did you get some sleep?"

"Yes...my lady."

"How about something to eat?"

"Please. I'm hungry." So was she—extremely hungry.

She sorted through the remaining food, handing him a bottle of apple juice and taking orange juice for herself. He seemed to like sweets—Thomans didn't have such a thing as sugar, although some of their food was sweet in a starchy sort of way—so she passed him a package of Hi-Ho's and a cinnamon bun, adding a

bag of cheese twists that caught her eye. The outlandish orange color plus the word 'cheese' had intrigued her, but she could try them another time, perhaps. For herself she chose a stick of sausage, some crackers and cheese, and, wonder of wonders, a dill pickle in a plastic envelope. Whatever had possessed her to include that in her purchases? Maybe her subconscious had ordered it. Right now, her mouth watered for it. As best she could remember, there ought to be another one in there somewhere too. At the last moment she also grabbed a package of chocolate cookies. There was absolutely no sense wasting chocolate on an extraterrestrial.

Perhaps food would make a topic they could talk about. "People here usually eat this kind of food between their regular meals," she informed him. "It isn't terribly nutritious, which is probably why they call it 'junk food.' For us, the advantage is that it doesn't spoil, and it provides quick energy. You will like their real food, made from actual fresh vegetables and spices. It's wonderful, much better than our food."

When he didn't reply she glanced back at him again. He was licking the center out of one of the Hi-Ho's. He had little blobs of white goo on his cheeks.

She faced forward again and finished her peculiar meal, thinking how much she loved her little kitchen, hers and Matt's, and how much she looked forward to creating good things to eat. Maybe tomorrow?

Eventually, Bennec started talking again. To her relief, he seemed fairly rational for the moment. He wanted to know where they were along their route and how much longer it would be before they arrived. Even so, he refused to understand why she didn't accelerate the pod to three or four times their present speed and fly at a much higher altitude. The whole idea of keeping a low profile simply bounced off his brain. To her shame, she ended up blaming their tactics on Hleo and the Council of Clans, who would be furious with both of them if they were caught. He accepted that with ill grace.

Questions about his personal life worked better. She learned far more than she needed to know about his clan and his tribe and his family, and how he was the fourth in line and had only got as far as he had through his own efforts, all of which he explained exhaustively. When he started into the details of the careers of his two twin brothers and sister, she tuned out his voice completely.

Finally, after checking the flight clock, she estimated they were about an hour south of their pass over southern Mexico. She turned up the volume on the speaker and checked in with Hleo.

"You will have to be careful, Captain, once you pass into the Gulf of Mexico. I have been detecting much radio activity and many radars operating there, possi-

bly part of an effort to detect smugglers. I suggest you maintain a low altitude and slow speed. It would be best not to perform any maneuver that might call attention to the fact that you are not a conventional airplane. In an emergency you might have no choice, but any such maneuvers would cause more problems than they would solve.”

“I understand, Counselor. We shall do our best to be careful. Thank you.” She turned around in her seat. “We’ll probably have more bumpiness over the land again, Bennec, and there may not be much time to eat after that. Why don’t we choose something else to eat from this bag and try to relax before we get there?”

His face solemn, he began rooting around among the remaining items of food in the last bag, looking almost pleased when he found two packages of Twinkies. He also pulled out a Snickers bar, but Darcy clucked her tongue. “Chili powder,” she said, shaking her head. He dropped it back in the bag.

---

Dear Mr. Méndez:

*It is now my obligation to provide you a few more details about the situation with your wife and her passenger. First, I must stress that this message is of the utmost secrecy. I would ask that once you have read and understood it, that you destroy it completely, delete any copies from your computer, and clear your email program’s cache as well.*

*This is the situation: the passenger hails from the same place of origin your wife does. He was not authorized to be here, and is in violation of his instructions. He seems to some degree irrational and perhaps unstable. I do not think he represents a danger to your wife, but in any case his identity as well as his presence here must be kept from becoming known, as it might provoke such a negative reaction that our main mission, to reunite in friendship, would be impossible.*

*For the moment, your wife and I have little choice but to hold this person where you are, where she can “keep an eye on him,” as I believe you say. I hope this will not be necessary for long, but for now there is little else to be done. I am afraid it is a fearful imposition upon you, and a terrible thing for someone to ask of you, but I know you to be a person of integrity and honor, and so I willingly humble myself to beg your good will.*

*There are several more things you must know. I trust you will understand if I say that your wife’s authority over this person derives from her supposed family rank and standing. She has explained to you that her marriage has changed that drastically. Her passenger is not aware of that, and if he*

were, he would most likely be much less subject to her control. I hope you understand me.

Thus it is necessary that she maintain this fiction a little longer. The passenger believes your wife lives with an elderly woman on an estate managed by a foreman. The foreman, of course, is you, Mr. Méndez. I would not presume to recommend how you should act, in such a capacity. I am sure I can leave that in your good hands.

I should also add that the passenger does not speak or understand your language. He will perforce have to rely on your wife to interpret for him as required.

