

Many Miles Away
A Cautionary Tale



A Novel by Charles H. Smith

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Prologue

The sudden knuckle raps didn't startle the room's occupant, a forty-ish, slightly built, bespectacled man absorbed in scrolling text down his computer screen.

"Yes?" he called out calmly as he turned around.

The office door swung wide open. A lanky student security worker was standing there, grinning. "Hi Dr. Plummer; 'just to let you know we're closing up now. Will you be leaving, or staying?"

Plummer smiled, an 'oh it's you again' smile.

"Staying, for a few minutes at least. I still have a couple of edits to make on this manuscript..."

Sure, thought the student, just like most nights...

He replied. "Okay then... But be careful out there when you leave — like they warned, the temperature is dropping, and it's already been snowing for a while."

Plummer acknowledged with a brief nod. "Thanks for that. Have a nice evening." He turned back around as the student left the area. Shortly thereafter the lights in the hallway outside clicked off.

Plummer exhaled. Yup, this book review was nearly in the can. Just one more pass should do it, he thought.

But the once-over exposed a small omission, one requiring a couple of fact checks. By the time he was finished, after a final look-through, it was more than half an hour later.

Finally! Off went the computer. He took a deep breath, rose from the desk, and gathered his coat and

scarf. The lights were the next to go; a minute later he was punching the button on the service elevator leading to the lower back entrance of the now-deserted building. Beyond that there was just the matter of the outside stairs, and a flat walk of a few hundred feet to the parking garage.

The elevator arrived and opened, and once inside Plummer hit the sub-basement button. The lift grunted and slowly began to edge its way downward, seemingly in no rush to carry out its orders. But finally it reached its destination. The door opened to an eerie hallway setting that might have framed the final scene of an *X-Files* episode. Plummer smiled at the thought, then walked briskly down the corridor to the back door — through which he quickly passed, and then just as quickly locked behind himself. He next edged toward the concrete stairs a few feet away, already thinking about possible television choices for the evening. It was Friday, so something good should be on...

He suddenly realized that it truly *was* getting cold. 'Windy, too, and snow was whipping at his face... Stopping for a moment to pull his scarf up tighter, he then began to move deliberately down the concrete stairs. But the third step was icier than he expected. He slipped abruptly and lost hold of the railing, tumbling right off the steps and down the exposed slope to its side. A moment later he saw a bright light, but after that there was only darkness.

Chapter One

Music for Us All

Somewhere there is sunshine,
Somewhere there is day,
Somewhere there is Morningtown,
Many miles away.

—Malvina Reynolds

Four Years Later...

Gretchen, though not a particularly clever kitty, could plainly see that things were now going her way. She was having fewer and fewer thoughts of that rude awakening a couple of weeks earlier — the one following her sudden ejection from a moving vehicle in the middle of the night. It had been pouring rain and thundering, and life had quickly taken a turn for the worse: from being warm and dry to being... not so warm, and miserably un-dry. In fact, in an instant she had transformed into the classic scraggly cat... But luckily for our heroine, she still had some of her nine lives left — was that a dim light she saw on the other side of the road? Yes; and it was coming from a house, the house at 423 Stuart Drive. What to do? She sat still for a moment, pondering. Then, shaking muddy water

from her fur, she cautiously made her way across the street and up to the solid wooden door.

But now that she was standing there, 'what next?
Poor poor pitiful me...!

“Meeooooowww!”

That did the trick. The door opened, and a new friend, and new home, were gained.

At the moment, a short, squat, middle-aged man had just entered the house and was looking left and right, calling out: “Gretchen! Gretchen! Where are you, my little one?”

So much for past adventures... Gretchen had been dozing comfortably in the bedroom, lost in cat-dream: the one about the cheeky mouse that kept giving her the slip... But now — was this the call for dinner? Yessirrr...! She jumped up, stretched, bounded off the bed, and disappeared expectantly around the corner.

The man's face brightened as she appeared. “Ah, there you are! Come here little lady... Would you like to go for a ride...? Of course you would...” He leaned over and picked her up. Nuzzling against his shoulder, she was purring within seconds.

The man stroked her fur and sighed. “Yes my friend, you have definitely made my visit here a good deal more entertaining. Thank you!”

Still cuddling her, he walked into the kitchen, then down the hall to the den, then back out to the living room, peering around in every direction and nodding approval all the way. He stopped there, right in the

middle of the room, and sighed again. He couldn't resist offering a few more words of encouragement to his new acquaintance:

"Well dear, things seem to be perfectly in order. I guess we can go now. Are you ready? I hope you're the adventurous type!"

