

SOULMATES



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Аннотация

It is 2023 a.D. and we're in one of the tranquil municipalities of the Po Valley. Two families make dinner plans, as they have done so many times before. However, a twist of fate will provide two long-time friends, Alex Brugellis and Angelica Benassi, with a close encounter of the first kind with a UFO. They'll be taken away from their respective families and transported to a surreal place, catapulted into an adventure that goes beyond their wildest imagination. It is 2023 a.D. and we're in one of the tranquil municipalities of the Po Valley. Two families make dinner plans, as they have done so many times before. However, a twist of fate will provide two long-time friends, Alex Brugellis and Angelica Benassi, with a close encounter of the first kind with a UFO. They'll be taken away from their respective families and transported to a surreal place, catapulted into an adventure that goes beyond their wildest imagination. They find themselves in an artificial habitat that was tailored to human beings. In this mysterious habitat, they will be forced to lived together, subject to the disturbing manipulations of an equally-mysterious device. However, the event was a blessing in disguise: they grow to love each other and

give in to the red-hot passion that ignites them. Alex and Angelica understand that they were meant for each other. Amid a conspiracy of interstellar proportions and complex plot twists, they'll spend the rest of their lives trying to be happy. And they are not alone, because thousands of other alien species have had the same fate and now live in hexagonal biospheres inside a structure similar to a beehive. This ebullient community made up by different species will join these two humans and try to address several unanswered questions and concerns. In their relentless quest for the truth, amid thousands of questions and conjectures, they find out that reality is much harder to understand: Those responsible for their abduction—which they refer to as “Casch-Mesis”—are unbelievable multidimensional aliens. Alex and Angelica will learn that they're part of an elite of individuals who have affinity and were transported to a place far away from their respective worlds, to a planet they call “Reservythia” because of its peculiar characteristics. After spending years in Reservythia, life will take its course and their human family will grow exponentially, thanks to the never-ending genetic changes made by the “Casch-Mesis.” However, when they seemed to have grown used to their routine, other changes will come

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Financial earthquake, my stocks were on freefall, my wife's complaints were weighing me down and, if all that weren't enough, the paranoid media was announcing an impending

apocalypse—as if Lucifer himself were going to collide with the moon.

I could even accept the surreal idea that a giant wave would level the ground all the way up to the entrance to Piacenza. “Maybe Po Valley would become a better place”—that seemed to be the popular joke for this foretold catastrophe.

And then there was my boss and his excessive demands. I couldn’t put up with him for another second. He slashed the project budget in half, but kept the same specifications? That decision puzzled me for days.

I was as stressed out as I could be and I wished I could have forgotten all about that entire week—if it weren’t for Maira’s first words.

A mediocre management for the Homo sapiens of the 21st century—I repeated to myself.

However, the weekend held some interesting promises. Actually, we had a pleasant surprise on Saturday: Angelica and Tommy. Saying we were friends would be undermining our friendship, because we have known each other since we were kids, so we were almost siblings. Even though they lived about 125 miles away, they always seized the opportunity to come and visit us. We’d spend a nice time in good company, having fun while dusting off our childhood memories. They brought their first-born, Lorenzo, who was a little over one year old. He was a restless baby, about twenty or twenty-two pounds, with nice little rolls of fat, and his mother’s almond eyes. I watched in

amusement as he and our daughter—at the tender age of two—were raising hell.

Enjoying a nice T-bone steak and a glass of Chianti: that sounded like the best way to end the day on a high note. A nice time at a restaurant would restore our loquacity and keep us in high spirits.

We left for a village up in the hills, located about twelve miles from my house, where there was a cozy country hotel I'd always go to in special occasions. It would take us twenty minutes or so to arrive at our destination some two thousand feet up the hill.

We got in our cars and left the city behind us, taking a narrow, dark road away from traffic through the exuberant chestnut grove up the first hills in the Province of Reggio Emilia. A light fog covered the valley and, despite the limited visibility, it wasn't a major issue—we had a GPS, just in case.

I drove unhurriedly, listening to our little girl's voice coming from her safe car seat in the back. My BMW was followed by my friends' car, a silent electric minivan that was as dark as the valley below us. Letizia, my wife, was on the passenger seat, keeping an eye on little Maira and addressing all her requests—at that moment of leisure in particular, she wanted to entertain herself with her new favorite pastime: an annoying game on the smartphone. But it was Letizia herself who noticed a faint, blurry light amid the liquid water droplets suspended in the air.

“Alex, what kind of weird light is that?” she asked me. “Where does it come from? I don't remember any street lights on this

road...”