I still expect them to arrive shortly before dawn. If that should change, I shall of course email you at once.

Again, I am terribly sorry to bring this upon you. Please know that if there were any other way the matter could be handled, we would have chosen it.

On behalf of all of us, Mr. Méndez, you have our most sincere thanks and our very best wishes.

Yours sincerely,

*Hleo ap Darshiell*

Oh, holy bleeding hell! Matt collapsed onto the couch with the printout. Hleo actually came clean! He wouldn't have believed Hleo had it in him! Destroy it, hell! He'd fold it a couple times and stash it between the pages of a book on the bookshelf. Talk about history! That email would certainly go into the book he was working on....

The picture became considerably clearer now. Darcy surely had taken off in a hurry because she must have found out, through Hleo, probably, that her relatives were coming early, or were already here. Or at least one of them was, because one was hitching a ride with her. And that one sounded a little problematical, to say the least.

Her sudden departure no longer rankled him. She must have been even more upset with her problems than he had been with his. Poor thing, she had been having such a good time enjoying their quiet life after all that Olympic business, and now this. Would they ever be able to really settle down and raise a family?



¡Ay, que pedo! “Matt the foreman?” Running a home for misplaced extraterrestrials! He wasn’t sure he wanted to do that merely out of interplanetary good will. But he’d damn sure do it for Darcy.

The pod had no means of detecting radar, though it had a type of radar of its own. She had used it to follow the terrain south from Alpine, before she had figured out how to program the navigation system to follow terrain automatically. It also had a set of navigation lights, but she kept them off. The fuselage was a dark gray, scorched with black smudges from its entry into the atmosphere, which should help make it difficult to see in dim light.

Night had fallen over the Gulf of Mexico. She had slowed the airspeed to that of a typical small plane, not knowing whether that was advisable or not. It was easier on her innards, though. She had thrown up twice more over the mountains of southern Mexico. She was terribly exhausted, nauseous, and fuzzy-minded. Would this trip never end?

There were occasional lights visible below, some recognizable as ships or boats or drilling platforms. Otherwise all was blackness. Hleo had set one of the radio’s circuits to the standard air frequency. She had heard nothing on it.

Bennec’s reflection was not visible in the dark, but whether he was awake or asleep, at least he was quiet. She’d buy him Twinkies by the case if they produced that effect every time.

They were 45 minutes over the Gulf of Mexico—almost half way—when the tiny radar screen showed a blip coming up behind them. It did not reveal if the blip was well above them or straight behind. But it was gaining.

She had just started to run through the things she might do about it when a blinding flash of light seemed to explode outside the pod. By the time she had blinked her eyes three times to clear the spots she was seeing there was another flash. Then the light stayed on, illuminating the whole inside of the pod. A few seconds later, her radio squawked. “Unknown aircraft, unknown aircraft. This is Coast Guard CG-425, Coast Guard CG 425. Identify yourself. Over.”

“What’s that?” shrieked Bennec, from the back seat.

“We’ve been detected!” she shouted, a little too excitedly. “Fasten your seat-belt, Bennec. Immediately!” She tightened her own. “I mean it! Do it now!”

“Unknown aircraft, unknown aircraft....” The same stern voice repeated the same message.

“What IS that?” he moaned.

She swerved the pod to starboard, keeping her speed the same. The light went out. Then it found them again, and remained steadily on the pod.

"Unknown aircraft, turn to port. Head bearing 315°. I will direct you to a landing site. I repeat: turn to port, head bearing 315°."

"What are they saying? Do something!" Bennec shouted. "Speed up! We can outrun them!"

"Silence, Bennec! I know we can outrun them. But we can't outrun their radar. They will know where we have gone. They will send other airplanes to catch us again. Be quiet and let me think!"

Far too many things were happening at once. The voice from the speaker continued to utter warnings and orders, Bennec kept screaming, and the light continued to blind her. She accelerated the pod just a bit, to get clear of the light.

Long, red streaks appeared in the air to starboard. They glowed brightly and faded, to be replaced by more red streaks.

"What are THOSE?" Bennec shrieked.

"I think they're shooting at us, warning us to turn. Did you fasten your seat belt, Bennec?" Unintelligible babbling came from behind her. "DID YOU?"

"Yes!" he squeaked. "I'm scared!"

"I am too, Bennec. Hold on. Hold on tight."

She rolled the pod steeply to port, away from the red lines, and slowed rapidly. The plane behind her shot ahead, way too close for comfort. She fought desperately to not panic. It was tempting to accelerate and shoot high into the stratosphere, just to get away from her pursuer, but she remembered Hleo's scratchy voice warning against performing extraordinary maneuvers that no ordinary aircraft could do. Hleo was certainly right: that would mark them as some unearthly vehicle. They would be tracked by other radars, and faster, more determined pursuers would be sent after them.

No, running away was not the answer. What was their altitude now? She checked the altimeter—only 75 meters above the water! Danger! Bennec's grizzling was not helping. She forced herself to concentrate.