Gretchen yawned.

The man concluded that this was cat-language for "Good to go." He stood silently for a moment, then reached out his hand. The lights in the room dimmed slightly, then went off entirely.

* * * * *

A few weeks later an agitated Jim Whittaker was trying to come to grips with some troubling data on his desktop screen. He was grimacing, and his face was going red. Suddenly he threw up his hands and fairly exploded. Portly, sixty-ish, a New Yorker through and through, Jim fit the very image of a television station manager, which is exactly what he had been for going on fifteen years. He sputtered at his companion.

"Jesus, Harry, just look at these numbers! How does he expect us to renew his contract with ratings like these?"

Tall, slender Harry, aka 'HOP,' as in Harold Oliver Pollard, wasn't showing much sympathy. As Jim spoke he was slouching aimlessly against the office wall, scratching his backside. "Dunno. He's pretty much living in his own little world, I guess." Jim persisted.

“Well, tell him it’s over. He can’t work for us again next year with viewership figures like these.” Jim was irate, but also puzzled: like a new-century version of Clark Kent’s boss, Perry White.

Harry winced. “He’s not going to be hap-pyyy... He’ll probably find some way to sue us...”

Jim ground his teeth and shook his head in disappointment. “Yeah, well, what else is new? If only people were more interested in this financial advice stuff. It’s to their advantage, after all.”

HOP was skeptical. For some reason his thoughts wandered off to that crown jewel of 80s popular music, ‘Girls Just Want to Have Fun.’ Money was fun, alright, but not so much so if you had to think too hard about how to get it. He had an appropriate reply.

“Sure it’s to their advantage. So’s a colorectal cancer screening.”

Jim grinned, then shrugged. HOP was right, of course. Jim’s news staff had been shrinking, despite his best efforts to stay relevant while remaining entertaining to the public. Serious subjects like financial investment were just not on most people’s tv viewing radar. Nowadays it was all about ancient aliens, fake ghosts, and blonde female celebrities with big mouths and shapely butts. Again he threw up his hands.

“So what’s a station chief to do, Harry? How did Cronkite haul in the viewers? I mean, it’s not like there weren’t plenty of sad things going on back in the sixties and seventies — wars, and civil unrest, and...”

HOP still seemed largely unconcerned. He was now looking vacantly out the window, twenty floors down toward the street level below. Some taxicab had just run into another one in the rain, and arms were flailing. 'Fun times in the Big Apple! He turned back toward Jim.

"Yeah, but remember there was hardly any competition for people's attention in those days. We've discussed this a million times, Jim. It's only when they run out of entertainment that people force themselves to engage. And who's to say what's important, anyway? Would Mr. John Q. citizen — no, would *anyone* — be able to look through the pages of an average scientific journal these days and figure out what the next big thing was going to be? 'The thing that was going to change their life in some important way?'"

Jim went cross-eyed and waved his hands, as if spinning dough for a pair of undersized pizzas. He was getting depressed.

"Okay, so we've got a lot of stupid people out there who are interested in stupid things, and don't want to hear about what's important — assuming, of course, we knew what *was* important... What can we *do*?"

HOP was not by nature an optimistic person, but he figured he should try to do something that would lift his boss's spirits. He started to open his mouth, but not much came out. Instead he just stood there, shaking his hands. "'Uh, just keep on keepin' on, I guess. Something's sure to turn up.'" He forced a smile, then started to walk away, nervously, out of the pit. But a

knock on the outside of the office door ahead stopped him in his tracks.

Jim responded, gruffly. “Yeah...!?” The door swung open. Standing there was Paula, Jim’s long-suffering executive assistant. He waved her in.

She smiled. “Hey boss... I just got this letter addressed to you. It’s pretty weird. I figured you’d want to take a look.”

Jim’s scrunched his face into a familiar scowl. “Yeah? Well, letssee... Who’s it from?”

Paula reached over the desk and passed him a plain-Jane envelope. Jim eyed it for a few moments, then turned his attention to the rather ordinary-looking personal letter that was just peeking out of it.

“Some guy named John DéZar. And check out — the check.”

Jim tilted his glasses down and had a look inside. There was a check, alright, made out to WMVZ, New York. And for five thousand dollars.

His eyebrows went up. “Whoa... What’s the cover letter say?”

“It’s pretty interesting. Read it.”

Jim started to unfold the missive itself. As he did, he thanked Paula, who took this as a request for her to go. She nodded, then turned and left the room, closing the door behind her.

Now, for HOP’s benefit, Jim read the message aloud.

