



# “CLOSE ENCOUNTERS”

A Short Story by  
**LANCE WOODS**

Based on the podcast series  
produced by



## “CLOSE ENCOUNTERS”

### Prologue

“Close Encounters” was a challenge to write for the *SuperHuman Times* podcast. It has many of the conventions of traditional superhuman fiction but, at its core, it’s a love story, and I’d never attempted to write a love story before. I don’t have anything against the romance genre; I just felt neither compelled nor qualified to make a run at it.

That said, in translating the script to prose, I tried to figure out the best way to approach this micro-romance novel. All I could envision was this turning out like Ian Fleming’s *The Spy Who Loved Me*, whose narrator is a young woman encountering James Bond while he’s on a mission. Even by the standards of ‘50s pulp fiction, it’s pretty tough to read; I recommend it highly for its badness.

Then I thought of attacking it from an angle that was different, yet more familiar: a romance told from the guy’s point of view. I’m sure such tales exist, but I haven’t heard about them or read them, which is good because that means they haven’t colored my storytelling.

Hence, “Close Encounters” is told from the point of view of its leading man.

Sort of.

You’ll see ...

SuperHuman Times™

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I can never decide which memory of our relationship is my favorite: the one where we first met, or the one where we killed that guy.

Tough call.

“Going up, ladies?”

It was so hard for me to act so casual as the door to the scenic glass elevator opened and I saw you for the first time.

I stood in front of a five-foot-eight bestselling author. Your long, auburn hair was much fuller and deeper in color than it photographed, complete with bangs. Your blue, business-casual suit complemented your grey eyes perfectly, and it complemented your fit body even more. It was refreshing to see that becoming a celebrity hadn't encouraged you to starve yourself; no one should enter their forties as an anorexic.

I'll carry that moment with me to my grave, along with the fateful words uttered by the woman who rode with you in the elevator: “Step right in, mister. It'll remind her of what a guy looks like.”

I didn't recognize the squat, late-middle-aged lady from her face, but from the occasional interview I'd read, you'd mentioned that your agent frequently accompanied you to signings and events. It didn't require a Holmesian deduction.

You blushed when I stepped into the elevator car. That made me smile. So did your not-quite-whispered conversation after I turned my back on you to press the button for my floor.

“Nice,” your agent said.

“Janie!”

I pretended to watch the hotel atrium and the surrounding walkways on each floor speed past us as we ascended.

“Blonde, an inch or two taller than you, probably in your age range. I'm just sayin', he looks nice.”

“Thank you,” I whispered.

Now it was your agent's turn to blush. “That is, I meant, looks nice in that suit. Highlights the grey strands in your hair without making you look old.”

“Really? Thanks.” I brushed a blond hair off my shoulder.

“Forty?”

“Pardon?”

“The suit? Forty?”

“Forty-two, actually,” I said.

“What a coincidence, that’s almost Renata’s age!”

You really blushed that time. I figured the best way to make you feel better was to recognize you. “Renata Mason, the author? I recognize you from your picture on the posters and signs around the hotel. You’re headlining the big writers’ conference here at the hotel, right?”

You said, “I wouldn’t call it headli—”

“I would,” your agent said. “Mister —?”

“Bailey. Duncan Bailey.”

Since she didn’t know if I was important, your agent extended her hand with a gunslinger’s speed, “Jane Sheppard, her agent. Are you here for the conference, too?”

“Oh, no, no. But one of the exhibiting publishers is a business associate I’m meeting for dinner.”

“That’s a shame.”

“Why?”

“I was just telling Renata that the marketplace could use some male romance novelists.”

“When was this?” you asked.

“You know,” Jane said. “Around. Earlier.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, Ms. Sheppard. I wouldn’t know the first thing about writing a book. But if I catch up with you again this weekend, Ms. Mason, maybe you can tell me how you do it. I’d love a chance to sit down and talk to a real writer.”

“That sounds like fun, Mister Bailey, but I have a pretty full —”

The elevator picked that moment to stop on your floor.

I sighed as I let you pass. “I tried.”

“She’ll be downstairs in the ballroom from eight to eleven,” Jane called quickly as the doors closed.

“And she likes mimosas.”

