

## CHAPTER 1

**THREE ALIENS SAT TOGETHER** in a booth of the bar and grill, not eating the food before them. The two adults stared down at their plates with disbelief, a greasy burger with two floppy strips of bacon and a square of droopy orange cheese in front of one, a meatloaf special featuring a discharge of thick white gravy hiding two lumps of something next to a side of a leaf of iceberg lettuce and a tomato slice before the other. The third alien was a toddler a bit too big for the booster chair she was strapped into. Her footed pajamas with the "Phone Home!" and "Beam Me Up" slogans were stained by the cran-whatever juice in her sippy cup. Her alien antennae headband had slipped to the back of her head. The husband and wife's sparkly blue makeup looked less than fresh, faded, and streaked. Their tour of the world's loneliest highway's UFO sites and the Lovelock, Nevada First Annual UFO Con was at an end, and the meal before them was a final insult on a long day. The toddler fussed, burred, and started to cry.

Jeff Abel bussed the table nearby, placing beer mugs, bottles, and ketchup-smearred plates into a grey plastic bin. The male member of the Family Von Alien grabbed Jeff's arm and tugged. Jeff wasn't a small man, but he let himself be dragged. The man wore glasses, which made his eyeballs look bulgy and big as he looked up at Jeff.

"Excuse me," the man said, "but this is unacceptable. This food looks disgusting."

"Let me get your server," Jeff said. He looked around for Stacy, their waitress. She wasn't anywhere to be seen. "Hmm. Okay, would you like me take this back?"

The woman said, "And why are there people smoking in here? It's not legal. The smoke is bothering our baby." She gestured about them with long, blue nail-polished fingernails.

Jeff looked at the toddler. She was at least two, maybe almost three, going on pork chop, and looking generally upset about everything.

Jeff nodded. "I wish they wouldn't smoke, either, but it's legal in Nevada inside the bar."

"Well, it shouldn't be."

Jeff nodded.

No one in the dining room smoked, but the attached bar had a handful of patrons, and two held burning cigarettes alongside their beer. A thin haze meandered through the dark wood rafters of the establishment, hanging over bar patrons and diners alike. From the walls of the dining room, the mounted heads of a mule deer and a six-point elk buck looked on impassively. But the bar and grill smelled of cigarettes even out in the parking lot, so the smell of smoke inside shouldn't have been a surprise.

"Let me figure out the food situation for you," Jeff said. "Want me to bring you something different?"

"A salad," the woman said. She wouldn't make eye contact. Jeff was used to that. His exotropia caused his right eye to look slightly off and away, wall-eyed some would say, as if he were a fish. People didn't know where to look sometimes when talking to him. Some didn't look at him at all.

Jeff pointed to the iceberg lettuce on the side of the meatloaf special. "Unfortunately this place doesn't do much better than that. But I'll see the kitchen comes up with something that'll make you happy."

The woman made a non-committal noise. Her blue fingernails drummed on the table. Jeff grabbed his bin with the dirty dishes.

"Back in a jiffy."

Jeff went to the kitchen. Only one cook worked behind the stainless steel station. He presided over a burger patty that sizzled away on a hard top grill and a batch of fries swimming in a fryer. The short, brown-skinned cook grinned when Jeff came in.

"Hey, Masaya, I'm going to make a salad for table four," Jeff said.

"Tell Stacy to do it," Masaya said.

"She's not around."

Jeff washed his hands and got out a cutting board and a chef's knife. He found a cucumber and some strawberries in the walk-in, along with a sealed packet of feta cheese. He peeled the cucumber with a peeler, chopped off the ends, and scored the sides with a fork. He then cut it

into neat slices and put it into a small bowl. Also into the bowl went sliced strawberries. He sprinkled the berries and cucumber with some balsamic, a pinch of sugar, and some dry dill. He tossed it with his hands. On a small plate, he arranged it all into a collapsed column. Some of the cheese went on top. On the side, he put a pair of cherry tomatoes.

"Voila," Jeff said and showed Masaya the salad. The cook smiled, nodded, and went back to his burger, plating the buns and fixings for his next victim.

Jeff walked out into the dining room. The family of three was gone. In their place stood a tall, blond woman in a waitress costume, looking at the table with the two abandoned meals, and then at Jeff. Her ice blue eyes narrowed. She didn't have a problem with staring Jeff in the face.

"Where are they?" Stacy said.

Jeff looked around. Two other tables had diners, the rest were vacant. The family of three hadn't changed tables, nor were they at the front counter waiting to pay.

"Bathroom, maybe," Jeff said.

