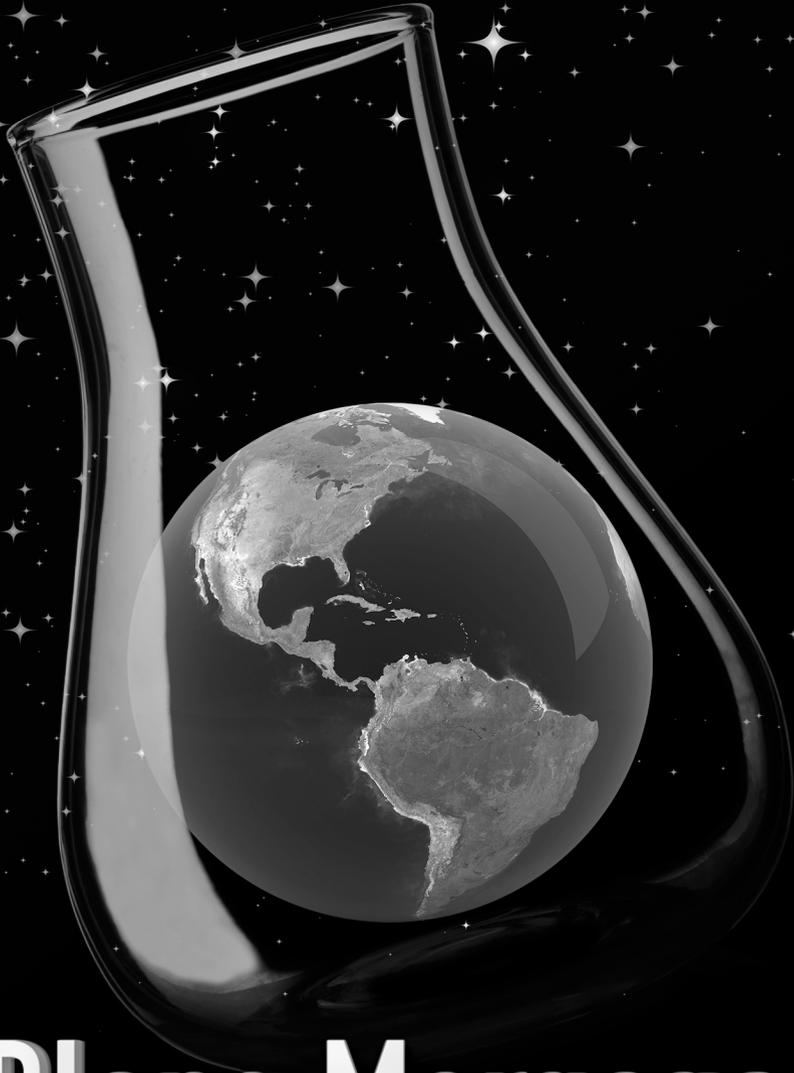


PROJECT EARTH

EXPOSING THE TRUTH



Blane Morgage

CHAPTER ONE

Josh



My name is Josh Hamilton and my life was nothing out of the ordinary. That is, until I met up with Alan and Mike and had NASA officials following me. But before that, I can assure you, my life was just ordinary.

What people first notice about me is my brown, medium-length hair. My naturally loose curls are unruly and stubborn.

“Your curls are what every woman desires,” my mother always said.

Maybe someday someone will desire mine. It would probably help if I could muster up enough courage to ask anyone out, I suppose.

Most of my time is spent immersed in sci-fi books or surfing the net trying to keep up with the newest astronomical research. Some may consider me socially awkward, and that may stand true, but I’m comfortable with who I am.

A few years ago, I was accepted into the university of my dreams in Colorado to study science and astronomy. I recall the feelings of excitement and fear battling within me when I first stepped foot on its overwhelmingly huge campus.

So many different styles of buildings are scattered throughout the property. Some of the architecture reminds me of medieval times with large stone walls and tall entry doors. The

centerpiece is a tall tower cresting above all the other structures. Its cone-shaped top points high into the sky. At night, it glows a majestic shade of gold.

