

FADE TO GOLD

Also by Stefon Mears

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FADE TO GOLD

Stefon Mears

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For Melissa, as always

*Many thanks to
Bill, Lori, Rob and Wendy
for catching what needed to be caught.*

Part One

Arrival

1

A-Day. Nine-Eighteen A.M. Pacific Daylight Time

The trucker blared his tuba of a horn again, and this time Charlie Evans gave the jerk a one-finger salute over his right shoulder.

Charlie knew his compact Garfield Caravel sedan wasn't exactly the fastest car on the road. In fact, it wasn't the latest and greatest anything. Not even when it was new, which was three owners and twelve years ago. Not to mention some two hundred twenty thousand miles.

The Caravel smelled like old French fries with a hint of cough syrup, the latter a side effect of Charlie's record two-month cold last year. The air conditioner would have been fine, if Charlie could afford to get it recharged so that it blew actual cold air instead of recycling the August morning wind, which was warm enough at this early hour to warn of a scorcher by the afternoon. And the car's exterior was an armada of parking lot dents and dings on a sea of hazard-cone orange that Charlie's most recent ex-girlfriend, Lucy, had dubbed a violation of the Geneva Convention.

But the smart cruise control worked just fine, and it would keep Charlie moving up One-Oh-One through the heart of Silicon Valley at a generous eight miles per hour above the speed limit. Or at least as close to that speed as the traffic allowed in lane three.

If that wasn't fast enough for the trucker, the jerk was more than welcome to go around.

And Charlie had set his cruise control and kept one ear open for the instructions from his GPS so he wouldn't have to waste precious firing synapses on his speed or directions or obnoxious truck drivers. Charlie wanted all his faculties focused on the reason he was on the road right now, and not tucked away in his San Jose apartment — his upcoming interview with Frenzy, “the ultimate search utility for all your devices.”

After two years of post-college freelancing scramble — ten years freelancing total if you counted high school work — Charlie wanted, *needed*, to find out what it was like to have vacation time. Sick leave. A 401K.

So Charlie had a red folder full of ideas on the faded tan cloth of the front passenger seat, and he imagined the questions interviewers would ask, the answers he could give that would make him sound confident without veering into arrogant.

And most of all, not desperate, which was closer to the truth than he wanted to admit. Which was why it wasn't just the August heat making Charlie sweat into his nicest work-casual red polo shirt and tan cargo pants, and dampening his short, curly brown hair.

Frenzy was a company that everyone used, but many people loved to hate. They had plenty of market share for their main products — the search utility, of course, but also their streaming video and audio, and their social media tool — but a growing segment of their base was either trying to develop alternative tools or actively supporting anyone else's tools out of frustration with the company's public image.

Charlie had good ideas how to go about changing that public image.

No. Check that.

Charlie had *great* ideas. In that folder next to him sat a mock-up for a potential online campaign to improve Frenzy's image with checkpoints at two weeks, two months, six months and a year. Not a complete reinvention, of course, but a one-eighty on their current direction and progress toward making them seem the kind of company

people would *want* to see succeed. The kind they'd trust again.

Charlie knew what size team he'd need, what sort of budget it would take to do it right. He had spent more time and effort on preparing for this interview than he had on anything else in the last six weeks.

Which was part of the reason Lucy was an ex-girlfriend. She could handle dating the professional social media wizard known to the world as "Evansessence." She seemed to rather enjoy it at first, even if Charlie only barely eked out a subsistence living here in one of the most expensive regions of the United States. Probably didn't hurt that he overhauled and idiot-proofed her cosmetics website.

But a professional social media wizard who was spending less and less time with her?

Charlie couldn't really blame her for leaving. Though he tried. At least, in the privacy of his own head. Over beers with his friends he admitted the truth. Charlie Evans spent too much time on the computer trying to earn a living, and not enough time actually living.

When the trucker leaned on his horn long enough to pull Charlie out of his thoughts, Charlie realized he was being passed on both sides. That wasn't right.

Worse, his speedometer read forty miles per hour and dropping.