Taking firm hold of the controls, she slowed and descended until she felt the pod smack the surface of the water and settle. She was prepared to zoom back into the air if water began leaking in, but it didn't. It floated like a bottle, bobbing sickeningly in all directions. Despite the wild motion, she could see the wing lights of their pursuer, far ahead, banking for a return pass. She grabbed the litter bag and threw up for the umpteenth time. The rag had disappeared. She wiped the bitterness from her lips with her sleeve.

"What's happening to us?" Bennec was moaning from behind. Good question, one she had no answer to. The plane was flying straight for them. A brilliant beam of light shot out from it, sweeping a narrow arc from side to side. There

was another explosion of light as it swept over the pod, then utter darkness, and then it swept back and stayed fixed on them, growing unbearably brighter as the plane approached.

“Unknown aircraft, unknown aircraft. Are you in difficulty? Over.”

She could barely hear the plane through the solid hull of the pod as it roared over them. The light went out. Surely it would bank again for another pass, and another....

“Unknown aircraft, unknown aircraft. If you are sinking, jump into the water. I will call a rescue helicopter. You will be pulled out in approximately fifteen minutes. I have dropped an inflatable raft at your position. I repeat....”

It struck her like a physical blow: ‘if you are sinking!’ Of course! A conventional airplane set down on water would sink. What about that? Why not? It was worth a try—she had absolutely no other ideas. Thank you for the suggestion, “unknown pilot!”

Ignoring Bennec’s screams, she overrode the safety stop on the navigation computer and reversed the vector of the engines, so they would drive the pod down rather than up. Then she gradually increased the thrust. The pod stopped bobbing. Droplets of water splashed against the windshield, then the water line crept up the windshield, and then the windshield was under water! She had forced the pod to submerge! The rocking motion at the surface gave way to a smooth hum that hadn’t been audible when they were airborne.

They were beneath the surface of the ocean! Their pursuer had watched them sink! She sat back in her seat slightly and took several breaths. Her stomach felt better already. She sneaked another pinch of bread in the darkness and chased it with water. Now the next step seemed obvious.

When the altimeter showed minus 20 meters she cautiously directed the pod forward. It had stayed watertight over a year below that dam at Fort Davis, so why not now? The gravitation engines should work just as well under water as they did in space or the atmosphere. Come on, pod!

To reassure her whimpering passenger she said “They’ll think we crashed, Bennec. Or maybe they’ll think they shot us down and we sank. They won’t be able to find us. We can’t move very fast under water, but we’ll keep going until we’re well away from where we went in. Then we’ll surface and get back up to speed. Don’t worry, Bennec. I’ll get you home safe.” She hoped she sounded more confident than she felt.

It was a novel experience “flying” the pod under water. By watching the gauges she arrived at the best speed it could make without overheating the engines. The crew of that plane would never expect their “unknown aircraft” to

keep moving under water, so maybe they could escape. If not, too bad—she had no other ideas.

The air in the pod could not be replenished under water, and with two people consuming it wholesale the scrubbers were barely keeping up. It was getting stuffy and sour. They needed to surface before long. She was fed up with having Bennec kneeling by her seat and sobbing while clutching her knee. He was terrified of being under water. She had no love for it herself, and she certainly didn't want to think about the islands or shallow water that might be in front of them. Neither the radar nor the radio worked. It was a frightening situation, yes, but bursting into tears hardly seemed like a productive response to it. Still, she almost sympathized with poor Bennec.

After two hours they had gone about 120 kilometers, surely out of range of any aircraft circling around the spot where they had gone down.

"All right, Bennec," she said, patting his shoulder. "The worst is over. Get back in your seat and buckle your seat belt. It's time to get back into the air. Go on. Move. There's a brave lad."

## CHAPTER 9



The crisp night, with barely a hint of a breeze, totally failed to calm Matt down. It got even cooler as the wee hours progressed, forcing him to put on a jacket as he carried the cordless phone with him, time after time, out to the front of the family compound to a spot where he could see the highway. A total of three vehicles passed in the three hours he was out there, one in each hour: a hot rod full of high school kids, an old pickup weaving slowly from shoulder to shoulder, and a New Mexico State Police cruiser. The phone didn't ring. There was no email. His nerves were shot.

Hell, the cats were nervous wrecks too. He had apprehended the midnight barfer. It was Mork, but there was no point chastising him. Cats didn't work that way. Whether it was because of his own nervousness or their mysterious sensing mechanisms, they knew something was up. Every time he returned to the house from scanning the highway, either Foosh or Eleanor would meow anxiously at him. He had nothing to tell them.

Maybe they were remembering getting their heads and backs scratched affectionately by Darcy. For his part, he was fondly cherishing the delicious memory of squeezing Darcy to him, her supple smooth warmth punctuated by small oofs of mock protest. If and when she returned, the "ranch foreman" probably could not greet her that way, damn it to hell. Her guest, blast his otherworldly hide, might misunderstand. But maybe the two of them could figure something else out....