I must have been very taken with you because the next thing I remember was standing in the hotel ballroom later that night. I don’t know how I got past whatever security the hotel might have set up, but it was remarkably easy to take a position in the shadows and watch you deliver your keynote address to the women at your conference. I was impressed with the range of ages and types I saw in the audience — some established authors (your fellow guests, I assumed), and many aspirants seeking counsel on how to plot their own courses to writing success. They, and I, listened to your closing words carefully.

“So, if you want to write a successful book, don’t look at the sales charts for guidance,” you said. “Look in the mirror. Every story and character we create reflects our own dreams. And when you share those with your readers, you might help them find some of their own. Thank you.”

The response was immediate, as if every person in the ballroom sat poised with hands in applause mode. For someone who’d just triggered a standing ovation, you were very gracious, smiling warmly and tossing a wave as you made your way to the stage wings where, I assumed, Jane would be waiting for you.

I also assumed that, like any good overseer, she'd probably want to get her client back to her room. And I remembered that the hotel kitchen — and, one could assume, its back area for room service — was adjacent to the ballroom.

I wondered, “Should I order her a mimosa now or wait until I actually catch up to her?”

As you and Jane stepped through the door that led from the kitchen to the service corridors, I heard you say, “I guess I left them wanting more.”

“Now they know how I felt in the elevator,” I said.

Jane screamed. You just gasped.

“Sorry,” I said.

“What are you doing here, Mister Bailey?” you asked.

“Frankly,” I said, “I'm waiting for you.”

Your jaw dropped open; your voice made some kind of tiny sound.

Jane nudged you. “I've heard worse opening lines.”

“I didn't know if you'd need some help getting away from your fans. I should have known Ms. Sheppard would already be —”

“Leaving,” Jane said.

“Wait, I didn't mean —”

“It'll be easier for you two to get a table in the bar,” she said with calculation. “And with a herd of authors about to stampede out of that ballroom, you don't have a lot of time to do that.”

“Janie,” you said, “you don't find it strange that this guy just happened to show up around us? Twice? In the same day?”

“It’s no coincidence, Ms. Mason. I was heading to the bar for a nightcap and I heard the applause for your speech outside the ballroom. I took a chance that you’d go for the fastest way out. I thought maybe I could escort you two to the elevators.”

Judging from the thoughtful look on your face, I’d said something that made sense, which amazes me in retrospect.

“Think fast, sister,” Jane said. “The herd is massing.”

“Okay,” you said.

“I’ll be honored,” I said.

“You’ll be going,” Jane said. “The lobby door’s at the end of this corridor. Cut left to the elevators, go to the top floor and you’ll be in the Sky Room ahead of the crowd.” She adopted the manner of a drama queen. “Go! Go and do not look back!”

With the look of a woman who knew better than to argue with the insane, you joined me as we briskly walked down the corridor. “Great. We get drinks *and* Janie’s one-woman show.”

I nodded. “Hell of a first date.”

You stopped. “*First date*?”

I stopped and smiled. “I’m an optimist. I just hope the bartender here can make you a decent mimosa.”

To my relief, she did.

Five years later, as we celebrated the publication of your new novel with a signing tour of New England, you told our waiter, “We’ve decided to sell our possessions and order the catch of the day.”

You amused the waiter.



“And please ask the sommelier to select a wine for us,” I said. “Make it the best in the house. It’s a special occasion.”

“Right,” you said. “No mimosas tonight.”

“Very good, sir.” The waiter made his final notes and left us on the terrace overlooking Falmouth Harbor. It was hard to divide my attention between the view of the water at twilight and you.

You were engrossed by it, too. “Thank you. It’s beautiful.”

“Just as you were five years and two books ago, when you said you’d have that first drink with me. Any regrets yet?”

“I should ask you that,” you laughed, taking my hand across the table. “You’d be entitled to them. Not every man would be content to let his girlfriend work virtually twenty-four/seven — racing against deadlines, attending personal appearances and conferences, touring —”

“Making a fortune and letting me tag along. The autograph line at the bookstore today was incredible. You have another hit on your hands.”

“Ah. You’re only interested in my money.”

“I’m only interested in you,” I said, “and in helping you do whatever it takes to make you happy.”

That’s when you grabbed your temple and winced.