”Dear Mr. Whittaker:

I have heard, and can see from watching your station, that you run a responsible operation. I am in possession of information that I believe will be of great interest to you and your viewers. In fact, I believe I can state accurately that scarcely anything could be of greater interest.

I am desirous of making this information public, and on this basis am inviting you to send your highly impressive station reporter Kerry Phillips to interview me at my home at 423 Stuart Drive, Hopkinsville, New York, on this coming Thursday at one p.m. Please do not commit a lesser-known figure in her stead.

Ms. Phillips should bring with her a mobile cameraman to film the entire event, continuing unbroken from their arrival at our address. Please do not send additional people for this first meeting, though I would be understanding were you to ask the local police to station a patrol vehicle on the street outside as an assurance of your employees' safety.

I realize this is an unusual request, but can only promise that neither individual will be in any danger, and that what is to be revealed is in no way injurious to any party, or in bad taste. My seriousness in this matter is indicated by my enclosed check, which at the least is meant to compensate your station for its time. Please feel free to contact the local bank to confirm that the check is genuine. However please do not circulate mention of this request to additional parties, as I should like this initial meeting kept free of complications.

We (my wife, two children, and I) will be here and waiting at that time. If you do not appear, I will attempt to find another party who is willing to come.

Yours very sincerely, John DéZar.”

Jim set the letter down, shrugged, and looked up at HOP. “Well... shit! — how about that... What do you think, Harry?”

HOP was more than a little suspicious. What kind of a stunt was this?

“God, it’s bizarre! Who could it possibly be from? A prankster? A whistle-blower?”

Jim shook his head. “Not likely. A five thousand dollar prank? A whistle-blower granting an interview in broad daylight with his whole family present? It doesn’t add up.”

“Agreed. Still, it’s got to be some kind of prank.” HOP paused, then suddenly lit up. “Oh God, I’ll bet the whole thing’s been masterminded by one of those idiots over at FOX. They just don’t know when to stop, do they? I’ll bet anything the check’s a fake, and there’s no such address in Hopkinsville, wherever that is.”

Geography was not one of Harry’s stronger points.

Jim arched his eyebrows again. But now his curiosity had been aroused. “Okay, maybe so, but let’s find out. It should be easy to verify the check, and make the street address, if it’s real. And maybe we can even pull up something on this guy DéZar — that’s a pretty unusual name, so it shouldn’t be hard to trace.

What do you say, Harry: are you up for a bit of creative detective work?"

HOP was dubious, but if that's what the boss wanted... He nodded. "Okay, fine. It shouldn't take long to research. One p.m. Thursday is only a little over two days away, though; 'how about if I get back to you on it this afternoon?"

"That works for me." Discussion over. Harry saluted and exited, stage left.

* * * * *

Three hours later HOP was back in his boss's office. Jim smiled and made a conductor's motion for him to have a seat. Harry obliged. He leaned back. Jim kept up the theatrics.

"So, Detective Pollard, what did you find out?"

HOP had a bemused look on his face. "Well, it's *interesting...*"

Jim himself now leaned back, resting his hands behind his head. "So, shoot..."

"Okay. On the personal check... It seems to be genuine. I called the bank, and while they were unwilling to give me all the details, they did verify that a John DéZar had an account with them, and a check numbered 211 had been issued to him for use. Moreover, the check appeared to be for 'a valid amount,' to quote the official."

"Hmmm... What about the street address?"

“That pans out as well. First I had one of my folks consult a criss-cross directory for the town, and the address was listed — it also comes up on Google Maps. He then did a bit of web searching, and get this: the house was sold about eight weeks ago. I got the realtor’s name, called him, and cajoled him into revealing it had been purchased, *for cash*, by one John DéZar.”

Jim’s eyes widened. “Damn! Legit... What about DéZar himself? Any information?”

HOP smiled again. “That’s where it really gets interesting. A web search comes up with absolutely nothing under that name — at least, nothing that could be connected to this context. So, I called in our usual PI, and asked him to check a few sources. Again — nothing.”

Jim was intrigued. “No kidding... So we’re talking about someone who’s either totally under the radar, or has an assumed name. ‘Organized crime? ‘Witness protection program?”

HOP shook his head. “Well, those were my thoughts at first, but the letter we received doesn’t sound like it was written by one of ‘da Boyz.’ ‘Too much erudite language: who uses phrases like ‘in her stead’ and ‘desirous of making public’ these days? This would appear to be a highly educated person, or at least somebody capable of deliberately sounding like one.”

