

Luna Ridge

Blackhawk Files

One

File Number V

Alene Nation

Chapter 1 - A Long Journey

The arrest of the wealthy financier, Rosorio Egroeg, was a feather in Detective Blackhawk's cap. However, the long flight from Mars to Earth offered little distractions to occupy everyone on board. Alex drummed his fingers on the small desk in his cabin. He glanced at the stack of ebooks and videos he checked out from the ship's small library. He finished reading them twice.

When he went to Mars, he planned only to inspect the Egroeg artifact's data Charlie Dane discovered. When the rich financier, Rosorio, left his probational zone from the Moon, he destroyed evidence against his company. He ordered his android to attack Charlie's ship to keep the remains from the discoverers.

Alex checked his comphone. No messages from Jaxon or the Chief of Police, Captain Holbrook. He'll have to send them a transmission call through Telcom on the ship. He looked toward his open cabin door when a steward knocked.

"Sir?" he said. "This ship will land on the Moon's station. From there, you can transport your prisoner to Earth."

"Thanks. Oh, is there a secure way to route my comphone calls and texts through Telcom while in my cabin?"

"Yes, I'll have them send you a link to your device," he said. "The connection may take twenty minutes or more."

"Thanks," he replied, thumbing through the ebook stack.

He wished the ship could travel faster than it did when he traveled to Mars. The vessel was lucky to capture the solar wind to shortening his trip to two months. But now, the spaceship will take longer to return to Earth.

He scrolled through the photos on his comphone and paused at the picture of Jan wearing his grandmother's traditional Navajo dress. In another photo, the former Operations Manager, Mike Carone, took their photo in the Martian ground station.

He missed his old friend, Mike Carone on the Martian Base. Mike left with his family to visit the ahman's planet, Arret. Felicia, his niece who resided on Mars, received messages from her uncle and Aunt Alice. She relayed the information to Alex and her family. He read the last message about the Carones' flying back to Mars. They should arrive on Mars three years from now. The ahmans were interesting people, having only four fingers and different anatomy. At first glance, they looked human, but they bore children through a pouch.

Alex reflected on the last time he was home with his wife, Jan. His dog Ralph got loose, and they had a hard time chasing the large animal. They captured the dog before he could investigate their goat, Camillia. The last night he spent with Jan was the best. He missed her, her eyes, her touch, and her gingerbread muffins. He wished this ship could increase its speed.

"Why won't the aliens help? Their ships have more power," he asked himself.

He rose from his chair and gathered the etablets and videos into his arms to return them to the library. At least, he had the freedom to walk around the ship while his prisoner, Rosorio, had to remain in his cabin. Alex checked him daily to make sure his restraints were intact. He knew Rosorio's resourceful wealth may allow him to find a way to escape.

He walked through the hallway and boarded the elevator to rise to the next deck. When the door slid open, he walked past the crew's hammocks and cots, lining the walkway. Due to his law enforcement status, the Space Force assigned him to a private cabin.

After dropping the reading etablets on the librarian's desk, he strode through the hall toward the prisoner's cabin.

All prisoner's calls were recorded. The guard outside Rosorio's cabin allowed only two outgoing comphone calls. One call Rosorio made to his son, Adrian, to assure his son he was all right. The other call was to Matt Mathews, his Moon Minerals, Inc. Manager.

"Yes?" Matt answered.

"I'll need you to stay on the Moon. The task is at hand."

"I will," Matt said, understanding the code words. He disconnected the call.

Alex withdrew his comphone from his pocket and tapped in his wife's number.

After a ten-minute delay, Jan answered.

"Alex?"

"Hi, Love," he said. "I'll be arriving at the Moon's space station in a few days. I have to arrange for Rosorio's sentencing first, then I'll come home."

"All right."

"How's ol' Ralph?"

"Oh, he's okay, just that dog needs exercise."

"I'll run him when I get home, and the goat?"

"I'm milking her for the milk and making a few dollars at the school. The extra I get goes toward the school lunches for the children who haven't much to eat at home."

"That's great. Any other news?" he asked.