Charlie stepped on the accelerator. Nothing happened, except that cold fear washed down his body, tightened his bladder. And his sweat kicked up a notch.

The trucker went around now, that tuba horn of his still holding its note while the trucker screamed obscenities and returned Charlie's salute.

Thirty miles per hour now.

But the engine was on. The light on the push-button ignition was green. The oil gauge read in the safe range. The digital readouts on the GPS were all...

All at once, every idiot light on Charlie's dashboard started flashing. The GPS went black.

Charlie gritted his teeth and flipped on the turn signal with his

left hand and steered right with his right.

Or rather, he tried to.

The power steering was dead. All the idiot lights kept flashing. Lots more horns and drivers screaming at Charlie. Cars in the right hand lane swerving as he yanked the wheel with both hands now, desperate to get off the freeway before...

The Caravel died, there in the slow lane of highway One-Oh-One. Momentum kept it rolling off the freeway, but the dashboard was dead, the accelerator useless.

But there wasn't a lot of room on the shoulder. Ten more feet of asphalt. Two feet of dirt. Then a tan cinder block soundproofing wall that loomed very solid.

Charlie slammed down the brake pedal. Squeezed his eyes closed. The power brakes were dead too.

Impact.

Slamming into the wall jarred Charlie's gritted teeth. His airbag failed to deploy. He jerked forward against the seatbelt.

Then slumped back against his seat. Very much alive. Uninjured apart from a kink in his neck and a sore jaw, thanks to the fact that the car hadn't had much speed left when it hit the wall.

Charlie sighed once, hard, then once more, slowly. He opened his eyes. His folder was on the car floor, his papers scattered. Some of them would probably be greasy, and the way his luck was running, that would include his résumé.

Cars whizzed past on the freeway behind him, mockingly fast and operational.

Charlie forced another slow, deep breath. He unplugged his phone, which was no longer charging there on the dashboard anyway. In less than a minute with his flicking finger he accomplished three important things.

First, he checked the local social media ride-sharing apps. No one could get a car to him in less than a half hour. No luck there. Second, he checked the prices of the local taxi services — all of them were urgency-sensitive these days, which meant they cost too much

for him. So, third, he hit the distress button on the app for his roadside assistance service, which submitted his GPS coordinates and got him in the queue for a tow.

Estimated response time: forty minutes.

Charlie dropped his head forward and thumped it on the wide center of his steering wheel with its stupid, un-deployed airbag.

Which, when he thought about it, was probably a small blessing in disguise. He wasn't going fast enough to need it, and now he didn't have to pay to repack it.

Charlie sighed again and looked at his phone. He had six friends who all worked within range to pick him up and get him to that interview on time. But the operative word there was "worked." His friends were coders and tech writers. They couldn't just take off whenever they wanted to.

Well, maybe Jimbo could. He was the star programmer at a small company that made games for mobile devices. If Jimbo wanted to get away for half an hour, they would probably ask if a full hour would help.

Charlie crossed his fingers and spun through his contacts until Jimbo's round, smiling brown face with its round, smiling brown eyes looked back at him. Charlie fired off a text message: "Need a lift. 911. Will buy beer tonight."

Seconds later his phone rang.

"Jimbo, you're a lifesaver. I'm at—"

"Are you watching the news?"

"No, man, I've got that—"

"Turn on the news. Pronto."

"I can't. I need—"

"Turn. On. The. News."

"Fuck the news! I have to get to this interview."

"Fuck your interview. Aliens have landed in New York!"



2

A-Day. Twelve-Twenty P.M. Eastern Daylight Time

It was true that Brice DePaul's favorite place to be was at home with his family. He planned to retire this year so he could spend more time with Inga and the kids in their home in the fashionable Upper East Side.

But right now Brice was in his second favorite place. The bullpen. Well, that was what he called it, and his staff picked up on the nickname. To the occasional tour group who wandered through it probably looked like any other conference room in the GagTV offices, which were much more corporate than their channel's content would suggest. Dull gray table twice as long as it needed to be, black leather executive chairs that rolled and spun, each of which had an adjustable height lever and that rocking option that everyone on the staff used when thinking. Three forty-inch television monitors along the short wall behind him for quick media reference when needed.

