

Chapter One

Mo-poke...mo-poke...

Sylvie turned her head to catch the direction of the strange sound. It came from the treetops above. So it *was* a bird: just as she'd thought, when she'd heard it outside her window last night.

But that solved only part of the mystery. She knew all the birds in the forest, and none of them had a call like that.

Standing motionless on the edge of the clearing, she strained her eyes to see through the tops of the trees. The air was unusually clear over the Olympic Peninsula tonight, but no moon lit the scene. The lack of a reflective layer of fog or cloud reduced the loom of light from Seattle and Bremerton, allowing the stars to glitter like shards of crystal in the blackness. She breathed in the cold damp air, savoring the familiar feeling of oneness with the forest which, throughout her childhood and teenage years, had never palled.

The sound had drawn Sylvie further from home than she had intended, but she did not feel nervous. Her keen hearing would pick up any approaching creature, whether man or bear. If she could not avoid contact, the heavy drag of the twelve-gauge pump-action shotgun slung across her back lent reassurance.

Suddenly she tensed. *Something's about to happen.*

Wings flitted on the edge of her vision: soundless, owl-like. Then she jerked her head up as a light flared above.

Instead of burning out in seconds, a meteor grew with terrifying speed, coming straight toward her!

She froze. No time to run, no time for fear. *What a crazy way to die.*

The meteor decelerated at an impossible rate: a shockwave knocked her flat on her back, grinding the gun into her shoulder blade, the trees groaned and swayed, leaves flew, and the huge ball of blinding incandescence dissipated in a hot blast, turning the wintry air to summer and stripping the frost from the grass in an instant. A glowing column of heated air, extending up out of sight along the path of the meteor, faded slowly as it cooled.

Sylvie sat up, with her upper body propped on her hands. She stared, her belated fear suppressed by the shock of finding herself alive and unhurt.

A featureless ball, about two hundred feet in diameter, floated motionless some fifteen feet above the center of the clearing. It emitted a faint glow and radiated heat from the friction of its passage through the air. A rectangle appeared near the bottom, lit from within, and a ramp silently extended down to almost touch the ground.

The opening faced her. Sylvie could see a little way into the brightly lit interior, but her view was limited to about three feet above the floor. She watched, now beyond comprehension and in a suspended state on the other side of shock, incapable of action or coherent thought; watching, merely recording the scene without interpreting it.

Three pairs of legs appeared: one set sturdy, wrapped in something dark and coarse. The others were more slender, child-like, but subtly different from those of any human child, clad in white one-piece stocking-like garments.

Big-legs came up against Small-legs One, as if they were embracing. She heard a murmured bass voice, answered by a musical trill, like an arpeggio played in some strange tonal scale on a harp. Big-legs repeated this with Small-legs Two, then turned away toward the ramp. Small-legs One and Two came together, side by side.

Big-legs walked down the ramp. As the figure came into full view, she saw that it looked

like a male human being, judging by its size, shape and full beard. In her shocked state it didn't seem strange to Sylvie that his body remained at right-angles to the ramp, although the ramp sloped down at an angle of some forty degrees. *Of course*, giggled the part of her mind which was rapidly edging into hysteria, *he'd fall flat on his back on the ramp, otherwise*. He stepped off the end of the ramp onto the ground, and became vertical to that.

The ramp retracted like a lizard's tongue, and the lighted rectangle disappeared. The man — she was now sure he was a human male — stood with his hands on his hips, looking upward. Nothing happened for a minute. Then, without a sound, the ball began to rise, accelerating at an unbelievable rate. Winter returned as cold air rushed in to fill the now unheated space.

Sylvie heard another sound: the rising scream of low-flying jets. Interceptors from Lewis-McCord Base, she thought. Response times had sharpened, along with intolerance for unscheduled flights, since September 11, 2001.

The jets stood on their tails, afterburners flaring as they clawed for altitude, vainly trying to close on the strange ship. They each fired a missile which lagged behind the target by miles. The sound of the jets faded as they climbed at maximum power. The man in the clearing chuckled, drawing Sylvie's attention back to him.

Then he turned and stared straight at her.

The hairs rose on the back of her neck. He could not possibly see her, not where she sat in deep shadow, the top of her head barely protruding above the long grass. With her night-vision reduced by the flare of jets she could hardly see *him*, and he was out in the starlight against a light background of grass.

But he'd stared straight at her.

Then he started walking toward her.

I should be scared. I should be terrified. Always, always keep away from a man!

But I can't move. Why, why?

And then he stopped, some ten yards away, and held his hands palm-out in the universal gesture of peace.