"Well, there is—"

"Jan? Jan?" he asked, looking at his comphone screen.

The call disconnected.

"Well, I'll call her when I arrive at the station," he thought.

The steward walked through the seated travelers, letting them know the Moon's orbiting space station was now in sight. The ship will stop there to transfer passengers to an Earth-bound shuttle. After Alex turns his prisoner over to the authorities on Earth, he planned to return to his Arizona home in Tuba City and his wife.

Days flew past when Alex peered through one of the portholes. As the space station orbiting the Moon drew closer, he packed the few belongings into his duffle bag and headed for Rosorio's cabin. He met the two soldiers, standing guard outside the door. This was the only door with a small square window in the upper center to view the prisoner inside his cabin.

"How soon will we land?" he asked, stepping closer and peering through the tiny window.

Rosorio stood in front of his bed, smiling.

"Another hour, Sir," said a robust soldier close to Alex's size. "You have time to visit the galley if you want."

"Thanks, but I'll wait with you," Alex replied. "He hasn't been any problem, has he?"

"No, not a peep."

They spent their time chatting about their work until the ship rocked and swayed into the cargo bay. The other soldier opened the cabin door and grabbed one of the prisoner's arms. Rosorio didn't resist. The soldier unlocked the left handcuff and forced the prisoner's hand behind his back to latch both wrists together. The other soldier pulled his comphone close to his mouth, receiving instructions.

"We'll take the prisoner to his new quarters," he said. "Follow us."

After the cargo bay door sealed against the open space, they marched down the offramp into the space station.

Chapter 2 - Escape

Later, inside the holding cabin, Rosorio Egroeg sat on the edge of his bed, waiting for his next meal delivery. The only sound humming through the walls was the space station's turbines. His arms lay on his lap with his wrists handcuffed in front. His interference with Martian law allowed Detective Alex Blackhawk to arrest him and transport him to Earth for sentencing. His message to Matt set in motion a series of contacts after they arrived at the Moon's satellite station.

Matt Mathews, Rosorio's Moon Minerals manager, wore his usual black work clothes. He carried an etablet as he approached the guard outside Rosorio's cabin. Now in his forties, he managed the labor hiring force in the mines on the Moon and the cost and supplies to keep the drilling machines running.

When he helped Rosorio's son on Mars on an illegal mining venture, they were both banned from Mars for one year to the Earth and Moon. His time from Mars was finished. He approached the guard in front of Rosorio's cabin.

"And where do you think you're going?" the guard asked, rising from his chair.

Matt paused. "I have some reading material for Mr. Egroeg. It must be lonely as a prisoner. You wouldn't want him to have ideas about escaping, would you?"

"Let me see that," the officer growled, extending his hand.

Matt handed the robust watchman the etablet. The man pulled the ornate cover away from the device. He waved a scanner over the etablet and the case. Satisfied he didn't see anything out of the ordinary, he returned both items to Matt.

"Okay, you can only stay for ten minutes."

Matt nodded, replaced the cover over the device, and entered the cabin when the guard unlocked the door.

Rosorio rose from the edge of the bed and stared ahead when Matt entered the room. The guard slammed the door shut behind him.

"I brought you something to read," Matt said, raising his voice for the guard to hear. "You'll like the first article."

Cautioned, in case of listening devices in the room, Matt handed the ornate case, covering the device to his boss. Rosorio examined the cover and slid his thick fingers over the embossed design.

"Thank you, Matt," he said in a loud manner. "I'll enjoy this."

"I have to go to the cargo bay and leave for the Moon," Matt said aloud.

"Can you come to Earth?" Rosorio asked, picking at the raised edge of the pattern with his nails. "I know Olivia would love to see you."

"Not now, I have financial work to do on the mines. I think Olivia's coming in a few days and then, I'll see her."

"Thanks, Matt for the etablet," Rosorio replied, setting the device on the table.

"No problem. Good luck," Matt said, waving.

Matt turned and rapped on the door. When the guard swung the hatch open, he stared at Rosorio while Matt made his exit. As he left the room, the guard shut the door in Rosorio's face.