Wait a minute! He stopped his musing to realize all three cats were wide-eyed and looking towards the east wall. Was that a sign? He rushed outside and headed for the highway.

The sky in the east was no longer black, having taken on a deep purple. In less than an hour it would be fully daylight. There was no hint of a vehicle on the road in either direction. He strained his ears to be sure. Nope, no vehicle. Damn! He heard something...what the hell was it? It was very faint, so faint he could hardly tell what kind of sound it was. It was a faint hum, like a transformer on an electric pole, but it hadn't been there before, he was sure. Yes, it was a little louder now; it was a definite hum, but it wasn't coming from the highway. What the hell?

He moved toward the house but got no better sense of direction for the sound. Then, against the small light in the living room, he noticed Eleanor had hopped up on the windowsill inside. Oddly enough, she was looking straight up!

He looked up too.

Holy shit! There was something up there! He had no idea what, or how high it was, but a black blob, darker than the sky, was floating somewhere behind the house! He could now tell that was the direction of the humming he heard. Ho-lee shit! Not daring to take his eyes off it, he cautiously felt his way around the house, stumbling once over a garden hose.

Changing position from the front of the house to the back gave him some idea of how high the blob was. It was low, very low, maybe twice the height of the larger trees on the edge of the compound. And it was getting lower. At that point his sleep-deprived brain finally remembered Darcy. Darcy! That blob had to have something to do with Darcy! Could she be in that thing? What the hell was it?

By now it was at the height of the big cottonwood at the back corner. The humming was still faint, like a low vibration that he felt more than heard. Lower, lower it sank, until finally he almost lost it in the darkness next to the old barn. It must have...could it have landed? Sure enough, it had set down in about the only clear spot it could have at the rear of the compound. The humming died down to a nearly imperceptible level.

He took a couple steps toward it and paused, remembering too many science fiction movies—tentacles shooting out, screaming people cut down like wheat...but no, he heard a definite mechanical crunching sound followed by a soft hiss, and damned if a door in the thing didn't open. He took another couple of steps and there was Darcy! There was his wife!

He was within half a second of rushing to sweep her into his arms when her voice cracked out sharply. "Matthew? Is that you? Please open the barn, Matthew, so I can park the pod."

Oh, shit, he forgot. He had to play-act. "Uh, yes, ma'am. Right away, ma'am."

The barn! Crap! Was there even room for that thing—what did she call it? “The pod?”—in the barn? He swung open the doors. In the gloom, he could see only the flat-bed trailer in the way. He grabbed it by the tongue and rolled it out into the yard.

The humming increased and the object lifted off the ground several feet and slid into the barn smooth as Jello across a wet plate, setting down once more. Far out! That was the damndest thing he’d ever seen! Her folks must have this transportation thing nailed! Holy, holy shit!

Darcy walked out of the barn in the half light, followed by a second person. She turned and said something in her native language that he couldn’t follow. “*Let’s get inside, Bennec, before someone sees us.*”

Then she turned to him, still using the same stiff voice. “Thanks, Matthew. Please shut the barn and join us inside. I’ve missed you, husband. I need a bathroom, right now!”

“God, I was worried about you. He can’t understand us, right?”

But she had turned to the man following her. “*This way, Bennec.*”

He found them both in the kitchen. The new arrival was staring in alarm at Eleanor and Foosh, winding around Darcy’s ankles, as if they might be rabid. Both he and Darcy were wearing similar snazzy-looking jump suits. His was green; Darcy’s was blue. The new guy wasn’t a whole lot bigger than she was, but more blond. He seemed nervous, his eyes jumping from the cats to the milk Darcy was pouring (into only two glasses) to the sink to the stove to the window to the refrigerator...all over the place. Darcy looked wrung out.

“I’m very sorry about this, husband. I’ve got to figure out what to do with our guest, as soon as possible.” She turned to the stranger. “*Bennec, I’d like to introduce the foreman, Matthew. It is customary to extend your right hand and shake his right hand.*”

“Matthew, this is Mr. Bennec Vianogh, a Thoman Congressman.”

They shook hands, awkwardly. “How do you do, Congressman?”

“*The honor is mine,*” he mumbled. “*I hope I see you well.*”

“Matthew,” she said more softly, “since you’re supposed to be the assistant, could I ask you to fix us some refried beans, tortillas, and maybe something else starchy? Do we have any pickles? I’m dying for real food. I can hardly wait until I can cook myself. I’m sorry, Matthew.”

He nodded. “Certainly, madame.”

“Thank you. *Follow me, Bennec. I’ll show you the bathroom.*”

Once the breakfast dishes had been washed, Matt didn't know what to do with himself. He assumed servants were supposed to stay out of the way, yet be on hand if needed. How the blazes did one do that?

Darcy and this Bennec guy were still at the dining table, jabbering away over *The National Geographic Atlas of the World*. Their language had a softer sound than he would have expected from what he had seen of it on paper. He might have recognized every twentieth word, or not. He had no idea what they were talking about. He stepped out onto the back porch and sat in a chair from which, if the mistress summoned, he could respond.