As if in a dream she stood up. She stared at him for a full minute, not moving, but kept her muscles braced to spin around and run.

Then he dropped down, to sit cross-legged on the ground. She guessed that he'd sensed her fear and wanted to appear as non-threatening as possible; showing that she could escape from him, if necessary, at his first move to rise.

Instead, her leg muscles somehow overcame her will and ignored her fear.

Sylvie moved out of the shadows and stopped about five feet from him. He appeared to gather himself, and she realized he must be able to see her better now, with the starlight faint on her white knitted beanie and long, ash-blond hair, framing and shadowing her face. He gave a long, drawn-out sigh, and time seemed to stand still. She could see the glint of his eyes, gazing up at her in the shadowed face, but nothing more.

Sylvie felt a strange sensation low down in her belly. It hurt, but it felt good too. *It must be connected somehow with what stopped me from running*. In some weird way, too, it was connected to the premonition she'd had the instant before the flying machine appeared.

Then his head snapped around, shattering the moment, and he stared off in the direction from which the jets had come. Sylvie heard it then: the *thwock-thwock-thwock* of helicopter blades.

He fumbled in his clothing and came up with something clutched in his hand.

"Take this and go!" he hissed, and tossed it to her.

She caught it instinctively, spun around and ran back to the trees. Panting, she hid behind a big fir, and then shock hit her again: an apparent human from an alien spacecraft speaking *English?*

To take her mind off this puzzle, she looked at the thing in her hand. It was a smooth ball, a

little smaller than a tennis ball. Sylvie thrust it into her parka pocket and returned her attention to the clearing, in time to see him stand up and glance back at her. *He knows I'm still here, even though he can't see me.*

A searchlight lanced through the treetops, then found the clearing. Again, leaves lifted and whirled. The helicopter settled to the ground. The searchlight fastened on the man, and for the first time Sylvie saw him clearly, but from the distance she could only gain a general impression.

He was a bit over six feet tall, and appeared to be powerfully built. His disheveled shaggy clothing obscured the shape of his body. A full beard and tawny hair hanging down past his shoulders masked his face. He stood in a relaxed pose, waiting, hands on his hips.

An armed squad boiled out of the chopper and surrounded him, close enough for Sylvie to hear the proceedings.

“Who are you, man? What you doin’ here?”

He opened his hands and smiled, but said nothing.

“You ain’t dumb, are you?”

He shrugged.

“Feel these clothes, Sarge, they’re real strange. Kinda like the skin of some animal.”

“Maybe he’s the son o’ Grizzly Adams.”

The man stood still, passively allowing them to handle him, a slight smile on his face.

“Hey, check out this necklace. Looks like — naw, it’s teeth! Some sort of animal’s teeth. Big ’uns, too.”

He reacted then, pushing away the investigative hand with a slow but inexorable force.

“Shit! He’s strong, Sarge.”

“Leave him be, Matt,” said the sergeant, turning to the man. “Sir, did you see some strange flying machine just a few minutes ago?” The man shrugged.

“Sir, if you won’t answer my questions, I’m going to have to take you in to be questioned by my superior officer.” The man shrugged again.

“OK. Let’s get him on board. Are you coming quietly?”

By way of answer, the man turned and walked toward the chopper. When the sergeant started belatedly after him, and snapped on a plastic wrist tie, he merely looked at it. The squad bundled him inside. The chopper took off and set a course for McCord.

Sylvie gazed after the retreating navigation lights until they were lost from view. She felt as if she had experienced some weird waking dream — until she felt the weight of the ball in her pocket, heavier than could be expected from its size.

She reached in and caressed it, and found it to be warm, as if alive. Then, feeling oddly bereft, she turned for home, her quest for the strange bird forgotten.

“There you are, honey!” Linda said. “I was getting worried. Did you see those jets burnin’ up the sky?”

Sylvie nodded, dropped the gun into the stand by the door and glanced at her Celtic harp standing against the wall, reminded of the musical sound of the aliens’ voices.

“I guess you didn’t hear that critter of yours, what with all the noise.”

Sylvie stripped off her gloves to make her communication clear, and signed, <<I did. Saw it too, but at a distance. It’s a bird.>>

“Thought so!” her mother said triumphantly. “I saw something on TV while you were out, one of those fillers they put on the end of the news, about this bird that escaped from Seattle Zoo. It’s a ‘tawny frogmouth’. It’s an Australian critter, something like an owl, but not related. Because of its call, it’s also called the ‘mopoke’.”

<<Yes, that's just what it sounds like.>>

"What's up, honey? You don't seem so interested. Did something else happen tonight?"