I’d seen this before, but each time it concerned me. “Not another migraine?”

“It’s not as bad as the last one ... just a twinge, really ... it’s ... it’ll pass.” It seemed to.

“You *have* to see a doctor,” I said. “Your head’s been ringing more than your cell phone. Say, why hasn’t Janie hasn’t called with *tonight’s* interruption?”

“She’s reading my revisions to the next book. Once that gets to the publisher, I promise, I’ll ... oww ...”

“*This week*,” I said. “As soon as our plane lands at home, you call for an appointment. I’ll go with you.”

“I feel much better,” you said.

“You say that every time. You’ve put this off for months. You have to take care of yourself, keep that creative mind sharp. I want us to have a *sixth* anniversary, and lots more after that.”

“Speaking of anniversaries, sort of, tell me something: in five years, why haven’t you ever asked me to marry you?”

“I didn’t want to get in the way of your career. As hard as you work, as much as you’re out there promoting your books and the Renata Mason brand, a husband would just be extra baggage.”

“Not you. You’re with me everywhere I tour. You leave me alone to work with no complaints. Our relationship is downright idyllic, more so than the ones I imagine for my books.”

Before I could reply, a reedy voice interrupted us. “It may be closer to your imagination than you think, ‘Miss Mason.’”

Instantly, we looked up to see a tall, thin, bearded man in a light-colored sport jacket and slacks who looked like one of those distinguished Viennese psychiatrists from an old movie, but in color, with a better fashion sense. “Good evening.”

“Who are you?” I asked.

He didn't answer me. Our uninvited guest took a chair from a table that was being bussed and move it over to ours, then sat down.

“I doubt he's here to pour the wine,” you said.

The man smiled in a way that made you, and me, uneasy. “This is the first time I've been able to approach you alone, ‘Miss Mason.’ You're usually in the company of your many fans, or lecturing, or in some other place with too many people. But this patio is very nice. Intimate enough to not be seen by the other diners, yet public enough to ensure you won't make a scene.”

“I picked the restaurant,” I said, “and we didn't invite —”

“Yes, yes, very impressive,” the man said. “You can lose him now.”

“Mister, I don't know who you are, but I think you'd better —” You grabbed your temple again.

“Renata!” I jumped out of my chair and hurried to your side.

“Another ‘migraine’?” the stranger asked. “Digging into your head like a scalpel again, isn't it, ‘Miss Mason’?”

“Why do you keep saying my name like that? ‘Miss Mason.’ You sound like you don't believe I'm Renata Mason.”

“I don't. And neither should you. You see, you're *not* really Renata Mason. And your ‘Mister Duncan Bailey’ isn't real at all.”

I stood up and headed for him. “Then it won't hurt you much when I show you the door.”

“But in fairness,” the man said, “I'm not who I appear to be, either.”

I stopped. I don't know why, but I did. “Okay, now I don't know if I'm pissed off or curious.”

“I feel the same way,” you said.

“Of course you do,” he said. “You’re curious, he’s nothing. Nothing but a reflection of your psyche.”

“Who the hell are you?” you asked.

“Mark Loughlin. I mean, this person *was* Mark Loughlin before I replaced him.”

“Replaced?” I asked.

“It wouldn’t be accurate to say that I killed him because his body is, clearly, intact. But it isn’t truly his body anymore. It hasn’t been for, oh, about twenty-five years now.”

He looked at you for a moment with a proud expression. “And for all those years, we thought our attempts to create a synthetic consciousness had been destroyed in the battle. No one thought you survived, much less found a host. But from what I see, Projectrix took possession of you, rather than —”

“Who?” you asked.

“Projectrix,” Loughlin said. “The professional name of the superhuman Renata Mason.”

I remembered her. “Yeah, Projectrix. She had some kind of bio-holographic power to create solid objects from thin air, something about energy-matter conversion —”

Loughlin smiled broadly. “Impressive, ‘Miss Mason.’ You go into conscious denial of your alter ego while hiding the truth in your subconscious. Of course, when a projection of your subconscious is standing right here, I suppose it’s impossible to hide anything.”

“*What* did you call me?” I asked.

“What did you call *me*?” you asked.