Not only is the landscape nicely manicured with flower gardens, but the Rocky Mountains lie on the horizon creating this incredibly picturesque scene. Creeks slither through the courtyards connecting several ponds filled with large, gold koi fish. Just off campus, my favorite spot is the observatory which allows us to see deep into the cosmos. I would live there forever if they allowed me.

Instead, I reside in a small dorm room on campus. It's about half the size of my bedroom at home with a bed lining one wall, a window at the end overlooking one of the many courtyards, and my work desk adjacent to the bed. Old-school posters cover the walls to remind me of home.

University life has been as typical as I would have imagined. Just like I've seen on TV and in movies, people walk aimlessly in every direction in the courtyard. Some sit and lean against trees with their heads immersed in laptops, tablets, books, or phones.

It's just a couple of months into the fall semester of my junior year and nothing in my appearance changed since I arrived other than I'm a bit taller and put on a few extra pounds. Not enough to change what people would label as skinny, but enough to make up for my additional height.

Through the years, I've managed to make a few friends. My best friend Steve started at the university a year after me. He's a slightly heavyset guy and fits the stereotypical description of a nerd. We routinely meet on Tuesday and Thursday nights to research and talk science.

Though we never get invited to any parties on campus, we attempt to host our own, but only a couple in our inner circle normally show up. I guess no one appreciates the 70's disco light ball and banners we hang. We still have fun, but the lack of attendance always reverts us back to playing games.

During one such failed party attempt, Steve and I and the two other unfortunate souls that showed up, Bill and Jack, resort to a game of Trivial Pursuit. It seems to be our go-to game. We keep time on each game to make it more interesting. Our all-time record is 16 minutes 27 seconds. Beating that will be tough, but winning against these brains is considered a feat itself.

Tonight's game is looking promising. I'm narrowing in on the win. With a lucky roll, I land on the last category I need to complete my pie.

The evil 'Entertainment' category.

If I can just get that piece, all I need to do to claim my victory is make it back to the center and answer the question chosen by my opponents. Although Bill's pie is already filled, he continually struggles to finish us off.

Steve reads me my question. "Name the female music icon that created and sang the song 'Like a Virgin.'"

"Oh, come on. Can you make it any easier?" Bill blurts out.

I should know this one, right?

"Ummm . . . Britney Spears," I guess, creating a room full of laughter.

"Wrong decade, man," Jack says.

"Madonna, Josh. Really, why are you so bad at that category?" Steve asks.

"Whatever. Keep moving on," I say.

Bill lands himself in the center once again after my failed turn.

"Raise your hands if you think we should choose 'Literature' for his final question," Steve proposes.

Jack and I both quickly agree with a raised hand.

“Alright, Bill, for all the marbles ... here we go. What famous book turned movie did Arthur C. Clarke write in 1968 with a computer named HAL 9000?”

Bill stands up. “Good game, gentlemen. My final answer is *2001: A Space Odyssey*,” he answers, following up with a bow.

“Great, Bill wins again. That was a good book though. The technology was way before its time,” Steve says.

“Why do you get all the easy ones?” I ask.

“Luck, my friend. Pure luck,” Bill replies.

“Time?” Steve asks.

“18 minutes, 38 seconds,” Jack offers.

“Almost beat the record. Maybe next time,” Steve says.

“Speaking of technology way before time, you guys know that sometime in October of 2018, the James Webb telescope will be launched into space. This thing is gonna put the Hubble telescope to shame,” I claim.

“We know. We’ll have to throw a big party for that one,” Steve adds.

“Yeah, well being just short of a year away, you should have enough time to plan for it. You think maybe we could invite some girls to that one?” Bill asks.

“Oh, yeah. I’m sure we could get the whole cheerleading squad to clear their schedules for that,” Steve says.

“Since we’re on the subject of parties, I’m done with this one,” Bill says.

The other two agree.

“Oh, come on guys. One more game. It’s only 9:15 on a Friday night for crying out loud,” I plead.