Jim nodded in agreement. “Yes — and given that, he probably knows we’ve noticed. I would guess he

also knows we're checking these things out, and that what we've found is likely to make us even more curious." He stopped for a moment to consider, then gritted his teeth. "Yeah. But that worries me a bit. Regardless of what the letter says, could this thing lead to some kind of a hostage situation — or worse?"

HOP was noncommittal. "'Could be. But aren't there easier ways to collect hostages? Maybe it's got something to do with Kerry herself."

Jim sat, flexing his fingers. "I don't think so. Kerry is becoming something of a celebrity, but she's not worth any more in a hostage situation than anyone else."

There was a short silence. Then the obvious occurred to him. "Might she have done something invasive at some point that could lead to an act of revenge?"

HOP's head swayed as he considered the point. "Again, 'possible, but it doesn't feel right. It wouldn't be that hard to snatch her — or anyone, for that matter — right off the street. Why go through this ritual, and blow five thousand dollars besides?"

Jim nodded, then put it in gear. "Yeah. Get Kerry in here, right away."

* * * * *

Kerry Phillips, ace numero uno field reporter for the station, was filming an on-location spot on the opening of a new hospital wing on the East Side when she got the call to return to the office immediately on finishing

up. It was just after five when she knocked on Jim Whittaker's door.

"Come in Kerry." Jim was cool, giving no hint of what was to come.

Kerry walked in. Thirty years old and in her prime, she was bright, animated, and, of course, slender and pretty. Meeting her for the first time brought on thoughts of Doris Day — in particular that leading lady of the silver screen's famous portrayal of Calamity Jane — and a certain endearing feistiness. More to the point, however, she was absolutely and thoroughly dedicated to her craft. Someday she was going to be moving up the ladder, and it was not merely because she was ambitious and personable. When Phillips delivered a story, she was convincing, and it was no act. The lady lived and breathed the news, feeling the weight of a public that, she thought — probably naively — was crying out to be informed.

She looked around, glimpsing Harry standing to the side. "Hi Boss — HOP — what's up?"

Jim sat back for a moment, saying nothing at first, just gazing at his prize reporter. Then he began his spiel. "Well, earlier today we received a very interesting letter. Read it for yourself."

He leaned over the desk and handed her the letter. Kerry unfolded the single sheet and studied it for a minute, looking increasingly puzzled as she read down through.

On finishing she flashed a smile. “God, this is *really* something, isn’t it?” She stopped short. “But it’s some kind of hoax, right?”

Jim shook his head. “Apparently not. The check appears real, there is such an address, and the house there actually was recently purchased by a guy named DéZar.”

Obviously, a mystery was brewing... Kerry liked mysteries! How intriguing...!

“Hmmm... So what’s the catch? Why has he asked for me?”

Jim tilted his head. “Well, we were hoping you might be able to shed some light on that, dear. Any thoughts?”

Kerry stood silently, bobbing her head back and forth, and tapping her finger against her lips.

“Uh, no... That name certainly doesn’t ring a bell — and that’s one I would remember. And I’ve never even been to Hopkinstown — that’s a small town north of here in the Catskills, right? Maybe it’s just that he’s seen me on the tube, and likes my work. You know, especially the exposé stuff.”

Jim nodded, and smiled. He rarely let on, but he was not just a little proud Kerry was working for him. Merely looking at her always made him feel good. He sat back in the chair again, folding his hands behind his head.

Kerry suddenly had a thought. Up went her index finger. “Ah, maybe the name is an *anagram* for

something else. Yeah!, let's see, uh: Ezdar... Radez... Edzar... Zader... Dazer... uh...?" She looked at her bosses. They weren't buying it. Jim put her out of her misery.

"Here's the thing, Kerry... Would you be interested in actually doing this? Mind you, we're thinking 'some kind of whistleblower thing, most likely, but there're a lot of nutjobs out there, as you well know. Under these conditions it's kind of hard to absolutely guarantee your safety."

Kerry could read the concern in his eyes. "Yeah, I see your point." She stood quietly, considering, then perked up, starting into a two-step 'let's-get-into-it' jig before catching herself. "But hey — I'm a reporter, right? 'Can't shy away from the tough assignments, right? 'Tell you what... It's not more than a couple of hours from here out to Hopkinsville, and even less from my apartment. If you can spare me tomorrow morning, I'll drive on out early and do some snooping around — without, of course, making direct contact. I should be able to get back by, uh, the early afternoon to work on the production of that Boratti story. If I see or hear anything that seems suspicious I'll let you know, and we can reconsider. Then, either we go the following day, or not. Fair enough?"

That seemed reasonable; Jim gave his okay. Conversation turned to the hospital story.