Until then, I hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary, and thought that blurry light could have been a vehicle coming our way. “I don't see any alert on the radar about other vehicles in the vicinity. Only Tommy and I are driving up this road,” I told her after I checked the Augmented Reality app.

I leaned forward to get closer to the windshield. Oddly enough, I couldn't see any light posts, but the intensity was increasing to the point that the light became almost blinding. Tommy, who had been keeping a consistent distance from my car, started to signal to me with his headlights.

“Alex! Alex! Look at the sky! It's coming towards us!” my wife yelled.

She seemed frightened, but I had known her for fifteen years and knew for a fact that she was easily impressed. By now, I was already used to her tendency to be alarmed. However, my blood ran cold when I was able to focus on that source of light hovering above our car. I felt a shiver down my spine and was petrified.

Ever since I was a kid, I had shown great interest in mysteries, especially any news about unidentified flying objects. *Wow! Is this really happening to me? It just can't be... I'm a lucky bastard! A first-degree contact!*—I thought to myself, being careful not to let my excitement show.

My first reaction was to hit the brakes. I needed to get out of the vehicle to observe it better and avoid any misunderstanding. I wanted to shoot down any possibility of that being a mere

helicopter. However, my sudden stop was an unfortunate one.

We felt the jerk and, out of the corner of my eye, I could see Letizia's body respond to the collision by moving forward and then pushing back against the seat. Then I heard Maira crying and screaming and was concerned for her safety.

My car was pushed into a ditch on the side of the road, and it ended up in a dangerous angle; the back wheels and bumper were up in the air. I got out of the vehicle immediately, losing all interest in that source of light, to open the door to the backseat where my daughter was.

"Tommy got distracted by the light, too?" my wife asked me. "Dammit! What about the emergency stop assistant?"

"It's all his fault! He always turns off the navigation app and there you have it!"

Since we had been driving at a moderate speed, I knew that the crash wouldn't have caused severe damage and calmed down after confirming that Maira was lively and reacting well after the fright. I put my daughter in Letizia's arms and took them to a safe place behind a tall chestnut tree about thirty feet from the road. My wife squatted behind the solid tree trunk while holding our little girl.

After making sure that my family was safe, I went to check on Tommy, Angelica, and Lorenzo. I wondered if the other car had got the worst part of the crash because it was coming from behind, considering the sudden deceleration and the head-on collision, and whether the passengers could have been hurt.

I imagined the dramatic scene: heads against the windshield, the airbag hitting Lorenzo's delicate head, and Angelica, my beautiful friend, with her face all cut up by the glass... *No, Tommy is indestructible. He won't be affected by a crash at twenty-five miles per hour—I repeated to myself. But, what about Lorenzo and Angelica? I hope they're okay.*

The silver minivan was clearly visible in the middle of the road, about thirty feet away. I noticed immediately that Tommy had also left the driver's seat to check on little Lorenzo in the backseat. My friend must have got hurt, because I noticed he was limping, but I could not see Angelica from where I was standing.

In the meantime, that bright light was still hovering over our heads. I estimated it was about nine hundred eighty feet above the ground, but it was hard to tell for sure without knowing its exact dimensions. That light seemed to have been in a fixed position, as if it awaited the developments of the crash. It was round and irregular, but too bright to allow me to analyze it properly.

"Stay here and don't worry, everything's alright," I told my wife. "I need to help the others."

Letizia wasn't a very brave woman. She actually started crying as soon as she realized I was walking away from her. Still, that wouldn't keep me from the noble gesture of helping my dear friends.

"Be careful!" she said. "Come back to us right away, please!" I ran toward their minivan. The dark, wet asphalt didn't offer much traction, and I could have easily slipped. As I got closer,

I heard Tommy yelling Lorenzo's name and, as I reached their vehicle, I saw that the airbag had indeed been deployed and the boy was now lifeless in his father's arms. Tommy turned around to face me and I could see terror in his wide-open eyes.

As if it weren't enough, the mysterious object in the sky started to hiss loudly, which made us cover our ears. However, we gladly noticed that the high-pitch noise made Lorenzo recover his senses.

Angelica was left groggy on the passenger's seat after the airbag caught her by surprise. She showed signs of recovery and the hiss had probably annoyed the hell out of her. I could see it in her face that panic was setting in.

"Stay calm, Tommy... Take care of Lorenzo and I'll check in on Angelica. I'll get her out of the car and keep her safe behind the trees," I yelled at the top of my lungs, making exaggerated hand gestures to show him where I was going.