When a click sounded, locking the door, Rosorio dug his nails into the raised pattern. After several tries, he exposed a small hard piece of plastic. Several minutes passed when he managed to pull the small rectangle item from the cover.

Rosorio first waved the plastic card over the electronics on his handcuffs. Nothing happened. He then laid the card on top of the green flashing light. When a small slot opened on his cuff, he inserted the square key inside. His handcuffs sprung open, allowing him to remove the restrictions. Now, he waited for his cabin door to open again.

Alex Blackhawk glanced at the time as he walked through the hallway in the space station. He needed to relieve Rosorio's guard. He approached the dark-haired officer, guarding the cabin door.

"Anyone visit him?" Alex asked.

"Only Matt Mathews," the guard replied. "Someone should bring his lunch soon."

"What did Matt want?" Alex asked.

"He had an etablet for Mr. Egroeg to read. I scanned it, didn't see any weapon, and let him inside."

"Okay, why don't you leave on break. It's my turn to stand watch."

"Yes, Sir."

The guard turned and walked away from his post. As Alex sat in the emptied chair, the familiar squeak of the meal cart's wheels advanced through the hallway. The delivery officer stopped and lifted a clear container from the top of the cart.

"Lunch for the prisoner," she announced.

"Thanks," Alex said. "I'll take it in for him."

"Do you need one?" she asked. "It's hot."

"No, thanks, I ate earlier," he said, accepting the prepared meal.

He looked through the clear bottom of the container. Satisfied, he nodded. He knocked on the door and inserted his key card.

She nodded and continued pushing the squeaky cart through the hallway.

"Step away from the door," he shouted and entered the cabin.

He didn't see Rosorio, but in a flash, a sharp object hit him on the back of his head. As he fell, another blow turned the swirling room black.

Rosorio peered from the doorway. He glanced back at the bleeding detective lying prone on the floor. He turned his attention toward the hallway. He glanced in both directions before rushing into the empty hall toward the elevators. As soon as one of the lifts opened, a man stood inside. Rosorio grabbed the man's neck and tossed him out of the elevator. He pressed the tab on the panel to close the doors and pressed another button for the Cargo Bay.

Later, as two officers strolled through the hallway, they noticed the prisoner's cabin door ajar. One of them entered the room and found Alex sprawled on the floor unconscious. Blood floated above his head in the light atmosphere. The soldier bent on his knee near the detective and tapped his communicator clipped to his shirt pocket.

"Medic. Emergency needed on Deck Four, Room eight!"

The other officer leaned toward his friend.

"Is he alive?"

"Barely," the officer said, feeling Alex's neck pulse. "Get the sheet off the bed. We'll use that to carry him. We can't wait."

The other officer yanked the bed sheet off the mattress and laid it on the floor next to Alex."

"Cover his back, then we'll roll him slowly onto his back."

"Medics here," a man said at the cabin doorway.

The two medics left a floating gurney in the hallway and entered the cabin. One checked Alex's pulse and adjusted one end of the sheet while the other orderly placed a brace around Alex's neck.

"We'll take it from here," he said. "Help us lift him onto the stretcher."

The first officer noticed one medic was an android, which lifted Alex's head and shoulders. The other medic and one officer adjusted the bed sheet. They centered and secured the large patient's shoulders to the stretcher.

Standing near Alex's head, the android medic administered oxygen and grabbed the stretcher handles. The human medic raised the other handles near Alex's feet. Together, they lifted the stretcher and carried Alex to the gurney outside the cabin. After they placed him on the mattress, they rushed the floating bed device through the hallway.

Matt met Rosorio at a predetermined location near a drinking fountain in the hallway.

"Take me to the cargo bay—The area where the shipping containers are sent out," Rosorio whispered.

"Here, wear this jacket and hat," Matt said, handing the mining clothing to his boss. When they rushed through the narrow corridors of the space station, a few soldiers ran past them. Rosorio held his hat over his eyes as they turned the corner.

"Are you sure you want to go there?" Matt asked. "Someone may see you."

"Have you called my contacts?" he asked.

"Yes, your plan is in motion. Can you count on them?"