"And what's that?" Stacy indicated the salad.

"She wasn't happy with the salad on her plate."

"I made that salad."

"I know," Jeff said.

She looked down at the arrangement of the cucumber and strawberry salad and screwed up her face. "You cost me a tip." She turned and marched into the kitchen.

Jeff bussed the burger, the meatloaf special, and the two salads.

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At the end of the shift, once the last bar patron left the place, Jeff swamped the floor and started to mop. Masaya sat on a stool with his back against the bar, a bottle of Mexican beer in his hands. He watched Jeff work.

"Stacy pay you your share of tips?" Masaya said.

Jeff shook his head. He wrung the water into the bucket, pulled the bucket along on its casters to the next spot to be mopped.

"She can't do that to you every night," Masaya said. "You've got to say something. You should be getting a quarter of the gratuity. It's the law."

"She got stiffed on a table," Jeff said.

"She says she did. Maybe she just took the money, put it in her pocket. Don't trust; always confirm, eh?"

Jeff shrugged. The owner came through the door from the stairs that led up to the office. He was squat and round with too much hair on the sides of his head and not enough in the middle. Masaya hid the beer behind a greasy, white pant leg. The owner ignored him, didn't look at Jeff.

"You'll lock up when you're both done cleaning up?" the owner asked.

"You bet," Jeff said.

The owner headed for the door.

"Uh, Mr. Carlson?" Jeff said.

"What?"

"I'll need to get my check from you before you go."

"You'll have to wait for tomorrow," Mr. Carlson said. "Receipts were kinda slow tonight. Hate to give you a check that'll bounce." The owner pushed the door open by the fanny bar and left. Jeff stared at the door as it closed on its automatic hinge. He waited for a moment, as if Mr. Carlson might pop back inside, check in hand, and say, "Just kidding!"

Masaya shook his head and chuckled. He said, "Why you even here this late? You're just supposed to bus tables and wash the pots. Avelino is supposed to close tonight and take care of the floors."

"Avelino had a thing with his daughter." Jeff finished mopping the floor of the bar, did a walk-through of the place. He turned the fryer off, checked the locks on the door, and killed the lights as he and Masaya went out the back. "So what are you doing here so late? You could have left an hour ago."

"My wife's car is in the shop," Masaya said with a toothy smile. "I was hoping you could give me a ride."

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They walked across the bar and grill's gravel back lot to Jeff's navy blue Ford pickup. The parking lot lights around the place clicked off, leaving only the full moon to show the way. Masaya opened the passenger side door. Some books started to slide out, but he caught them before they fell to the ground.

Jeff got in, turned on the cab light. "Just throw that junk behind the seat," Jeff said.

Masaya took the books in his lap as he got in. "C+? Ajax?" he said as he considered the thick, soft-covered books and their bland text-book-graphic covers. "Linux? What, you some kind of hacker?"

He flipped thru the Linux book. It was replete with orange highlighter, margin commentary in blue ink, and Post-it notes covered with scribbles.

Jeff took the books from Masaya and plopped them behind the bench seat atop towels, a sweater, a toolbox, and the rest of the accumulations of the truck cab. "Stuff I had to read for my last job."

"Looks like hacker stuff. And on your last job was there a problem with getting paid? Maybe you shouldn't have quit."

Jeff turned the key and the engine rumbled to life. He poked the gas gauge, the needle buried past the 'E'. It didn't move as the engine warmed.

"We gonna make it?"

"Gauge is busted," Jeff said. "I'll get you home."

The truck rolled and crunched its way to the road, where Jeff turned onto the two-lane highway. A black Suburban was parked on the shoulder across the street. The lights reflected off of it as Jeff's truck passed by. Tinted windows revealed nothing of the vehicle's interior. Jeff tried not to look at it as they left it behind, but he couldn't help checking the rear view mirror. The Suburban didn't follow them. He wasn't being watched, not anymore. Not out here, away from his former life, away from who he used to be.

"You just shouldn't let this guy take advantage of you," Masaya said. "Or you should get another job. Why you washing pots when you could be doing your hacking?"

"It wasn't hacking, it was programming," Jeff said. "And I quit that so I could come here and work with you, of course." And when he washed pots, the overwhelming anxiety of someone, some agency, either foreign or domestic, tracking his every move all but disappeared. But Jeff didn't mention this.

Masaya laughed. After a moment, he said, "But you know computers."

Jeff gave a half-shrug, nodded.

"Then when we get to my place can you fix my computer? My kids got some viruses on it or something and it doesn't work right."