<<Yes, I met ... a man.>>

Linda's face paled. "He — he didn't try to hurt you, honey?"

<<No. He was ... nice.>>

"Nice?"

What she wanted to tell her mother was too strange and complicated for signing. Sylvie stepped across the little cabin's living room and turned on the computer. Linda's eyes grew round as her daughter typed out an account of her night's adventures.

"You're kidding me, right? Flying saucers are a myth!"

For answer, Sylvie went to her discarded parka and drew out the ball. She held it out on her palm, and they put their heads together over it.

Here, as she turned it in the light, one could well believe it to be an alien artifact. It was perfectly smooth, and gorgeous iridescent colors played across its surface, changing constantly. Sylvie picked up a spoon from the table and gave the ball a gentle tap. It rang with a pure note, surprisingly loud, sounding like one of those sounds the aliens had made.

"Why do you think he gave it to you?" Linda asked, with a catch in her voice.

<<I suspect he didn't trust the soldiers with it.>>

"And he trusted you? Why?"

<<I think ... he ... saw into my soul.>>

Linda gazed at her daughter in something like awe.

"What are you going to do with it?"

Sylvie smiled, and signed, <<Bury it in the garden, where no one will find it. It can stay there until he comes for it. I'm sure he will.>>

Chapter Two

Lucille stood motionless in the corner of the ward, trying to make herself invisible. Not a difficult task, really, as *all* nurses were invisible to Major-Doctor-God-Almighty Steven Kemp, unless they were young and blonde. Doctor Benton wasn't much better, but at least he sometimes made the effort to be human.

For once, her invisibility didn't bother her. They were talking about the Wild Man, just as if he wasn't right there, lying in the bed between them.

Lucille found the Wild Man fascinating. He never spoke, but his eyes would follow her when she was on duty. The other nurses mentioned that too, in their endless speculation about him. His eyes never followed Kemp, nor any of the doctors who came to poke and prod and test and shake their heads. While they were there he would stare rigidly at the ceiling.

She also wondered what he was doing here when he was obviously not a military man, yet here he was in the military hospital at McCord Base instead of in Providence or one of the other Seattle hospitals.

Now, invisible in her corner, she could see his eyes, full of intelligence, following the doctors' conversation; but if one of them glanced down at him, immediately the eyes would become dull, unfocused.

"The scans show no brain damage, but he doesn't speak, he doesn't respond," Kemp growled. His pale eyes glared down at the Wild Man, who stared blankly back. "He's just got to be brain damaged or retarded — in some way the scans can't pick up."

"I'm not so sure, major," Benton said. "He could be foxing, in my opinion."

"Why? What could he possibly gain by that? He's got the musculature of a very active man. Why would he *like* lying in a hospital bed, day after day?"

"I don't know. It's just one of the many mysteries about him, like that necklace. It's the one thing that upsets him, if someone tries to take it away. And what sort of teeth *are* they, anyway?"

"Grizzly bear's?"

Benton shook his head. "I've never seen a grizzly's teeth so big, sir, and I've seen some. My grandfather used to hunt them."

"So, an unusually large grizzly!"

"And what about the reason *why* he's in hospital, instead of being questioned by the top brass? A fever that varies between 103 and 104.5, enough to kill a man who's had it as long as he has. But we can't find anything wrong with him!"

Kemp shrugged. "Some new virus."

"He's not producing any antibodies! And that's another thing — his blood's *too* clean. And his teeth!"

"I told you. A big grizzly—"

"I mean his own teeth, major. They're *perfect*. No cavities, no dental work! Hell, not even the *wear* a man of his age should have. It's as if they'd been re-enameled."

Kemp frowned. "No one told me about the teeth."

"They didn't think you'd want to hear, sir. Just like you won't entertain any speculation about his origins."

"I don't believe in flying saucers, Lieutenant—"

Kemp broke off suddenly, and turned to frown at Lucille. "Haven't you got work to do, nurse?"

"I'm doin' it, doctor. There's a twenty-four hour watch on this man, remember? You ordered

it yourself.”

“Well, *we’re* watching him, nurse. You can wait in the hall till we’re through.”

As Lucille reluctantly moved past him to obey, he muttered under his breath, just loud enough for her to hear, “Uppity black bitch.”

“Racist pig,” Lucille muttered in kind, and shut the door before he could react.

I knew it! It had to be something like that! Flying saucers, holy shit! Trembling with excitement, Lucille found a chair in the corridor and sat down to wait, glad to rest her feet despite missing out on the discussion in the single-bed ward. By the time the door opened and the doctors emerged she was sitting demurely, head down, excitement suppressed.