I carried my friend over my shoulder, since she was still a little confused. Then the object in the sky started to move and shoot out some rays of light. A gust of wind swept the road, whirling dry leaves around and raising the dust, thus decreasing our visibility even further. In the blink of an eye, it was as if I had been taken to the set of an old sci-fi movie, with flying saucers, laser rays, and the respective sound effects.

All that noise, the irritating dust, the kids crying... I couldn't think amid absolute chaos. I just wanted to get out of there. Unfortunately, my legs were shaking and didn't follow the

command given by my brain. The flying object seemed to shoot random rays of light without a given target: a tree, a bush, a rock. I had my doubts whether it could control its own weapon.

Tommy and Letizia were yelling for me to get out of there, since everything seemed to disappear out of thin air once it was stricken. It must have been some sort of disintegrating ray of such intense energy that it had the power to vaporize anything. I needed to make a decision as quickly as possible. *Maybe I should just stay here, behind Tommy's solid minivan. I will be at a greater risk of being hit by these rays if I start running now.*

And that was when I saw my BMW evaporating after it got hit by that weapon. I realized each one of us was an easy target and the vehicle would have been a useless shield. *Shit! I just bought that car a few months ago. Why didn't I wait a little longer for a better opportunity? How am I gonna explain that to my wife? My jaw tensed at the thought of that loss. Alex, you better calm down... Keep a level head and you'll make it out of here alive—I* repeated it to myself, trying to focus.

There I was, ready to run as fast as possible while carrying Angelica and all her ninety pounds over my shoulder, when she chose the worst possible moment to finally come to. All it took was one look around for her to understand that she was in danger during a seemingly air strike.

“Lorenzo! Lorenzo! Where is he? Where's Lorenzo?” she screamed.

I was the only obstacle between her and Tommy's voice.

“Let me go! Let me go! I want Tommy... They're right there... I can hear him!” she tried to get away.

Angelica hit me right between my legs and knocked me down to the ground. She set herself free and left me there, twisting and turning in pain.

“Stop! Stop! It's way too dangerous!” I yelled, trying to discourage her from running in their direction.

I finally managed to get up and run after her to try to stop her. I wasn't that much of an athlete, even though it looked like I was in good shape, but all my efforts were in vain. I saw her being vaporized by that lethal ray right before my eyes. Tommy screamed in anguish when he saw his wife disappearing into thin air, and his screams echoed through the valley.

I was devastated. That night had taken a tragic turn. I had tears in my eyes as I followed my instincts and the only clear order coming from my mind: *Run! Run as fast as your legs can take you! Run away from danger!*

That was exactly what the first cavemen did to survive. Fear had turned me into a record-breaking athlete, but then a blinding light surrounded me and, after that, it was all darkness.

The First Day...

Supreme happiness. Absolute peace of mind. I had never felt that way. That surreal tranquility had taken over my entire being, as if universal peace had inundated me through my extremities and my mind had been left completely void of any thought. I felt as if I were floating but, at the same time, supported by a semi-solid surface. There was a warm breeze caressing my skin. I wanted to remain there, in that state, forever.

This is a very pleasant dream... Where am I?

My memory came back spontaneously, rearranging itself as if my life could be rebuilt automatically, step by step. Each piece of the puzzle was coming together and each empty space was being filled. I was aware of myself once again. In that brief moment, I realized I was in a typical state of wakefulness. However, when my most recent memories came back to me, I woke up right away.

I sat up immediately, out of breath, as if I were awakening from a nightmare. But it hadn't been a nightmare... It was real life.

I started to study my surroundings, frantically looking at

everything around me, searching for a clue or anything that could help me understand what was going on, but nothing seemed like it was supposed to be. I was sitting at a shore, but the water in front of me was practically still, so I assumed it was a lake. I also saw some mountains in the horizon. Then I looked at my own body—I was naked. And that was what shocked me the most.

This is a very charming place—I thought, as I continued to observe the weird landscape. Maybe I'm dead... Maybe I went to my happy place, to another part of my existence. I was fantasizing, searching my brain for a possible explanation, no matter how bizarre it might sound.

I saw a small grove across from the lake. It had very large, tall oak trees that were almost sixty feet tall, which is not common in my region. However, what really caught my eye was a narrow path to my left that went deep into the grove. It seemed like a dirt road created by constant traffic from people or animals.

The sun was rising behind the mountains, casting just enough light on the vegetation. I also noticed that the weather was perfect. Even though I was naked, I felt pretty comfortable. I believe it must have been about seventy to seventy-five degrees, but a warm breeze was brushing through my skin. All I could do was get up and let my legs carry me further than my eyes could see. And I had my eyes set on that narrow path.