*"Each color represents a completely different nation, Bennec. Most of them are members of The United Nations. Their headquarters are there. We are here."*

*"I see! That is excellent! It will be easy, then. All we have to do is go there and meet them!"*

*"Not so easy, Bennec. You remember the operation orders from the Council of Clans, I am sure. The first order was to establish friendly relations. That will take careful preparation, which means considerable time and work on the part of all of us."*

*"No! It will be easy, my lady! That order was before the Council knew about you and me together! Allow me to compliment you, my lady! You were magnificent, fighting their air force and hiding from them and getting us here safely! So brave! Together there is nothing we cannot do! Nothing!"*

*"Yes, well...thank you, Congressman Bennec. It has made me tired, sir, terribly tired. I need to sleep. So do you. Let me show you to your room. Please try to get some rest. In fact, consider that an order."*

He smiled sagely. *"If my lady orders it, I shall obey. I shall try to obey."*

The sound of Darcy sliding a chair closer to him woke Matt out of a fitful slumber. From the position of the shadows out back, he had slept in his chair well into the afternoon. Darcy was pale, strain showing on her face. There was no sign of Bennec.

He sprang up and hugged her gently. She wept into his shoulder, clinging to him. "Did you get some sleep, sweetheart?"

"Some. Not enough. I'm so tired, Matt." She sat down, dabbing at her eyes. "I have to figure out what to do with him, soon. He's acting very strange. He could easily create a real mess. Tell me, Matt, what do people do when friends or relatives have mental problems?"

"I don't know, really. I know families usually work with a doctor. Sometimes treatments are given. Sometimes people can be admitted to institutions where they are cared for. You remember George, don't you? And his wife Charo and



their daughter Cristina? George has a sister who's had all kinds of problems and treatments over the years. Why don't I call him and see what's available?"

"That would be great, Matt. Thank you. There's something else you could do right now, too. Bennec needs other clothes. He can't go around in that flight suit. Could you run into town right now and get some nice looking clothes for him, pants and a shirt or two? If you take your cell phone you can call George from the road."

"Be glad to, babe. No problem. I can guess his size pretty close, I'm sure. What should we do about Abuelita?"

"I'll go see her tomorrow. I'm just too tired to think right now and there are too many things to be done. I want to get out of my flight suit and take a hot shower."

"That's quite a deal, that flight suit. So is that machine you arrived here in! What the heck is that thing, anyway?"

"It's the escape pod for the moon base. It was just for emergencies, but I was able to use it to come to earth. I hid it near where I landed, below the observatory. It was lucky those soldiers didn't find it."

"It's incredible! It hardly makes a sound—it just floats along! Where did you go in it? What makes it work?"

"Oh, I'll tell you later. Nearly to the South Pole, actually. I really need a better place to hide it, but that'll have to wait. Uh-oh. Look busy."

She pulled Matt's scratch pad over and began jotting down notes as Bennec emerged from the house. His hair was a mess and his eyes were puffy. Darcy stood up.

*"Good day, Bennec. I hope you feel refreshed. We have both slept past the midday meal. Let me finish giving the foreman his orders and then we can eat."* She patted her hair while looking at Bennec's. *"We both need to wash up, also. Please, do me the honor to go first. I will follow."*

She tore off a sheet of paper and handed it to Matt as Bennec walked back inside. Using a more commanding tone, she told Matt, "Thank you for running these errands for us. That will be all for now."

Matt knew a cue when he heard one.

He got back from his shopping as the sun was setting into a reddish haze. Darcy and Bennec were sitting at the dining table, the dirty dishes stacked on the counter by the sink, no doubt for the servant to clean up. He laid his shopping bag on the table.

"Here you go, madame. It was a pleasure to serve you."

Aww, shit. He meant that to be humorous, but it might have sounded pissy. Poor Darcy had enough problems without his adding to them. He winked at her over Bennec's shoulder and turned to the dishes.

They seemed to have been arguing when he walked in, but he heard the shopping bag rustle as she slid out his purchases.

*"Ah, excellent, Bennec! These are the clothes of a person of status! Try them on and let's see how you look!"*

While Bennec was changing, Matt whispered from the sink, "Is everything all right?"

She shook her head, face tight with worry. "Did you learn anything from George?"

"A few things. Tell you later."

Bennec came out of the second bedroom. Matt thought he had a preppy look about him, small, trim, blond, and athletic, so he got him khaki jeans and a crisp green dress shirt, since his flight suit had been green. He'd put the belt on backwards and his flight shoes looked a little weird below the jeans, but all in all he looked pretty good.

*"Amazing, Bennec! You look like a diplomat!"* He didn't, but what did he know?