Loughlin focused all of his attention on you. “You honestly don’t remember being Projectrix? The attack? When the superhumans breached our cloaking device and boarded our

ship? It’s all in your memory. I scanned it once I finally located you. Deny it all you like; I know it’s there. So do you.

“All you have to do is let yourself remember.”

Jesus, it was huge, like a flying industrial park. Why did alien spaceships always have to be so big?

So tired ...

*“DefenseOne ... DefenseOne command ... do you read?”*

*“We read you, Projectrix. What’s your situation?”*

*“Hiding and resting inside some kind of super-lab. Seems more secure than most of the other chambers. This ship is crawling with guard ‘bots, and I can’t fool them for very long with my holograms. Just when I think they’re gonna slam into one of my brick walls, their sensors figure out it isn’t real. Wait!”*

The only calm voice in the room spoke. *“Proximity sensors activated. Ship status critical.”*

DefenseOne again: *“Can you and the rest of the team hold them off?”*

*“Yeah, we’re still running interference for Circuitbreaker. He should be on the bridge by — I’ve got company, command. One guard ‘bot. I’m gonna try something new. Stand by.”*

Something new. Something stupid. Stupid-cubed.

*“Hey, tin man! / You up for a threesome? / Which one of us ya gonna shoot, handsome? / One of us is human, one isn’t.”*

Yow, did I – well, we — really look that good at nineteen? Not even a tiny roll of blubber pushing against that Spandex. I have to get back to the gym!

*“Blast the hologram and the human gets time to escape. / And blow up this important-looking lab. / And blow up your whole, lousy Martian minivan. / And we’ll do it, too, because we are Projectrix. / And you can’t have our planet —”*

God, the pain!

Even though the blast cauterized the wound, it hurt so much. I fell to the floor.

The ‘bot stood over me for a second, then paused, turned, and floated off, probably in response to new commands.

*“Trix? Projectrix, come in!”*

I was too weak to even activate my commlink, couldn’t say anything, couldn’t speak ... couldn’t resist the voice ...

Why wasn’t I dead already?

*“Synthetic consciousness preservation protocols engaged. Biological implantation achieved.”*

What? The ship’s A.I.? What the hell was going on?

*“Assimilating host consciousness.”*

*“What? No! Leave me alone! Let me —”*

*“Host identity: Renata Mason. Alternate identity ... Pro-jec-trix. Age: nineteen human years. Occupation: Masked crimefighter.*

*“Physical attributes within human norms ... mental attributes significantly higher. Ability to create solid holographic projections ...*

*“Analyzing physical damage ... single energy blast in upper chest ... partly absorbed by body armor, but system is in shock ... weakening ... now integrating with host biological functions to stabilize ...*

*“Analyzing mental patterns, knowledge, memories of ... bravery ... honor ... sacrifice ... loyalty ... humanity ... survival ... of humanity ... survival ...*

*“Survival ...*

*“Survival ...”*

*“Why am I remembering any of this?!”* I dropped to my knees beside your chair and grabbed my head as if it were my turn to suffer a migraine. Only this was worse. The images of the battle, the pain of that blast, all so vivid, as if I’d really been there ...

As if *I’d* been Projectrix.

I looked up to you and saw tears spilling down your cheeks, but your expression was completely blank.

Loughlin just kept talking. “Fortunately, after the landing, the few organics among us who made it to Earth each transferred our consciousness into unsuspecting humans before our native bodies died from their battle wounds.”

“So you were going to take over Earth by taking over Earthlings?” I asked.

“Originally,” Loughlin said, “but it — I can’t believe I’m explaining this to a figment of your imagination.”

For the first time, neither could I.

“It would have required too many trained organic minds to be effective,” he continued, “and we didn’t have the numbers. So we developed an artificial consciousness — *you* — that could overtake human minds and create sleeper agents that would attack Earth *for us* when activated. Clearly, the force of Renata Mason’s personality overwhelmed you after you ensured

your survival by assimilating her mind. You weren't properly calibrated for the stronger will of a superhuman host.”

You finally spoke. “I don't believe you. I *am* Renata Mason. I always have been.”

“You've done what you were built to do: learn about humans through your host. But since your host wasn't an average human, *she* absorbed *you*. One woman, two entities, bound by their uniqueness. You buried your superhuman past and pursued a writing career — *her* writing career — above everything else. Ultimately, you realized you both weren't just unique, but lonely.”