I stood up, trying to get the blood flowing back to my legs. Standing at five-seven feet tall, I could see a familiar shape about a quarter-mile away from me. It was someone lying on the sand.

It would have been impossible for me to see it if I hadn't stood up. My heart was racing as I ran towards that other person. Maybe I could get some answers. For better or worse, I wasn't all alone in that place.

As I got closer, the shape became clearer and increasingly more familiar. It was a woman, who was also naked. She was lying on her stomach. I was able to identify the feminine shape of her backside, hips, and waist. When I was only a few feet away, I made a positive identification because of her old-fashioned hairstyle: short hair, right below her chin, in a dirty-blond shade that was so familiar to me. I also recognized her new fluorescent tattoo on her right triceps. *Yes! That's her... Angelica!*

She was sleeping in an uncomfortable position, with her face against the rough sand and her arms extended on either side, slightly turned outwards. Even though I was beside myself when I saw a friendly face—or body—I was deeply ashamed of noticing her nudity, even though I was doing it unconsciously. I felt I was cheating on my best friend Tommy when I let my eyes wonder through his wife's intimate parts.

That was when I thought, *Wait a minute... What would the better option be? Should she wake up to see a man squatting over her? Even though we've known each other forever, the sight of me in that position will scare her more than it's necessary. She'll already have to deal with the fact that she's waking up, completely naked, in an unknown place... For the love of God, she doesn't need to be staring at my genitals on top of that!*

I looked around, trying to find anything to cover my private parts, but there was nothing I could use. *Dammit... An oak branch wouldn't provide much comfort, would it?* The most logical reaction was to stay away, wait for her to wake up and give her time to gradually adapt to that situation without any added trauma.

Actually, I only had to wait another ten minutes before Angelica started to wake up. From a safe distance, I watched her panicking when she woke up in an unknown place. She looked around and noticed I was there. Following her most basic instinct, she started running toward me.

“Alex... Alex! What's going on? Where are we?” she yelled before she reached me.

When she was about six feet away, she looked at me from head to toe and realized that we were dressed up as Adam and Eve. I could feel her gaze moving up through my body and stopping in one area in particular. *That's really great! Here I am, naked in front of my best friend, and all she does is analyze my physical attributes.*

I pretended I was running away, covering my family jewels with my hands, but in a natural way. Angelica blushed, showing that she was embarrassed by that situation, and decided to cover herself as well—she put her right arm over her chest and used her left hand to try to hide her pubes. Apart from hiding our shame, we were both intrigued by the circumstances we had found ourselves in.

“Where are we? Tell me! Answer me!” Angelica could no longer fight back the tears and started sobbing. “Where the hell have we ended up? How did we get here?”

“I can't really take a wild guess as of now,” I said, looking down and thinking that we had to analyze everything first and try to gather more facts. “Can you remember anything?”

“I remember that odd object hovering over us,” she said, wiping away her tears with her left hand. “Your car went off the road, then you were carrying me... I could hear Tommy's voice! I was looking for Lorenzo... Where's my baby? What happened to him? Is he alright? Tell me! I was running toward Tommy, then this blinding light came and... Next thing I know I woke up here,” she started sobbing again.

“Listen... Let's try to arrange all these weird events in chronological order. We need to look at this clearly.”

Angelica knelled down on the sand. She had the facial expression of someone who was getting ready to listen to something unbelievable, albeit elementary.

“We were going down the road when a mysterious object got closer. I'd say it was a UFO...”

Angelica seemed to agree with me, keeping her eyes wide open and nodding, while shaking a little bit. I noticed goose bumps covered her skin, despite the pleasant temperature.

“By what I could see, it was an unknown aircraft equipped with a technology that is not compatible with what we have right now, in 2023... I've never seen anything like those rays—they

were incredible, like an alien weapon. That object abducted us with those rays.”

Angelica started to look confused, as if that theory taken from a “Twilight Zone” episode sounded extremely unbelievable to her. However, I had known her long enough to admire her open-mindedness. She was trying to adapt to that out-of-the-ordinary situation and recover from my verborrhea.

“Alex, I know you as an IT Consultant who is passionate about science fiction. I trust your observations, but there's something I need to ask you: Please analyze this situation carefully, without letting it be contaminated by your fan-boy fantasies.”

I was offended for a split second, but decided to leave that debate aside for the time being. “I know it sounds like a sci-fi movie, but that's exactly what I saw with my own eyes: you evaporated when you were struck by that ray... You disappeared into thin air. I was struck too, and that's how we both ended up here,” I added.

“Are you trying to tell me that it was the ray of light that brought us here?”