*"Excellent, my lady! This was all we needed! Now we are ready for our grand triumph!"*

*"Not yet, Bennec. I told you—it is too soon. We must plan and prepare."*

*"No, no, my lady! Please understand, dear Anneyn, I have much more experience in negotiation than you. The prize always goes to those who dare to be first! There is not a minute to be wasted. We must go to this New York City tonight, within the hour!"*

*"We're not going anywhere tonight, Bennec. Nowhere!"*

*"Do not be afraid, my lady. You will fly us in the escape pod and I will call the, the, was it the Secretary General? while we are under way and we will arrive and take the place by storm!"*

*"Bennec! Listen to me! That will never work. It will bring disaster. I forbid it! Now sit down and let us begin our plans!"*

*"My lady! You disappoint me! You were so brave yesterday, and now you are the fearful one. But do not worry. I will protect you!"*

"Is everything all right?" Matt asked. Darcy looked upset. She glanced at him.

"I think he's losing it."

"What can I do?"

"I don't know."

*"What does he say?"* asked Bennec.

*"He is worried that you are shouting. It is not polite."*

*"Does he know who you are?"*

*"Yes. He is completely reliable."*

*"Still, he is only a servant. If he interferes, I shall stop him. Now come. Let us go!"*

*"For the last time, no! We are going nowhere!"*

*"For the last time, then, dearest Anneyn! Let us leave!"*

In a flash, so fast Matt could hardly see him move, Ben had Darcy's arm twisted behind her back. She winced in pain. He took a step toward them.

"No, Matt!" she pleaded. "He's much too fast and strong! He's lethal! Please don't try to stop him!"

Forcing Darcy ahead of him, Bennec pushed her out the back door onto the porch. Matt felt an icy calmness come over him. His ears tingled strangely.

He grabbed a paring knife off the counter and followed them outside.

They were halfway to the barn. He caught up as they were moving inside. It was getting dark, but he could see them well enough. The hatch on the pod opened.

"Hold it! ¡Pendejo!" Matt shouted.

Bennec roughly pushed Darcy inside the pod and turned to face him. "Matt, please! Don't!" Her voice was breaking.

"No chance, babe. Tell him to take me instead. I don't care what happens to me, but I won't let him hurt you!"

Bennec stepped toward him and Matt lunged at him with the knife. The next thing he knew he was on the ground holding his hand to a burning spot on his chest. Darcy screamed.

*"You see, my lady? You see how easy this will be? Let us take this servant with us. He may serve us yet again."*

With surprisingly little trouble, Bennec dragged Matt into the pod, laying him roughly on the deck alongside the open hatch, head to the rear, feet next to the pilot's seat. Darcy felt sick. A red stain was spreading under Matt's hands.

Bennec grabbed her arm. His grip was like iron. "Now, my lady, take the pilot's position. Get us under way. Or I shall finish with him now." He closed the hatch.

Her breath was coming in ragged sobs. She could barely remember how to activate the engines. She eased the pod out of the barn and into the air over the compound. Bennec remained behind her with one hand firmly clamped on her shoulder. Slowly, slowly, she eased it ahead above the dark farmland.

What choice did she have? She thought of making the pod lurch and throwing him off balance, but it didn't accelerate that abruptly, and even if it did, she still

wasn't fast enough or strong enough to get the better of him. What would get to him? What were his weaknesses? There had to be some....

*"Let's see if I remember your maps, my lady," Bennec said, perfectly calmly. "We must head east. Be sure to clear the mountains. Go very slowly."*

They gradually closed on the majestic Organ Mountains, barely glowing in the failing light. They passed over enormous deep canyons and finally over the crest, several blinking lights on antenna towers passing under them.

*"Bennec, there's one important thing that I did not tell you."*

*"Stop the pod! Stop right here!"* Bennec ordered. He moved up front to peer out the windows. *"Yes, this is good. Turn the interior lights on, low."* She did so.

He had opened the hatch! He was going to push Matt out! She looked back at Matt. The bloody stain on his shirt was bigger than ever but his eyes were open. He winked at her! She felt dizzy, her heart in her throat. She struggled to speak.

*"Bennec! I didn't tell you that I am married now. I have married outside my tribe. I am no longer First Daughter of Clans. I have no tribe. I am nothing!"*

He stared at her in shock. *"No!"* he roared. *"That is impossible! My lady would never do that!"*

Anger flared through her. *"I assure you, I have married a citizen of Earth. I have done so, and gladly. In fact, I am pregnant, you pathetic ass! Look at this!"*

With that, she pulled the top of her flight suit up over her breasts, exposing her belly to him. His jaw literally fell open, a fraction of a second before one of Matt's feet kicked him in the face. His head thumped back against the bulkhead over the hatch as he put one hand to his mouth and grabbed with the other at the edge of the doorway, but it was too late. He fell backward out of the pod, his scream dropping in frequency as he accelerated downward, toward the rocky crags far below.

Shaking uncontrollably, half afraid she too would fall out of the pod, Darcy closed the hatch and fell to her knees, crying convulsively, her forehead pressed against Matt's thighs. She was seeing spots. Her stomach was turning flip-flops. She squeezed his knees. They were warm and knobby. "Oh, Matt, Matt...."