But Brice called this conference room the bullpen because here the bullshit flowed freely. Most of it work-related. Some of it promoting the sort of camaraderie that Brice loved. And listening to comedians give each other guff was one of the joys of his day.

The morning meetings had a coffee urn, a deli tray, and a basket of muffins. But the dominant scents were the coffee and especially the fresh bagels and lox. Those were the smells of creativity. Brice always imagined that George Carlin's office had smelled like Brice's morning meetings. If Brice could leave even half of that kind of comedic legacy behind when he was gone, he would be proud of his life.

But Brice knew the truth about his legacy. He would be remembered more for the news he covered on his "comedy news" show, *Weeknightly with Brice DePaul*, than for the humor he injected.

He couldn't even be sad about that anymore, though he spent years — and thousands of dollars — crying and raging about it to a therapist. He was a comedian trying to spin the news funny, not a journalist who wedged in some jokes.

But the therapist had been worth the money. She helped Brice see the sad fact that his show was necessary. That he was saying the things that needed to be said. Things the "journalists" had forgotten how to say, or rather forgotten that they needed to say them.

That he did it with humor only meant that people paid more attention when he was talking.

Still, as much as Brice loved being right where he was and doing just what he did, he was tired. Twenty years of this was too much. He was closer to sixty than he was to fifty these days. His once blue-black hair needed weekly infusions of dye to hold back the flat gray tide. And despite daily trips to the gym, he had developed a noticeable paunch.

Yet when Brice looked around the table at his staff, he always smiled. Here were gathered a dozen of the sharpest wits his budget could buy. Some of them better comedians than he would ever be, and he joyed in the fact that he had found them, nourished their careers.

Brice had a staff of twelve, including five women and a two-thirds majority of minorities, and they all worked and played together well in the most relaxed environment he could give them. The guys wore jeans, with striped shirts or flannel or tee shirts when they felt like it. Like Brice himself, who was wearing a Humor Inc. tee shirt and a

Mets cap. Some of the women dressed that way too, but on hot days like this one they opted for light dresses.

They laughed together. They called him “B.” And they listened when he was talking. He would miss each and every one of them when the time came to retire.

“All right, folks,” he said, standing up and calling the meeting to order over rehashes of last night’s episode of that new Star Wars television show. “I know we’re gearing up for the primaries and I know the first debates are coming up, but just once this week — just once, I’m begging you — give me something to lead with that doesn’t have to do with politics. Go.”

Jenna, as usual, was the first to speak up. She was a third-year writer out of Georgia State, who could mix reds and browns in her dresses well enough to bring out the highlights in her dark skin tone. That she was attractive and spoke with a strong sense of self-confidence only meant that Brice put her in front of the camera as often as he could find a reason.

“There’s a guy in Chicago beating up muggers in an honest-to-God Robin the Boy Wonder costume. Best part?” Jenna held up her hands in a wait-for-it gesture. “He’s—”

The bullpen door swung open and slammed into its doorstop. One of the interns — Suzi, the tiny blonde from Georgetown, who was more interested in real journalism than comedy which made Brice wonder what she was doing *here* — came running in, her face a mask of fear, lips quivering. Before Brice could even ask what was wrong she turned on the center monitor.

The channel was the last one they’d been watching — Conservative Network News, “All the truth you can handle” — and the screen was split. In the upper right corner it showed a silvery gray flying saucer floating down gently out of the sky, spinning as it came. But most of the screen claimed to show the live feed, which had the saucer, already landed in Midtown Manhattan in front of the Radio City Music Hall on three long, telescoping legs of the same silver-gray metal.

Where was the bubble dome though? Weren’t flying saucers all

supposed to have a bubble dome on top? Or was the lack of one supposed to persuade viewers that this was real, and not some kind of network stunt? Probably for someone's presidential candidacy.

Across the bottom of the screen, as always, scrolled the latest "headlines," mostly tidbits about gun control, gaffes by liberal politicians, and of course, mentioning that aliens had landed and where was the Air Force?