“They better or find themselves working in a mine on Mars,” Rosorio replied. “There shouldn’t be many on duty in the cargo bay at this hour.”

They turned into the next hallway where Matt tapped a security camera away from them. They strode toward a door marked Cargo in Operation. Another sign posted underneath read,

“This is an open space area. All personnel must wear spacesuits and oxygen.”

Matt opened one of the cupboards lining the walls.

“Wear one of these,” he said, pointing to the space gear stacked on the shelves.

Rosorio removed the jacket and hat and withdrew one of the large suits from the shelf. Matt checked the hallway for intruders while Rosorio stepped inside the gear, zipping it from the front. He found insulated boots in his size on the lower shelf and slipped his feet inside. Matt chose a clear helmet from another shelf and raised it over Rosorio’s head. After he clamped the helmet to the collar of Rosorio’s suit, he tapped the oxygen switch and looked at his employer. Rosorio gave him the thumbs up and pressed his voice tab.

“I’ll call you if I need you,” Rosorio said. “Don’t call me.”

Matt nodded. “Understood.”

The large man turned and entered the small airlock. As soon as he stepped inside the enclosed foyer, Matt shut the door behind him. Rosorio opened the next hatch and walked into the open cargo bay. In the bay, a small crew consisting of four people in space gear, stood near the opening to space, guiding the metal containers along the rails.

He removed a magnetic bar from the floor used for reaching hard to find places on shuttles. One man, standing near a work counter, turned too late as Rosorio swung the metal bar hard on the man’s head. As the unconscious worker slumped to the floor, Rosorio grabbed his legs and dragged the lifeless body behind a couple of storage barrels. He glanced around. No one approached him as he crouched behind one of the containers.

Each container had a GPS guidance device installed to let the crew record the location of the shipment. Rosorio opened the container’s GPS panel cover and logged in his destination coordinates.

With rollers underneath, he shoved the unit toward the long line of other containers where workers mounted them on the rails. He lifted a roll of rope from a nearby counter, opened the entry hatch, and threw both items into the large container before rolling himself inside. As he drew the hatch closed, he pressed the magnetic bar across the door, locking it from the inside.

The container moved with ease onto the rail tracks for transport. Voices outside informed Rosorio he would leave soon. He switched his headlamp on for a second, found the rope, and secured himself to the internal metal handles. When he heard the ejector turbines roar, he turned off his headlamp and held tight to the metal hooks lining the inner wall.

One by one the containers shot into space toward various locations on the Moon. A crewman logged in the coordinates and waved to release the next unit. When a surge pulled Rosario’s container, he braced himself against the G-Forces which shot him into space.

Matt continued through the hallway to the other end of the cargo bay to take a shuttle to the Moon. Adrian caught sight of him and hurried to Matt's side.

"Where are you going?" Adrian asked.

"The Moon," he replied. "I have some work to finish."

"Since our ban from Mars has lifted, I need you to stay here and manage things until I can exchange places with my sister on Mars."

"That's fine by me," Matt replied, continuing to walk.

"Uh, I heard my father is missing. Do you know where he is?"

Matt placed his forefinger on his lips.

"No and it's better we don't know."

Adrian nodded.

"Well, I'm catching the next Egroeg Transport to Mars," Adrian said. "I just messaged Samantha."

"Yeah, I'll be glad to see her," Matt replied.

Adrian paused to look at his friend and employee.

"If you want to get on with my sister, you'll have to answer to my father."

"Just saying, Adrian. Have a good trip."

"I'll call you when I land," Adrian said, grinning.

"Okay. Talk to you later," Matt said, entering the Shuttle Bay full of spacecraft.

He watched as Adrian continued toward the shuttle port of the station. As Matt walked to one of the small space crafts, several station officers and Jaxon Steele approached him.

"What's up, guys?" he asked, pausing as he held the railing on the onramp.

"We have to search your shuttle," Jaxon said, displaying his badge.

"Sure," Matt said, backing off the ramp. "Knock yourself out."

Jaxon glared at him and hurried up the ramp into the fuselage.