"Hey, babe," he whispered, and a moment later, "I'd pay a lot for a movie of you doing that."

She couldn't catch her breath. "Matt, dear Matt...."

"Hey, sweetheart. You reckon we might ought to find us a doctor?"

"Oh, oh my stars, of course! Good heavens, right away! But...where?"

He was still whispering. "Well, the hospital at the university has a helo pad on the roof. I bet you could set this down there real easy."

“Oh! Yes! That’s not far, and I know where that is. It won’t take long. Please hold on, Matt!”

“I’ll wait right here, love.”

It was easy to spot the helo pad. Not only was it on the top of the tallest building the area, it was ringed by floodlights and there was a big target painted in the middle. A helicopter was resting on it, and people were rushing around pushing two gurneys through a doorway. She hovered a short distance away, trusting the darkness to make them invisible. Finally the helicopter lifted off, tilted slightly, and clattered away. The door to the inside of the building closed.

She eased the pod down on the center of the target, noticing as she did so that some of the floodlights were mounted on the roof over the door, focused down on them. That gave her an idea.

“Matt,” she said as she opened the hatch, “can I ease you onto the ground without hurting you too much?”

“Huh? Yeah, I think so. It’s not far.” He swung his legs out the door and with her help slid out onto the target, grunting painfully.

“I’ll be right back.” Blinking away tears and sniffing messily, she stepped into the pod. Leaving the hatch open, she lifted off and set it down on the roof behind the floodlights. Then she climbed down the access ladder at the side and began beating on the closed door.

It opened to reveal a large, surprised woman in a white uniform. “What is it?” she asked.

“You forgot one!” Darcy said, pointing at Matt.

“What?? Oh, Jesus!” she said, looking around. “Where’s the chopper?”

“It’s, it’s, uh, circling. It’ll come back for me. Please, get help for this man, now!”

“Oh, Christ!” She hustled back inside. Darcy ran to Matt, kissed him quickly. “I’ll see you soon. I love you!”

“I love you too.” But she was already gone.

The ER team that returned with the nurse was astonished to see a bleeding man lying all by himself in the center of the helo pad, but they quickly eased him onto a stretcher, lifted the stretcher onto the gurney, and sped him inside.

She held the pod a hundred meters away and fifty meters above, watching anxiously until the door closed. Please, please be all right, Matt! It was time to gather her wits, if she could, and get the pod back in the barn. Now, where did Matt keep his truck keys?

## CHAPTER 10

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It took her an hour and a half to get back to the hospital. She felt bad about the extra ten minutes to take a shower, but she simply had to. There was a lot to wash off, much of it in her mind. The hot water was wonderfully restorative, and some pats of bath powder took away the memory of the sour smell that had surrounded her all day. When she arrived in the lobby, in her black hair, jeans, and a sweat-shirt and asked to see Matt Méndez, the receptionist told her to please have a seat in the waiting area.

A few minutes later a policeman sat down next to her. "Excuse me. Are you Mrs. Matt Méndez?"

"Yes, I am Ana Méndez. How is my husband?" He opened a small notebook and jotted something in it.

"I can't tell you that, Mrs. Méndez. The doctor will talk to you in a few minutes. I'm Sergeant Gomez. I'd like to ask you a few questions first, please. Were you with your husband when he was injured?"

"No, sir. I was at home."

"I see. Do you know where your husband had been?"

"Not exactly. He said he was going shopping. He said he'd be right back. I think he went to the mall."

"Yes, ma'am. Do you have any idea who brought him to the hospital?"

"No, sir. Why?"

"Apparently he was brought by helicopter. But the helicopter ambulance people say they didn't bring him. A nurse saw only one other person, a small blonde woman in a uniform. The ER people say they didn't see any helicopter."

"I don't know anything about that. I just want to see my husband."

"Yes, ma'am. Just one more question. Your husband was knifed, ma'am. Did he have any enemies? Do you know anyone who would want to hurt him?"

"Oh, no, sir! He's a writer. I'm a student. We live with his grandmother. I can give you our address."

"Not necessary, ma'am. I have it. Mrs. Méndez, it looks like your husband was attacked by a mugger. If you learn anything different, will you please contact me?" He handed her a business card.

"Oh, yes sir! I certainly will!"

He folded his little notebook and tucked it in his shirt pocket. "Thank you, Mrs. Méndez. The receptionist will tell you where your husband is."

The surgeon who finally joined her in the consultation room was female, small and dark. "Mrs. Méndez? I'm Dr. Singh. Your husband is going to be fine. He suffered a cut from a knife. It was long but not deep and we put in 35 stitches to close it. He's in recovery now, but we'll move him to a regular room as soon as he wakes up completely. I'd like to keep him here a couple of days to make sure there's no infection and the wound knits and drains properly. Do you have any questions?"

"When may I see him?"