"Actually," said Brice over the old stuffed suit's narration about hoaxes and the liberal agenda, "that's a good question. If that's supposed to be a real spaceship, how did it land in Manhattan without triggering the air defense systems we've all paid so much money for?"

Silence.

When Brice was a child, he used to watch old Warner Brothers cartoons every afternoon after school. And in the silence following that question he found himself remembering one where Daffy Duck did an amazing dance routine onstage, then presented himself to the audience for his applause. All that could be heard was the sound of chirping crickets.

Brice looked around at the faces of his expert staff, and as one they stared back at him, brows furrowed and some looking for answers in the notes they had not yet written. He could almost hear those chirping crickets.

It wasn't the first time Brice had compared himself to Daffy Duck.

"—the Chinese?" continued the Conservative Network News voice over, "And if so, what level of extant threat dose it pose? And when is the President going to respond?"

Brice's heart was pounding like it hadn't since the last time the President had been on his show. Real or hoax, this aliens thing was the biggest piece he'd seen in some time. Maybe the last big news item of his career.

He could almost taste the jokes bubbling in the back of his mind.

Brice muted the monitor. He stood, letting his chair roll back behind him. He pointed at the screen.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "I submit that we have found

our lead for tonight. And that means we need not only the best, the absolute juiciest sound bites we can cull from the cable news networks for their sheer comedic value — and I assure you, these guys are already on the air giving us gold that I pray some of the interns have captured so it doesn't slip past us and into the waiting hands of the late night talk show hosts, who will be all over this, mark my words — not only do we need to tear through this story like we've never been through one before, we need something even more important.”

Brice shook his head, lips tight together like they didn't want to let his next words out. He punched his own hand to make them part.

“We need to know what the hell is actually going on out there. And why.” Brice leaned forward on the smooth, gray table. It felt cold under his flushing skin. “So I'm going to have to ask you guys to do something I hate to ask of you.” He gave a heavy sigh. “I'm going to have to ask some of you to act like journalists. Make the important calls. Follow the important leads. Find out whatever you can find out. There may be more humor in the truth here than we'll ever find in the broadcasts of another network.”

“Which team are you heading?” said Jenna.

“Assuming that's real, it's happening no more than four blocks from where I'm standing. So I'm taking a camera crew and going down there myself.”

Shock and surprise on every face at the table.

“That's right.” Brice straightened up and adjusted a tie he wasn't wearing. “Brice DePaul is going on-location.”



3

Twelve-Thirty-One P.M. Eastern Daylight Time

No one would have ever suspected that Laura Jefferson was riding in the back of this old wreck.

The rental Garfield Frigate sedan was the cheapest thing Laura had sat in since her first big hit movie, three blockbusters ago. Gray cloth seats instead of leather. Bench backseat where she could actually feel springs try to poke through the padding, instead of something more shaped and molded for the comfort of the passenger.

A single rear vent that did not do nearly enough to chip away at the humid New York heat, which was dampening her skin with what the magazines would no doubt call a “glow.” As though sweat were somehow beneath her pores now.

Worse, the vent brought in a wet, dead possum smell to mix with the lingering odor of chemical cleaners and cigarette smoke. Might have put Laura off her hunger, except that she hadn’t had anything to eat since that bland protein shake following her morning workout hours ago. Raspberry. Laura scoffed. That shake tasted less like raspberry than banana candy tasted like actual bananas.

She wanted a lamb curry wrap from Ranjit’s with a side of crisp sweet potato fries. And come hell or high water she was going to have

it. Ranjit's was a personal treat she only got to enjoy when she was in New York making the talk show rounds, and there weren't enough dead possums in the whole huge city to make her skip it.

And the smell was definitely dead possum. Laura grew up in Oakwood, Ohio, and she knew the difference between dead possum stink and dead rat stink, thank you very much. Possum had more of a tang, and rat, especially here in a big city, smelled scummier. Filthy, rather than dirty.