“At first, when I saw you disappearing, I thought it was some sort of disintegrating weapon. I feared the worst—that you had died. Then, I was hit as well, and I had that same sensation you described: I saw a blinding white light and, then, there was only silence... I woke up here, with you, in this unknown place. Since we're not dead, I can only assume those rays were actually part of a teletransporter... All in all, we were abducted!”

She showed signs of agreement and her body languages clearly indicated that I had found a crack in her shield of skepticism. Deep down, she was an intelligent woman and, despite my fantastic explanation, it all sounded logical and probable to her.

“Well, were we teletransported by that aircraft to this place then?” she asked. “But, where are we? Why would someone bring us here?”

We had been in that unknown place for only a few minutes and had little to go by as far as finding answers to all those questions. “What do you want me to say, Angelica? We don't have any clue to create a satisfactory theory... And, there's more: all these arguments I just shared with you are nothing but conjectures. For all I know, we might as well be dead, in a limbo, waiting to go to the other side. What the hell do I know? We should just try to find someone who can help us. How about we start over there? Let's walk there and explore this area going down that path,” I said, taking her by the hand and showing her the trail through the oak grove.

She hesitated for a moment, but then agreed to follow me. Being careful not to expose our genitals too much, we followed our way towards the unknown.

That oak grove was nothing but a small group of trees that are unknown to most people living in the Po Valley area, but largely found throughout the rest of the Italian peninsula. I knew them well because I had observed the indigenous vegetation in other parts of the country during my business trips. These trees were

enormous and its branches were so intertwined that they created a thick dome that was almost impenetrable to sunlight. I thought about locating ourselves geographically by looking at the sky, then I cursed myself for never having pursued a passion I had since I was a boy: Astronomy.

“Do you know anything about astronomy?” I asked.

“Do you really think this is the time and place to joke around?” she asked rhetorically.

Maybe... If I could use my rudimentary knowledge in astronomy, I'd be capable of locating us, even if it were in a generalized way... We could at least know in each hemisphere we are. If I were able to find the Northern Star, that would tell me we're in the southern hemisphere; if I found the Southern Cross, that would mean we're in the northern hemisphere—I thought, stretching my astronomy fundamentals. I made a deal with myself that I'd pay attention to the stars as soon as dark, clear skies were presented to me.

As we walked, I glanced at Angelica, her breasts bouncing with each step. She was no longer covering them, because she wanted to pay attention to the unknown path, too.

“Do you think we're... we're still in Italy?” she asked me, looking left and right, studying the landscape.

“I don't know,” I shrugged. “But the landscape is similar,” I tried to give her a more comforting answer. “The water in the lake, the vegetation, the mountains in the distance... It all points to the great lakes in northern Italy. I just don't know which

one...”

Angelica was shivering and hadn't notice the margins of the lake and the mountains, but I had paid attention to every detail and thought our surroundings looked similar to those of Lake Como or Garda. However, one crucial thing was missing: the several villages along the coast. As far as I could see, there were no traces of civilization anywhere.

After we walked about a mile and a quarter down the winding path, we finally reached the edge of the grove. About fifty yards away from that corridor of trees, we found a weird welcome sign. Our jaws dropped when we saw a square green sign with a male and a female silhouette. The images were drawn side by side and had one hand up, as if they were saying hello to us. That reminded me of the messages we sent to space last century...

“What does this mean?” Angelica had stopped suddenly and her muscles were tense. “Is someone waiting for us? Dammit, what's going on?”

We had to keep going to find out. We took a few more steps out of the grove. That's when we were able to admire the futuristic, majestic building erected at the bottom of a hill. It was a very large farmhouse with an exuberant garden and bushes. I started walking faster, pulling Angelica by the hand.

Once we approached the farmhouse, we stopped to admire it. The house was white and had a post-modern look with large stained-glass windows all over the place. It looked like a “V” with a flat base. There was a terrace on the concave part of it,

with a splendid wooden porch. Next to it, there was a trapeze-shaped pool and everything was surrounded by orchids arranged in a complex design.

The construction material had actually called my attention. It wasn't cement or metal, and it reflected light in a weird way—at least a way I had never seen before, because it was luminescent. *Does anyone live there?*—I wondered.

We followed a path around the pool, crossed the terrace, and approached the entrance, where there were two openings. They were two common doors with a knob, one on the right and another one on the left, each displaying the corresponding silhouette of a man or a woman.

“Wrong door... It must be the bathroom,” I said.

“It's true...” Angelica couldn't help but laugh, and her face lit up to highlight her beauty. “I needed to go anyway. Excuse me.”