Chapter 3 - Jan Receives Word

Two months ago, Jan heard from Alex. He assured her he was coming home and had arrested Rosorio. She almost told him the good news, but their conversation was cut off due to the distance in space he was from Earth. She rose from the sofa, set her parenting emag on the worn coffee table, and entered the second bedroom. Alex grew up in this small farmhouse with his grandmother and father. He brought her here when Rosorio threatened her life. This unused home was the quickest way to place her in a safe house.

She cleaned and sorted the smaller bedroom they used for storage, thinking about her future. Her friend and Alex's cousin, Sunflower, helped her when she had time off from the hair salon.

Jan closed the emag tablet, and entered the small bedroom to work in the jammed closet. She thought Alex should have arrived at the Moon's satellite station by now. As she removed some of his grandmother's clothes for the thrift store donation, she wanted to call him more often, but her work at the Indian school took much of her time. *"He'll call me when he has some free time,"* she thought.

Just then, her comphone beeped from the small main room of the old farmhouse. She emerged from the bedroom and reached for her device near her cat on the sofa. Frederick, the tuxedo cat, complained but didn't move.

"Hello?" she answered. "Jaxon, what's going on? What? How? Can he come home? Well, I'm coming there. Thanks, and keep me informed. I'll catch the next shuttle. Bye."

Her labored breathing increased as her heart pounded faster. At first, stunned, the news of Alex's injury jarred her soul. She stared for a moment at Frederick as he licked his white paws and wiped them over his ears.

"Sunflower. I'll have to call her," she murmured and then shouted. "Oh God, please don't let him die!"

When she tapped in Sunflower's number the first time, her hands shook, and she almost dropped her device. She took a deep breath and tapped in the familiar number again.

"Hi, Sunflower," she said when her friend answered. "Can you come over to my place?"

"Sure, what's going on?" her friend asked.

"Alex is in trouble and I'm going to the Moon to be with him," Jan replied. "Good. See you soon."

Frederick jumped off the sofa when she hurried into the bedroom and opened the top drawer of the dresser. She pulled her warm weather clothes and laid them on the end of the bed. The cat jumped onto the bed and rested against one of her embroidered pillows. As soon as Jan piled the soft material on the bed, he rose and walked to lay on it.

"Oh, no, Mister," Jan said, pushing him away.

"Mow!" he whined in protest.

Jan entered the closet and jerked to a stop. A row of Alex's clothes overwhelmed her. "*Which ones to take?*" she asked herself, placing her hand on one side of her face. She pulled a couple of shirts and slacks off the hangars and set them on the cedar chest. When she glanced across the bed, Frederick once again sat on her clothes.

"Oh, Freddy, you can't lay there," she said, grasping him around his middle.

She set him on the floor and shooed him into the main room. A half hour passed when the dog, Ralph, barked over and over from the outside porch.

As Jan turned to leave the bedroom, a familiar voice called her name from the front door.

"Okay, tell me what's happening with Alex?" Sunflower asked from the doorway.

"Come in. Alex is hurt. Jaxon said he's unconscious," Jan replied. "I just have to get a few things from the bathroom and and..."

A wave of dizziness overcame her.

"Slow down," Sunflower said, guiding Jan to the sofa. "Take a deep breath and sit for a moment."

When Jan's breathing slowed, Sunflower turned toward her.

"Now, tell me how Alex got hurt."

"He was returning a prisoner. The prisoner hit Alex and escaped. I have to be with him when he wakes up. Uh, and I'm pregnant. I hope the airline doesn't prevent me from flying?"

"How far along are you?"

"Almost five months."

"I'm sure it's okay, but best not to say anything. Once you're in our little airport, you don't have to go through the TSA in Phoenix. I'm happy for you," Sunflower said, standing. "Well, let me help you pack, and I'll drive you to our airport."

They rose from the sofa and walked into the bedroom. Sunflower saw Alex's clothes on the cedar chest.

"Do you need to pack Alex's clothes?" Sunflower asked.

"I don't know. The clothes he brought may be dirty. I guess, having them with me makes me feel there's hope when I get there."