Laura would have to remember to mention that in her interview later. The interviewers always seemed to find those sorts of details charming. As though they were surprised to find out that there was a real person behind the twenty-two-year-old face, figure and long blond hair that the media kept describing as "magnificent," or "ideal," or worst of all "perfect."

Laura had never felt perfect a day in her life. Inside she still felt very much like the skinny preteen with the face full of pimples and the mouth full of braces, who couldn't get a boy to dance with her, much less go on a date with her.

The boys looked at her differently now. Steve, for instance, the driver provided by the studio who, from the way he fiddled with the air conditioner at this long red light, was probably wishing they were still in his limo instead of this old wreck. Whenever Steve looked at her he had that same hunger in his eyes that so many guys did. Like she was a lamb curry wrap herself.

At first Laura had found those looks exciting. That skinny preteen girl inside her crying out "The boys like me! I'm sexy!" Then they creped her out for a while, made her feel threatened. Now those gazes were just a fact of life. A certain percentage of the men she met couldn't come near her without experiencing intense lust. It wasn't personal. Probably didn't even have to do with sex. Not really. The way Laura looked at it, she was like a lottery prize to those guys. She just represented something that they thought was missing in their lives. Something they thought they wanted, but wouldn't know what to do with if they actually got.

And their odds were about the same.

Steve the driver was a little different. He had that way of trying to make everything he said sound charming, as though he thought he might have a shot. Enough confidence that Laura wondered if some other starlet had given him a tumble at some point.

She could imagine it. Steve had the kind of clean-cut features and soft hazel eyes that looked attractive and masculine without sliding into threatening. Laura could picture some bored and lonely starlet looking at him differently after a couple of days of riding in his limo. Maybe in a thunderstorm, when the starlet was shaking and chill from the rain and Steve lent her a coat that smelled like some rich after-shave...

Well, Steve could hope all he wanted, as long as he kept those hopes to himself. The last thing Laura needed right now was some random hook-up. Bad enough the interviewers would inevitably ask about her recent break up with Jesse.

Jesse Carter, action film star with blockbuster success rivaling Laura's own, and the bastard who...

Laura spliced that direction right out of her thoughts. This was lunchtime. Laura time. The one hour a day when she turned off her phone, and refused to even think about business, social media, or other responsibilities.

For Laura, film stardom amounted to a twenty-three-hour-a-day job. Even sleep was something she caught when she could, on planes and film sets or in interview green rooms. And it was interrupted more often than she liked to think about.

So her lunch hour was the one single hour of the day she took completely to herself. And she made certain her agents, manager, publicist — and more importantly their assistants — all knew this. One single solitary hour when she was sure to be free from commitment or obligation and they all needed to respect that.

Even family and friends only got to interrupt that hour when they were actually having lunch with her. And when Laura could arrange that, she met them with big smiles and bigger hugs.

Not today, alas. Today she would dine alone.

If that eternal red light ever changed.

Lunchtime privacy was why she asked Steve to drive this rent-a-wreck instead of his limo. It was why she wore a long, plain brown skirt with a bulky but lightweight tan top, cheap sunglasses, and all her hair tucked up under a Cleveland Indians baseball hat.

The perfect disguise. No one would look twice at her while she ate lunch in peace at Ranjit's Wraps on 58th.

Well, no one but the owner, who had figured out who she was on her second trip. On that day he waited until she finished her meal, then asked, in the most politely quiet and discreet way possible, if he could trouble her for an autographed photo for his five children. Laura regretted not having one on her, which was why even now she kept a handful in her oversized brown faux-leather disguise purse.

That day Laura mailed him six autographed photos with a big thank-you card. One personally inscribed picture for each of his three daughters and two sons, and one for Ranjit and his wife.

Since then Ranjit seemed to enjoy the espionage of pretending she was just another customer. He gave no sign that he knew who she was except that he gave her a little wink when he brought her her meal.

Laura restrained herself to tipping the cost of the meal, so as to thank him without embarrassing him.

But Laura was never going to get to Ranjit's Wraps at this rate. Worse, she couldn't see much beyond the huge SUV directly ahead of her.