"Ah. Of course. Give us a few minutes—about a half hour, probably—to set him up in a regular room and then you may see him. He's going to have a spectacular scar on his chest."

"Thank you, Dr. Singh. I appreciate your efforts."

"You're very welcome. I wish all my procedures were this simple."

Florinda Vasquez, the nurse coming on duty for midnight rounds, couldn't wait to check on the "miracle man" in 2115. The whole hospital was buzzing with the tale told by the ER nurse, of the man who had been delivered by an angel. The nurse admitted she hadn't actually seen her wings, but they could have been folded back, and anyway, who said angels always had wings? Otherwise, she looked exactly like an angel, and who else could have so gently laid the miracle man in the very center of the helo pad on the top of the twenty-eighth floor? There was even an aura around her! The nurse had felt the heavenly vibrations in her very soul! What is more, the Helo-flight pilots swore there had been no other helicopters in the air anywhere in the city. And didn't everyone on the top two floors always hear every helicopter that landed on the pad? Who but an angel could have materialized a bare two minutes after a helicopter left and then van-

ished less than a minute after that? Besides, it was a Catholic hospital! It was a miracle!

RN Vasquez was not inclined to skepticism, especially not if an actual flesh-and-blood patient was the proof, but even so she briefly wondered why the angel hadn't simply healed the man where she had found him and dropped him off, say, at a church. But what did she know? Miracles were not meant to be comprehended.

She was surprised to find two people in room 2115. The miracle patient, a strapping young man, was out like a light, his face relaxed in bliss, no doubt an aftereffect of his brush with the divine. The other was a slight woman in a chair next to the bed. She was leaned over against him with her head on his shoulder, their hands were clasped, and she too was sound asleep. She looked uncomfortable but Nurse Vasquez didn't have the heart to wake her and make her leave. She draped a spare blanket over her and went on to the next room.

"What smells so good, sweetheart?"

"Oh, I had an idea for a variation of pork adobo and I just had to try it. I know Abuelita is bringing something over tonight, but I couldn't wait. I've been dreaming about this for a week. This way you might have a choice tonight!"

"Oh, me! I'll eat so much I'll pop my stitches!"

"Please don't. It'll be ok if you almost do, though."

She sat close against him and laced her fingers through his. The late afternoon sunlight was making the leaves overhead a vivid green.

"Matt."

"What?"

"Do you remember when you said you didn't care what happened to you? That you just didn't want Bennec to hurt me?"

"Yes."

She rested her head on his shoulder. "I can't stop thinking about that. I care what happens to you, too."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Well, do you remember when you flashed your tummy at him?"

"Of course. That was a shocking breach of our etiquette."

"Your cute little tummy probably saved my life, you know."

"I doubt it. Your foot saved your life."

"I never saw anyone move as fast as that guy did. Not even you."

"What will happen to him?"



"Happen to him? Oh. Well, a year from now, maybe two or three, some climber will probably discover his body and report it. Nothing will happen. Climbers die in those mountains all the time. No one will be able to identify him—no one on this planet, anyway."

"Gosh. Such a waste."

"Yup. Really. But your plans are back on track, huh?"

"Eventually. Next week I'll email Mr. Braithwaite and get started on all that. Right now I just want to be here with you."

"Aww! And I just want to be here with you, love. And the little one!" He laid his free hand on her middle. She put hers on top of his.

"I guess I didn't tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"It may not be a little one. It might be a little two."

"What?"

"Our people had a very hard time in the beginning. Many of us died. Eventually, we began having more babies. We still do, about half the time."

"No sh...no kidding? Wow! That's terrific! We'll need twice as many names! How about 'Foosh'?"

"No! That's a pet's name! That's like 'Spot,' or 'Rover!'"

"How about..."

"What about the yellow bedroom?"

"What about it?"

"We'd need another one, won't we?"

"Maybe. Either that or another house."

"Another house? A new house?"

"Sure, why not?"

The sound of footsteps came from the side of the porch. Abuelita appeared, carrying a pie.

"¡Buela!"

"Good afternoon, Matt, and Ana. I found a use for those fresh cherries. I made some dessert for us."

"How lovely, Abuelita! Thank you!"

"You two look so domestic, sitting close with all those cats, so peaceful and sweet." She stepped up on the porch and drew herself to her full height. "Could there be something you want to tell me, I wonder?"

Matt glanced at Darcy. "Well, yes, Abuelita, yes, there is. We followed your advice. We got married. We did it some time ago but...we couldn't announce it. There were...complications. But we worked them out."

“About time. Congratulations! And you’re expecting a joyous event too, aren’t you?”

Matt’s mouth dropped open. “How did you know?”

“Grandmothers know these things. Can’t you see how happy she looks? What do I smell?”

“Uh-oh! The sauce! I added a little sesame oil and rosemary to the red sauce. I better check it! You two come to the table.” She rushed inside.

“Can you make it, Matt?”

“I think so.” He struggled to his feet and grinned at his grandmother. “Come over here, Buela. Let me lean on you.”

Together, they walked in to dinner.