“Sorry, man. I had a long week and I need to get up early tomorrow,” Bill says.

“Yeah, enough for me too,” Steve says.

“Fine, don’t let the doorknob hit you where the good Lord split you on the way out,” I say.

“Oh, that’s original,” Steve says, leading the way out.

They all slide out. After tidying up, I stream some of my favorite music, crank it up, and lay back on my bed falling into a deep meditation. Only a few minutes pass then ...

Knock, knock...

“Anyone home?” I hear. The door swings fully open.

“Yea, uh ... help yourself in,” I respond quickly, popping up from my comfortable horizontal position.

A slightly out of shape guy, glasses on partly crooked, shirt half tucked in, and hair going every which way walks in.

I’ve seen this guy before.

“Hey man, your door was open,” he says.

“Oh, apparently, my friends were born in a barn.”

“I was just walking by and heard White Clover playing. Didn’t think anyone around here was into that kind of music,” he says. His eyes scan my room. “Cool Floyd poster, man.”

“Thanks.”

“I’m Alan,” he says, extending his hand out.

I jump to my feet and shake his hand. “Hi, I’m Josh. Yeah, I’ve seen you around.”

“I jam to this type of music all the time on my guitar,” he claims.

“I love playing guitar,” I reply.

“Oh yeah, you play?” he asks.

“A little. I took some guitar lessons when I was a teenager, but I haven’t picked one up in a while.”

“I wouldn’t mind having someone to jam with. There’s a pawn shop close to the Walmart just a few miles from here that always has screaming deals on used axes. Go grab you one and we’ll tear it up.”

This guy seems alright. Although he reeks of booze right now, I can only hope he’s straight up. Would be nice to have a change of pace.

“I’ll check it out. I’d really like to get back into it. Might be a bit rusty though.”

“We’ll get you oiled up in no time.”

“Cool. I’ll go check it out tomorrow.”

“Awesome. Nice to finally meet someone who likes good music. If you get yourself a 6-stringer, I’m just down the hall in room 318,” he says, walking out.

“Nice to meet you,” I blurt out as he disappears. “Don’t worry, I’ll get the door,” I add under my breath.

I feel bad for doing it, but I call my dad right away and ask if he’d transfer fifty dollars into my spending account. He didn’t put up much of a fight after I lied through my teeth and told him it was needed for supplies for a lab project. If I told him the truth, I’d have to hear the old “If it’s not for the greater good, you don’t need it” speech.

I cruise over to the pawnshop the next day. Lo and behold, there it lies. A nice, worn out, scratched up Yamaha acoustic for a price within my budget. Sold!

Sorry, Dad!

The weekend passes. On Monday afternoon, I decide I’d drop the news to my new friend Alan. I stop and grab my less than perfect guitar and make my way to his room. I feel a bit nervous approaching his door. Is this too soon? I don’t want him to think I’m too desperate for someone to hang out with.

Alright, push through this. He invited you.

Knock, knock . . .

Please don't answer...Please don't answer...

The door opens just enough for Alan to stick his head out. Eyes squinted and hair in even worse shambles than the other night. "Yeah, who is it?" he asks, attempting to focus in on me.

"Hey, Alan. It's Josh from the other night."

Silence. His mouth hangs open and the confused look on his face leads me to believe his memory is as short as my attention span.

I continue. "Remember, you stopped by my place. You heard my music and we ..."

"Sorry bro, I think you have the wrong room," he says before slamming the door.

Wow, this guy is a train wreck!

I turn to walk away and the door swings back open.

"Haha, I'm just messing with you, man. C'mon in. Nice . . . guitar??"

"Oh, good one. Yeah, it's not what I would consider top of the line by any means."

"Ah, it'll do. We'll throw some new strings on there and make it rock out."

His room is what my mother would consider a disaster. There are clothes laying all over the floor. Pictures are leaning up against the wall, where I would assume he has intended to maybe hang them one day. An erector set sits in one corner. *Who has an erector set at his age?* Then there's this beautiful guitar sitting in its holder. It just didn't fit in.