Unbelievable! She's about to go in through that door by herself. She's either going nuts, or she's under the influence of a mysterious force—I thought as I watched her acting so recklessly.

Angelica opened the door as naturally as possible and went in. After being shocked for a moment, I tried to follow her, but something unexpected happened: I wasn't able to go in. I tried to cross the threshold of that weird door, but it just didn't happen. A mysterious force did not allow me to take a step further. It was a repelling force, just like the one that occurs between two magnets when the polarities are charged the same. The more effort I made to go in, the stronger the force repelling me was.

I walked about fifteen feet backwards and ran towards the door with as much force as my body mass and speed could generate. Then I was thrown some six feet away from the door, which finally closed to separate me from Angelica. I pushed against the door with my shoulder, I kicked it, I pounded on it, but it was all in vain. *What a strange material... It's similar to wood, but much stronger*—I thought as I saw I couldn't really damage it. I wasn't able to leave a single scratch on it.

“Angelica! Angelica!” I yelled her name to no avail. I was unable to communicate with my friend.

Then I tried the other door, the one displaying the male silhouette. I placed my shaky hand on the knob, turned it and crossed the threshold without any issues.

The wonders of that day never ceased to amaze me. I just stood there, admiring the beauty of that luxurious place. It was as if I had entered a castle of one thousand and one nights owned by an oil tycoon from Russia.

It had one gigantic, open room with designated areas. It was well furnished and practical, like those houses in the decoration magazines my wife likes so much. I was impressed by the large, relaxing Jacuzzi, the sauna, and complete gym with a stationary bike, treadmill and other multipurpose machines—all of them equipped with state-of-the-art holographic technology. There was an island in the kitchen, which seemed to have all modern appliances known to man, including self-cleaning technology—which I had never seen with my own eyes because

I've always assumed it was something only rich people could afford. Then there was the multimedia center with the usual TVC system (TV + computer), in addition to some devices that, as an IT Consultant, I was ashamed to say I could not recognize. Apparently, that house had one single floor and high ceiling—160 feet high, actually. The walls inside and around the perimeter were transparent, made of a glass-like material that was abundant throughout the house.

I saw Angelica out of the corner of my eye and started to yell and jump up and down to get her attention, but she was too busy admiring the house, or maybe looking for something to wear. *In such a well-decorated house, I'm sure you'll find some fabric that suits your style. It would be nice to finally cover our naked bodies*—I thought, looking for something as well.

The decoration followed a western style, so I knew I had to look through closets and drawers. Angelica went on in her pursuit on the other side of the wall and I decided to look through the furniture. Nothing... All closets and drawers were completely empty.

I went into a room that had a king-size bed, confirming that it was meant to be a bedroom. The closets were also empty and there weren't even sheets or blankets to improvise a toga. Nothing at all... It was as if someone was conspiring against us, so that we would keep our Adam and Eve costumes.

The bed was made of wood boards and, on top of it, there was a mattress covered with a silky fabric, and two classic pillows

made of synthetic rubber. There was another door in the room, and I saw Angelica suddenly coming in.

“Man! There’s only one bedroom with a double bed!”

“I’m glad you’re happy to see me, too. No need to throw a party, though,” I said ironically, after confirming that I wasn’t among her priorities.

None of us needed to be a brain surgeon in order to understand that nobody lived in that house. Angelica had searched all rooms and knew there was only one bedroom, which we’d have to share.

“So, it looks like nobody lives here...”

“Do you really think this house is completely empty and was put together specially for us?” I asked, flabbergasted.

Angelica turned her back to me, hiding her breasts and pubic area, but exposing other important physical attributes.

“Did you see the signs? I’ve started to suspect that’s the case, exactly.”

I hadn’t seen any signs, but maybe it had been my oversight, because I was too distracted looking for other things.

“Look at the walls. There are some drawings leading to the bedroom.”

“Say it, Angelica... What’s on your mind?”

She hesitated for a second before trying to express her thoughts in a confused, disorganized way, as if she herself were unsure of what she was saying, as if it were all a figment of her arbitrary female intuition.

“You know... This house... We’re both naked... There is only

one path leading us here and nobody else around. Where are the owners? And, most importantly, where are we? These signs on the walls are everywhere...”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I’m not trying to say anything; it’s just a feeling. Maybe I’m wrong,” she shook her head.

Those half-formed sentences brought to mind the picture of a white canvas with a few fragmented brush strokes here and there, which didn’t allow me to see the complete picture.

I tried to go out the other door, the one in front of Angelica, but it happened again: that invisible force didn’t allow me to go any further.