"What's the deal with this light, Steve?" Laura tried to keep the exasperation out of her voice, but she knew that was a lost cause. Her lunch hour was ebbing away.

"It's not the light. Traffic's completely locked down. And it looks like police cordons are going up at the end of the next block." He turned to look at her, trying to infuse the hope in his eyes with humor and affected a conspiratory tone. "Word on the radio is aliens have landed."

He laughed, but Laura sighed.

“Of course,” she said, shaking her head. Then thought about the implications. “Man, the guilds are going to kill that guy’s budget. Working through lunch? And not securing the proper permits to keep this kind of traffic snarl from happening?”

“I don’t think it’s a shoot. I’d’ve heard something.” Steve craned his neck to see what he could see, but got distracted by an incoming text message.

“Well it has to be some kind of publicity stunt then. I mean, aliens? Landing in Manhattan? Aren’t they supposed to buzz the rural states?”

Laura was thinking of the occasional “abduction” story she had heard growing up in Ohio. They always seemed to take place around campouts or late night drives, but Laura had been on her share of campouts and late night drives and never seen so much as a moving light in the sky that wasn’t a shooting star.

Personally, she suspected the actual culprit in “abductions” was alcohol. Not aliens.

“Jake from over at the Rock says the police are acting serious enough. And he says news cameras are out there.” He looked over his shoulder again. The worried look this time. Protective. “I should get you back to the studio.”

News cameras? The only news cameras that showed up at a shoot were supposed to be there. And if the crowd over at the Rock thought this was legit...

Actual aliens? Not latex prosthetics over underpaid actors? A real spaceship?

How could Laura pass up the chance to see that?

Of course, there *were* the news crews to consider. Publicity was just what Laura wanted to avoid on her lunch break. Then again, she *did* have her disguise on. And with traffic gridlocked like this, she was never going to have time to sit and eat the way she wanted to anyway...

Steve was firing off text messages when she looked up.

“Steve, can I ask you a big favor?”

No teasing. No flirting. That wouldn't have been playing fair, and Laura never played games with the real important people in show business — the support staffs. So her tone was straightforward and honest. And she didn't assume he'd say yes. She waited until he replied.

“Don't ask me to try to take you into that mess. The studio would—”

“Nothing like that.” She waved the thought away like brushing off a fly. “Why, if you were responsible for getting me close to whatever's going on up there you might get fired, even if nothing bad happened to me. What I was going to ask was, would you swing by Ranjit's and ask him for ‘Laura's usual’ to go?” She handed him a twenty. “This will cover it, and let anything extra be a tip.” She handed him two more twenties. “Your lunch is on me, of course. Just take mine back to the studio. I'll warm it up when I get back.”

“Back?” Steve's hazel eyes widened in actual fear. How could he not be excited about the chance — even just the chance — to meet people from a whole other world? His voice trembled as he said, “Tell me you aren't—”

“Me? I'm just going for a walk. It's a lovely day, and the sun is actually shining up there between the skyscrapers. I'll toddle along back to the studio before they need me.”

“Laura, you can't. Please. What if—”

“Steve, as far as you know, I'm just going for a walk. I could be going any direction at all. In fact, I'm pretty sure I'll be walking back toward the studio.” Which she fully intended to be true, even though it wasn't the first destination she had in mind. “So you have nothing to worry about and no reason to be concerned. Do you?”

Laura really wanted to flutter her eyelashes, but she kept her sunglasses on to prevent herself from doing it. Instead, she leaned a little closer.

“It's my lunchtime. You know I'm not going to tell you where I'm going anyway.”

Steve gave a relaxed sigh, probably realizing that those words released him from immediate culpability. Which meant he was smart

enough to realize he couldn't stop her.

“So,” he said, “if you hear anyone talking on your walk — anyone who actually did venture near the so-called aliens — and you hear anything interesting, you'll tell me, right?”

“Of course, Steve!” Laura opened the door and put one brown sandal out onto the hot asphalt. As she got out, she said over her shoulder, “But what are the chances of that happening?”