He rifles through the mess in his dresser and pulls out a bag of new guitar strings.

"I really don't have the money for those," I sheepishly admit.

"No worries, Josh. You come here and jam with me once a week and we'll call it even. Thursday nights are best for me."

Steve and I normally hang out on Thursday nights, but this would be way more fun.

“Cool, man. That’ll work for me too. Thanks.”

As he finishes off connecting the last string, we hear a single knock on the door before it swings open.

The guy standing in the doorway is enormous. Tall, body shaped like a professional athlete, and a face chiseled out of stone. He could be making some serious bank modeling for a fancy shirt company, like Polo or Boss. I’ve seen him in my chemistry class. I mean, how can you not notice a guy this big?

“Big Al, what’s up man? I need to get that socket set back I lent you before my old man starts riding my ass,” he says.

“Sorry, Mike. Let me find it,” Alan replies, fumbling through his pile of clothes on the floor. “Here it is.” He pulls out a black plastic case.

“We still on for Thursday night?” Mike asks.

“Oh, the party at The Pit. I already forgot. Damn it, man. I just promised my new friend here that we could jam the guitar this Thursday.”

“C’mon, man. How many times have I played wingman for you? You owe me.”

“It’s cool, Alan. I have other things I can do that night,” I chime in.

“No, screw that. You can join us. We have Mr. Mike here to chauffeur us around.”

“No, I’d probably just be a burden,” I say, trying to talk my way out of this.

“No burden. You’re in,” Alan demands.

“Who is this guy?” Mike asks.

“This is my neighbor, Josh. We share the same appetite for great music, which this world is in critical need of.”

“If you want to call what you listen to great music, that’s your problem. Good ole fashion rock and roll for me. I guess you’ll be hanging with the cool kids come Thursday, John,” Mike says.

“It’s actually Josh,” I correct him.

“If you say so. Get some rest between now and then. You’ll need it hanging out with this one,” he says, pointing at Al. Then he wraps his humungous hand around mine as we shake. “Nice to meet you. I’ll pick you girls up at 7 Thursday night. Be ready!”

“Wow,” I say after he walks out. “That guy is big. I would guess he plays football?”

“Not anymore. He was a quarterback in high school. Pretty good too, I heard. He had scouts from all over the country checking him out ever since his freshman year. But as most stories go with guys like him, the body just wasn’t up for it.”

“That sucks. He definitely has the build for it. What happened?”

“His senior year, one of the last few games of the season, he took a blind shot from behind. The last thing he remembered from it was waking up in a hospital bed the following day. Broke some ribs, punctured a lung, and slightly severed an artery in his chest. It almost killed him.”

“I suppose that would probably be enough reason to quit the sport.”

“No doubt. The bad part is that he had already been interviewed by some of the elite colleges for full scholarships. But that was all it took for him to decide that maybe life was a bit more fragile than he thought, so he decided to go a different path. And here he landed.”

“He mentioned that he’ll pick us up. I assume he lives off campus?”

“Yeah, he lives with his dad and sister not far from here. Hometown boy,” he says, holding my guitar up. “There it is, all sewed up. Let’s see what she sounds like.”

He starts plucking at the strings. “Hey, it doesn’t sound half bad ... for an old junker,” he adds.

We play for an hour or so and he helps me brush up on some of the chords. One could definitely disprove the “it’s just like riding a bike” theory after hearing me play.

The next few days slip by. Before I know it, Thursday arrives. Making my way through the maze of people in the chemistry building, I see Mike approaching.

“Hey, Jim, you ready for tonight?” he asks quickly without slowing his pace.

“Yeah, can’t wait. And it’s....”

Josh.

He’s well out of earshot by this point, so why bother correcting him? I’m just feeling lucky that he recognized me and acknowledged the fact that he knew me. I quickly look around to see if anyone witnessed this exchange with the hopes my coolness status is raised. But no such luck.

Shucks!