Kemp paused to glower at her. “You’re aware there’s a security blackout on this man, are you, nurse? *Nothing* that passes in that room is to be repeated outside.”

“I’m quite aware of that, doctor,” she said, with dignity.

“See you remain so.”

Kemp and Benton turned away and strode off down the corridor. Lucille put out her tongue at their retreating backs, then re-entered the room. She closed the door and stared eagerly at the Wild Man. To her amazement, he winked at her.

“You’re not so dumb as they think, are you? I swear, you understand everything what’s going on,” she sighed. “Major-Doctor-God-Almighty-Kemp just can’t see past his prejudices. Land sakes, that guy’s an asshole.”

“You’re not wrong,” the Wild Man croaked.

Lucille chuckled. “Yeah, thought you’d agree — *what!?*” She goggled at him. “You spoke!”

“Don’t ... tell the world. Just keep it between us, eh?”

“Sure.” Suddenly weak at the knees, Lucille flopped down in the visitor’s chair by the bed. She put her hands on the covers to stop them trembling, and whispered, “Why wouldn’t you talk to Kemp?”

“You want ... the short answer, or the long one?”

“How about both?”

He sat up and smiled. He had a lovely smile, Lucille decided, in spite of all the face-fungus. His beautiful royal-blue eyes crinkled in a way that warmed her.

“You know the short answer already. He’s an asshole.”

Lucille laughed. “And the long answer?”

The Wild Man became serious. “He has ... a closed mind. He wouldn’t believe what I told him without proof, and I’m not ... in a position, while I’m ... held here, to offer proof. Besides, I don’t trust him to ... use the knowledge wisely.”

“He’s an officer in the US Air Force.” Lucille found herself in the unexpected position of defending Kemp. “He’d have to tell the government.”

“Exactly.”

He fixed her with those dark blue eyes, and as he continued his voice smoothed, like a stiff door hinge loosening with use, becoming deep and warm as it took on a compelling tone. She noticed the hairs rising on the back on her neck as they had long ago when, as a child, she’d heard Martin Luther King speak.

“And from what I can tell of the way your governments are ... constituted, they’d keep it secret, if for no other reason than knowledge is power. The story I have to tell should be freely available to every person on Earth, so they can make their own ... evaluation of it, and act accordingly.

“Also, I have no desire to be locked away for the rest of my life as a state secret. That could happen.”

Although he occasionally paused to search for a word, his command of the language was perfect, but in an accent she couldn’t identify.

“Did you really come out of a flying saucer?” she asked fearfully.

He gave her that killer smile again, and her fears dissolved.

"I was born on Earth, but I was taken away and brought back by ... people ... not of Earth."

"Holy she-e-e-i-t!" She goggled at him for a while, then said in a small voice, "Why're you telling *me* this?"

"Because you're a kind person. A moral person. I've been observing you, and I can tell. It's a gift I've been given."

"Hoo, man! I dunno about that. Some of the guys I've known—" He waved her comment away.

"That's nothing. You're moral in ... the ways that really matter. You wouldn't knowingly harm another person, and you wouldn't fail to give help to someone who asked you for it."

Lucille opened her mouth to protest, then closed it again. He was looking at her with such certainty. And then she realized he'd spoken the truth. She had never thought of herself that way; the behavior he'd described just seemed to come naturally to her. She felt a warm, unaccustomed glow of self-esteem, and felt touched that he was confiding so much to her. She decided the least she could do was to trust him, too, then her professional instincts surfaced.

"Wait just one minute! How come you're sittin' up, chattin' away like you had not a care in the world? What happened to your fever?"

"Gone."

"*Gone*? It can't just go like—" She reached out and put her hand to his forehead: his *cool* forehead. "It's gone," she said blankly.

The Wild Man shrugged. "I wasn't sick. I just pretended to be, so they'd put me in the hospital."

"No one can *pretend* to have a temperature of 104.5!"

"They can't? You can't control your bodily functions?" He looked genuinely puzzled. "I can. I was taught how, but I thought people would have worked out those controls for themselves by now."

Once again, Lucille was lost for words. She looked at him in awe, then said in a small voice, "Why did you want to be in hospital?"

"They brought me here for tests when they first caught me. I could see it'd be easier to get out of here than from the place where they were holding me."

"You want to get out of here." It wasn't a question.

"Of course. If I'm out of communication for much longer, my friends will get worried. And there's something else. Something personal."

His eyes took on a dreamy look. Lucille waited, until finally he spoke, slowly and quietly.

"I met this girl. She ... moved me. In a way I never thought could happen again, since my wife died." He sighed. "At first I thought it was just because she was the first human female I'd seen in the flesh for a long while. But it wasn't that.