This time, Angelica witnessed what was happening and panic set in her blue-greenish eyes. She went around the bed and tried to walk out of the same door, but had no issues doing so. She sighed in relief after being terrified at the idea of being stuck in that room with me forever. Then she tried to leave the bedroom through the door I had used, and this time she was the one affected by the repulsive force. Actually, it was as if someone had designed a confined area: I couldn’t go to Angelica’s side of the house and vice-versa. Still, I couldn’t understand the reason behind all that.

“Why can’t I go out? I can’t see anything in front of me that wouldn’t let me out!” Angelica yelled in fear.

I had a theory: it was some kind of force field, a technology we didn’t know about, one of those things we see in sci-fi movies.

But, what is creating this force field? Is it magnetic force? No... We're not made of ferromagnetic material, so it wouldn't have any effect on us—I thought, trying to make the most of my knowledge in physics. I couldn't come up with explanations as a theory physicist could, because I had only seen the basics in college. My intuition, combined with my wild imagination, was telling me that it could be a gravitational field. Who could have designed this technology, though? Could this be a top-secret military experiment? Or maybe a huge corporation is behind it... Then, again, it could be an alien nation! I was deeply immersed in my fantasies, trying to find an explanation, but it was only a theory so far.

Angelica was a successful physician working in one of the most reputable hospitals in Florence. I usually enjoyed talking to her because she had incredible people skills. She was eloquent and knew how to carry on a conversation with a variety of arguments. She could improvise and portray herself as a politician, educator, business executive, or athlete, even though she was none of that. She followed her intuition but, at the same time, she was pragmatic. In sum: we agreed on many things because she would listen to me and, above all, I loved listening to her. We were great friends, even though now I was trying to imagine how our lives would have been in an alternate reality, as I let myself be carried by fantasies down a forbidden road.

I stopped to reflect on that day. I was only kidding myself, thinking I was living a nightmare, or that it had all been my

imagination: the UFO, those rays, that strange place... Angelica and I, together... All those hours I spent inspecting every inch of that mysterious environment. It had been a day full of doubts and unanswered questions. However, the night soon came and darkness enveloped me once again. I was suddenly in a state of deep sleep.

The Second Day...

That feeling... Where am I? What am I doing? Is this a dream? My mind is empty, I can't remember anything... Something hit meeeeeeee...

I quickly opened my eyes. I was drenched in sweat, as if it had been a muggy summer night. Then I quickly realized I wasn't in my homeland, Reggio Emilia. And all that sweat hadn't been caused by the humidity in the valley. It was actually the panic brought about by recent memories rushing into my mind once again.

That strange experience, when I was half asleep and half awake, was an kind of awareness I could not explain. It was as if my thoughts were out of focus and then started to take shape as my mind made great effort to constantly rearrange them, like the lens of an old analogic camera trying to focus on a moving object.

My vision started going back to normal and I became aware of my surroundings. This time I felt a warm, fuzzy feeling, something smooth to the touch placed right in front of me. I was barely waking up when I realized that Angelica and I were in an intimate, intriguing embrace—which was completely

unintended.

Once again, I was the first one to wake up, and maybe I woke up more quickly due to my physical reaction to something I could not explain. I was hugging Angelica the same way my daughter hugs her Winnie the Pooh; the thing is that Angelica is no teddy bear, and teddy bears don't have that disturbingly arousing feminine fragrance. As soon as I regained control of my muscles, my ethics forced me to break away from that pleasing contact and my sudden movements ended up waking her. Beautiful Angelica blushed when she realized what was going on.

I couldn't avoid any remarks she wished to make, so I tried to organize my thoughts and exorcise my fears.

"This is the second time we fall asleep suddenly," I started out the conversation. "I just can't understand the purpose of it. I'm not trying to force a situation, and it's too early to be sure, but those theories about aliens... Those abduction cases that are so talked about... Who put us in bed while we were both unconscious?"

I felt a shiver going down my spine at the thought of someone making our bodies do something involuntarily at night.

"You're letting yourself be carried away by your imagination. It could have been a simple technology created by twenty-first century *Homo sapiens*. How about a colorless, odorless sleeping gas?"

"The thing is that you didn't witness your dematerialization with your own eyes. You evaporated a few feet away from me

when you were struck by that ray. And what was that strange aircraft? And what is this place? Did you take a look at the lake outside?”

“I did. So what?”

“There are no villages along the lake... I’ve never seen a more beautiful place completely void of buildings and human life. Not a single sign of civilization.”

Angelica didn’t want to admit it. Even though she was an open-minded woman, she refused to talk about aliens and abductions.

“You’re scaring me now... Please, just let me be. I have to find something to wear, ‘cause I’m tired of walking around like this.”