Jan returned to the closet and grabbed the handle of her rolling suitcase.

"Take it slow and I'll check the airline schedule," Sunflower said, returning to the main room.

Jan stepped into the bathroom and collected her hairbrush, toothpaste, and toothbrush. She scooped her makeup collection with both hands and returned to the bedroom to place them in a small case. Once again, Frederick was sitting in her open suitcase.

"Shoo, you can't go with me," she said, waving her hand to move the cat to the floor.

He whined and scurried into the main room and sat next to Sunflower on the sofa. Jan pushed Alex's one shirt and a pair of slacks into her suitcase and closed the luggage before rolling it into the living area.

"I'm ready", Jan said. "I better take my heavy sweater."

Jan grabbed the knitted jacket from the kitchen chair.

"Can you...?" she started to ask.

"Yes, Frank and I will take care of Ralph, Freddy, and Camilia while you're gone."

"Oh, thank you."

"Do the animals have enough food for a few days?"

"Yes, Freddy's food is in the lower cupboard by the sink. Ralph's is there as well, and all Camilia needs is grass, grain, and hay. She'll have to be milked. The bottles and sterilizer are in the barn in a cupboard."

"Don't worry. We'll do that."

They left the home through the front door and passed Ralph tied to the support beam of the porch. His rope was long enough for him to potty beyond the porch stairs. Sunflower locked the door behind them and helped Jan with her suitcase down the steps.

Ralph wiggled and strained against his rope. Sunflower glanced toward his water bowl to make sure it was full. Since it was, she hurried after Jan who climbed into the truck. Sunflower picked up the suitcase and lifted it into the back truck bed. She entered the cab and started the engine. After a few attempts, the motor roared to life.

"Someday, Frank will have to replace this beast," Sunflower said, driving from the yard toward the gravel road into town.

As they entered Tuba City, Jan turned toward her friend.

"Thank you for helping me out," she said.

"That's what friends are for," Sunflower replied.

When Sunflower's comphone beeped, she asked Jan to answer the device.

Jan reached into Sunflower's purse and withdrew the comphone.

"It's from Frank," she said. "Hi, Frank. It's me, Jan. She'll come home as soon as she drops me off at the airport. I have to fly to Phoenix and catch the next flight to the Moon. Well, yes, I guess you heard. He's hurt bad. I'll let you know more after I get there. Bye."

Sunflower drove to the outskirts of Tuba City. The city airport remained small but accessible to many of the eastern Arizonian towns, Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Dallas, Texas.

Sunflower parked in front of the terminal and helped Jan unload her suitcase from the back of the truck. Jan waved as her friend drove away. She turned and entered the airport, hauling her rolling suitcase behind her to check it in.

"Flying to Phoenix?" the clerk asked, typing Jan's information on her computer.

"Yes, and then, I need a shuttle to the Moon's station."

"Do you know when you will return?"

"No, I don't."

The clerk continued to type on her keyboard.

“Here’s your boarding passes and a receipt for your suitcase,” she said. “Please enter TSA on your left.”

Jan accepted the passes.

“Thank you.”

She walked toward the TSA passenger line and saw only a few passengers waiting their turn. After passing through the carry-on X-Ray, she found the departure gate and sat in the waiting area. As she rummaged through her carry-on, she discovered a sandwich Sunflower had made.

“Thank you, I’m starving,” Jan murmured.

She glanced around the waiting area, noticing several adults of all ages, teens chatting, and toddlers running back and forth. Most of the passengers were Native Americans since the airport is located on the Navajo reservation. When the steward announced her section to board, she rose from her chair and stood in the line entering the jet tube to her transport plane.

Jan located her seat next to an older native man and buckled her safety strap around her waist.

“Are you seeing relatives?” he asked. “My daughter lives in Phoenix.”

“I’m continuing to the Moon,” she replied. “My husband is there.”

The older man nodded and opened his etablet to read. Jan slipped her carry-on tote under the seat a head of her and tried to relax.

The aircraft turbines rumbled beneath her feet. With a great lift straight into the air, the airplane took off through the clouds.