"I ... can't explain it. I'm still trying to work it out. It was like ... like I'd always known her. As if ... our two souls called to each other. Even before I saw her, I somehow *knew* she'd be there."

Lucille's own romantic soul thrilled, and in that instant she determined to do all she could to bring these two young people together.

"Can I help? Can I go to her, tell her where you are, and bring her to you?"

He shook his head. "Thank you for the offer, Lucille, but I don't know where to send you. I don't know her name, where she lives, or even much of what she looks like, except she's about twenty years old, slim, and has long fair hair."

Lucille stared. "How the hell will you find her, then?"

"She's got something of mine. It's a—" he frowned, searching for the words— "a sort of electronic tracer. I can go straight to it."

"Couldn't I do that, using whatever you use to trace it?"

He smiled ruefully. “I’m afraid not. It only works for me, because it’s tuned to my brain pattern. I use only what’s in my head to find it. My friends are very careful not to allow any ... alien artifact to fall into the hands of beings they’re visiting: cultural contamination, you see. To the girl it’s ... significant, because of the ... circumstances in which she got it, but to anyone else it would look like just a ... a pretty, useless toy.”

Lucille sat and thought as he fell silent. For some reason he reminded her of her childhood, way back in the 1960s. She didn’t like to think of those days, back when she lived with her mom in Birmingham, Alabama. It brought back the feelings of impotent resentment at being part of a despised minority, the humiliation of being treated as sub-human by smug, powerful white men like Kemp.

Then she made the connection.

The Wild Man was in a similar position: in a minority of one, considered less than human just because he was different. Lucille was a competent judge of character, also; she felt sure he posed no threat to the security of the United States of America, so why were they holding him, other than the fact he didn’t fit into one of Kemp’s neat little boxes?

A Wild Man shouldn’t be caged.

“We-l-l... Looks like I’ll just have to help you get out o’ here, don’t it?”

He gave her a dazzling smile. “I was hoping you’d say that. But I don’t want to get you into trouble.”

“You won’t, s’long as you keep your mouth shut about me after you’re out.” She tapped her name-badge. “You know my name, Mister, but to me you’re just the Wild Man. I’d like to know who it is I’m helpin’.”

“Fair enough. It’s Balmasin-o-Kalivolo-Adamskayavol.”

“Phee-ew! What in tarnation does that-all mean?”

“He of the Kalivolo tribe who slew the great bear.”

Light dawned. “*That’s* why you won’t let no one touch that necklace!”

He nodded. “Nobody *gives* you cave-bear teeth. You have to go out and get your own.” He grinned. “My name’s a bit of a mouthful. Why don’t you call me Bal?”

Lucille frowned. “Nah, doesn’t suit you, somehow. How about shortening the rest of it? Kal, Kali, Ada, Adam — Adam! That’s perfect for you!”

“It is? Adam ... Adam...” He tried it on his tongue, then nodded. “Okay, I like it.” He smiled at her, then said, “Tell me something, Lucille. I understood everything Kemp and Benton were talking about, except for one thing. Why did Kemp call you a *black* bitch?”

Lucille stared. “Why, ’cause I *am* black, that’s all.” When he still looked uncomprehending, she said, “My color.”

“But your color’s not black, it’s a nice warm brown,” he said seriously. “Not like Kemp, who’s all ugly pink and yellow blotches.”

Lucille stifled an explosive giggle. “Oh, Adam, I love you,” she sputtered.

“I love you too, Lucille, but I don’t get it.” He snapped his fingers. “Oh, wait. It’s a slangy exaggeration thing, is it? Like that little Nurse O’Halloran, who’s got pinky-orange hair, and they call her a redhead.”

“That’s near enough,” Lucille gasped.

“Good. I don’t like to misunderstand things. There’s a big cultural gap for me to cross.” He flung the sheet aside and stood up. “I’ve been playing sick too long. Time to get the kinks out.”

He stretched to his full height, quite unselfconscious about the fact he was naked except for the necklace, and flexed his muscles. Lucille sat gaping at this casual display of sleek male power.

She had always thought men needed clothes to give them style; and that they looked faintly ridiculous, naked. Now she felt overwhelmed by this raw physical beauty. He looked at her and spoke then, and she looked away, embarrassed to be caught staring, but he showed no

concern.

“Well, Lucille, have you got any ideas on how I can get out of here?”

Before she could set her mind to the problem, a thought came to her:

Lordy, to be thirty years younger again! I wonder if this gal he's after has any idea in her head of what a gorgeous hunk o' man I'm aimin' her way?