She went to her private area, the one only she had access to. I did exactly the same and went to my side of the house. I needed to find answers, and I needed to find them fast.

“I’ll look over here,” I told Angelica. “I want to leave this house and find out where we are.”

As I looked for something to wear, even though I had already searched the house the day before, I didn’t see anything else worth a second look besides those strange devices. *I’ll worry about these gadgets later... I need to find higher ground to get a better view of this area, to try to understand where we are.*

Outside the house, it was about sixty-eight, seventy degrees. Judging by the position of the sun, it was a day in May or June, about eight in the morning. I couldn’t tell the exact time because I had lost my watch and my smartphone. A nice breeze was coming from the lake and it felt good on my skin, even the humidity in

the air seemed ideal. I was surprised to find it all so comforting about that environment. The vegetation was certainly familiar. I recognized the trees and plants, even though I couldn't name most of them.

I tried to find out where the house was in relation to what I had already seen in that environment. I was standing next to a hill with the oak grove to one side, adjacent to the lake. *I wonder what is on the other side of the house.*

I crossed the orchid garden arranged in small, colorful patterns, and went up a small hill after walking through a patch of grass. Less than a quarter mile away, I arrived at the top of the hill and could enjoy a panoramic view. On the other side of the hill, there was a large meadow, like that of the first hill, with a few trees here and there and sprinkled with small oak groves, like the one I had seen. I also identified some tamarack, chestnut trees, and other fruit trees.

Despite the seemingly anthropic landscape, as far as the eye could see, I didn't find any man-made structures: no buildings, roads, or ancient ruins. Nothing at all. It was weird how that house seemed to have been built in the middle of nowhere, in a completely secluded place. I was sure we weren't in Veneto or Lombardy, two of the most populated areas in Italy, crowded with rural dwellings all over the place. There was no sign of the typical medieval villages Italians are so proud of.

Pay attention to the details—I obsessively kept repeating to myself. *Where could you be? Maybe it's a less inhabited corner of*

the world. I have this weird, disturbing feeling... I couldn't put my finger on it, but it was different from how I felt when I first woke up at the shore—then, again, I had probably been too distracted the day before. It was... absolute silence. I let it go for the time being, because maybe I could be wrong.

It seemed like a good idea to walk along the lake and do some exploring until I could reach the mountains. Maybe I wouldn't find anything, but I could climb up and see more of the area. However, I soon realized my predicament. *I'm naked—no clothes, no shoes... Maybe I'd have to walk tens of miles, and that goes without saying that I'd need to carry food and water. How could I survive such a trip?* No, that wasn't the right time to start a new adventure. *I better go back to the house. If there's logic behind it all and we're here for a special reason, I'll find out sooner or later.*

I sat in the terrace, on a comfortable wicker recliner with soft pillows. I watched as the sun came up and let my thoughts run free like bloodhounds tracking something down. *I can't believe they brought us here to die of hunger and thirst.* That thought went on and on in my mind.

I got up from the chair and paced the terrace next to the pool, like a fly going in circles within a room. I knew I'd be able to find clues somewhere about who built that house, whoever was there before us, or even who had kidnapped us.

In the meantime, I would have done anything to get my hands on some cappuccino, maybe a nice piece of *erbazzone*. My

stomach kept reminding me of my basic human urges. It had been at least thirteen hours since we had arrived at that place, and there would soon be some serious consequences. Besides, there was the possibility that we'd have to live with our current birthday suits.

At that moment, I had already given up the idea of wandering far away from the house, so there was no other alternative but to look inside once again. *Maybe I went past a pantry without noticing, maybe there's some coffee... I can already feel that annoying headache setting in due to lack of caffeine.* I ended up confirming that there was nothing to eat in the kitchen.

I was happy to find a large bathroom in a corner of the house, though. It was one of those functional, comfortable full bathrooms with a bathtub and shower stall. *Dammit, toothbrush and toothpaste are nowhere to be found... There isn't even any toilet paper! Well, at least I can try to have some privacy with these opaque walls.*

I reflected on what Angelica had said, about those symbols she had seen on the walls leading to the bedroom, but all walls around the perimeter were just huge see-through glass. I touched one of them to check the nature of that luminescent material that allowed the ideal amount of light in. When I made contact with the wall, something unexpected took place: the glass started to show stylized animations that consisted of lighten-up paths and several arrows that were easy to understand right away. *But these are not mere instructions...*

They were indications similar to those we see in the windshield of our vehicles thanks to something we call CarOS—an operating system for automobiles. Blue lines were predominant and led to the bedroom, while the green lines led to another area of the house.

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