“Lonely? She has me!”

He finally looked directly at me, regarding me as a participant in the conversation. “Yes. The ideal companion. When she subconsciously realized how ‘unique’ she truly was, Renata Mason used her bio-holographic abilities to create you.” He returned to you. “How else do you account for ‘Duncan’ never being jealous of your success? Never sharing details about his own career? Have you ever asked him what he *does*?”

I couldn't answer any of those questions.

“My Gods,” Loughlin said, “I've watched you for months, and I've seen how he literally appears and disappears an instant before you enter or leave a room. All this while Renata Mason's fertile mind fills in the blanks to make him as real as possible.” He pretended to resist the impulse to chuckle. “It's actually quite fitting. A woman without a real soul creating a man who isn't real at all. One could say you were made for each other.”

This part I remember clearly: when we looked at each other for a moment that seemed too short, yet lasted forever. I gently wiped the tears from your cheeks.

You caressed my face.



“Don’t go,” you whispered.

Standing up, kissing your hand and letting it go was the hardest thing I ever did — at least, as far back as I could remember.

“I was never here.”

I stepped away from the table and walked out of the restaurant.

It was dark by the time I’d taken up a position behind the greenery surrounding the restaurant’s patio. I wasn’t sure how I ended up there after leaving, but since I could see you, I didn’t care.

I watched you turn on Loughlin, trying not to make a scene before the other diners.

“What did you do to him?”

“You did it. But ‘he’s’ not really gone. You’re just accepting reality, and Duncan wasn’t real.” He leaned closer to you, as if he’d been a long-lost friend. “Migraine’s gone, right?”

You paused and hesitantly nodded.

“That’s just the activation signal I’ve been sending for the last few months,” he said. “It led me to you. But it won’t trouble you much longer. Once I transmit my report to our elders, they’ll dismantle the entire artificial consciousness program and, for lack of a better term, dismantle you.”

“Even so, you’ve lost,” you said. “We *beat* you.”

“Hardly. Ever since superhumans like you abandoned their heroic careers for more mundane lives, most are no longer in top condition. They won’t know what hit them when the Earthers are controlled by our minds.”

“No,” you said quietly. “I’ll stop you.”

“How? Have your imaginary boyfriend thrash me? Have me arrested on suspicion of invading Earth?”

“Oh, no.”

He never heard me coming up behind him, thanks to your distraction, and your sly smile.

“I’ll stop you by realizing that my subconscious talent for creating my perfect boyfriend can be used consciously to create the perfectly solid and real bio-holographic assassin. And they’ll never connect him with Duncan because *we are* Renata Mason.

“And you still can’t have our planet.

“Or my ‘soul’.”

He never saw me coming. But everyone else on the patio did. That was the idea. They saw a large, bald man in a crew turtleneck and dark suit who looked nothing like me grab Mister Loughlin’s head and twist it until his neck snapped.

I may not have been real, but that felt “real” good.

You screamed in terror and I bolted off the patio, through the restaurant proper, making sure to bump into people along the way. I even knocked over a waiter with a full tray.

And after the killer ducked into a dark alley and evaporated, Duncan Bailey flew out of the restaurant bathroom in response to his girlfriend’s scream. I held you tightly as you wept and shivered and fought the urge to cheer out loud. You told the management, and later the police, about this deranged bookstore owner named Loughlin who approached us during our meal and tried to convince you that you owed him money because he didn’t sell enough copies of your last book to settle a gambling debt, which might be the reason for the bald guy snapping his neck.

The other diners corroborated our story, especially the ones who were lucky enough to get video of the brute on their cell phones. Thankfully, they were able to distract the reporters that showed up, which let us sneak away once the police were done with us.

At least we were able to salvage a nice walk along the beach — although, as we made our way around the restaurant to get to the parking lot without being interviewed, another man might have worried when your cell phone suddenly rang.

But I knew who it was: Janie, who knew where we’d be eating and heard about the murder online. The videos were being posted already, so she was pretty freaked.

“Nothing to worry about,” you told her. “Everything’s fine.

“I’m just having dinner with the man of my dreams.”

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