Chapter Two

Kerry was right: it was less than two hours to Hopkinsville, and they were closing in. ‘They’ in this instance were Kerry, an unmarked station vehicle, and Kerry’s longtime cameraman and close friend Tim Van Meter. What a difference between the city and the lush green countryside! Kerry rarely worked outside the City proper, and usually was so absorbed in what she was doing that explorations beyond her near-suburban apartment were rare for her. She had grown up in a small town, but by now had fully embraced city life, both its dazzles and its routines.

It was a sunny late-Spring day, and the drive on the curvy, lightly trafficked state highway had her in good spirits. Tim was helping...

Something caught his attention as he was looking out the passenger’s side window. A huge black bird was greedily snapping at some unseen foodstuff on the ground as the car whizzed by.

“T-W-E-E-E-T??” he mouthed out loud, in a voice at least two octaves deeper than James Earl Jones’s.

Kerry laughed. “What’s all that about?” she asked.

Tim smiled back. “Well, if you’re gonna talk to a big bird like that, you can’t use a cutie-pie tweet, right?”

She laughed and nodded. “I suppose...” Tim could be a bit over the top at times, but he was always fun to be around.

But a few miles outside of town she came back down to reality: it was now well after noon on Thursday.

“So, Tim... I guess I haven’t said much about the nature of this interview. There’s some ‘stuff’ you need to know...”

Tim, forty-ish, long-haired, and by all appearance an import from another era, was slumped down in the passenger’s seat. He’d already realized something was up. Usually Kerry was pretty talky about the project at hand, but this time she’d been atypically sparse with the details. He bobbed his head slowly and gave her an understanding smile.

“Yeah, well, I figured that was coming. Telling me only that we’re driving out here to ‘interview this guy’ is not your normal style.”

She chuckled, just a bit self-consciously. “You know me too well!” She paused, briefly, then continued.

“So it’s like this... A couple of days ago the boss got a letter from some guy out here in the boonies named John DéZar. He wants me to interview him. He didn’t say about what, but implied that it was something of great importance. Attached to the letter was a check for five thousand dollars — made out to the station — included, apparently, to spike our interest.”

Tim stared at her. “Five thousand dollars?? Isn’t it normally the interviewers who pay out, not the interviewees?”

“True enough...” She paused to stretch out an index finger: “but wait, there’s more! The station verified the authenticity of the check, the address of the house, and the fact that it had recently been purchased by a Mr. DéZar. We were still a bit suspicious, so I offered to drive out here yesterday morning to have a look around.”

Tim was still following.

“You went, I take it?”

“Yup.”

“Did you find anything interesting?”

Kerry shook her head. “Not really. I drove past the house; it’s good-sized but pretty ordinary-looking — generic early-twentieth century. ’No activity inside that I could see, though all the blinds were down or drapes closed. ’No car out front. There’re a couple of neighbors, but the homes are spaced pretty far apart... Whoops!” Kerry swerved the vehicle to avoid an oblivious squirrel out for a noonday stroll.

Tim waited for more, but there wasn’t any. He was forced to prompt her. “Was that it?”

She smiled. “No, that only took a few seconds. There are a couple of small stores a mile or so away, the kind local residents might be frequenting, so I inquired — very discretely — about the ‘new folks,’ and got just the most limited of responses. But one of the clerks did remember a middle-aged man who bought some food and wrote them checks from a local bank on a few

occasions a little while back, and they did recall the name DéZar, it being so unusual.

“Hmmm. ‘Nothing very strange there, really.”

“No, but then I stopped in at the local realty office that had arranged the sale of the house several weeks ago. The agent remembered the sale, of course, and told me a couple of things he hadn’t mentioned over the phone to HOP on Tuesday.” Again Kerry felt the urge for a tease, and coyly stopped talking. Tim bit.

“And...?”

She looked over and smiled. “Well, as he told HOP, the sale was a cash one. Harry should have explored that comment a bit further, because it really was a *cash* sale: a hundred and sixty thousand dollars in bills, mostly hundreds, in a shoebox.”

Tim’s eyes opened wider. “Je-e-esh! Wasn’t the agent just a little bit suspicious?”

“He was, but this DéZar character said he represented a large firm that didn’t want to leave a paper trail, and that the agent could check a sample of the bills of his choosing to verify that there was nothing illicit involved. The agent did just that, and found nothing wrong. So a few days later he collected the money and closed the deal, turning the keys to the house over to DéZar.”

Tim sat still for a moment, now fully engaged. “Did this guy DéZar show him any kind of identification that might make the whole thing any easier to swallow? Did

DéZar give him an indication of what he wanted the house for?”

“Apparently, he made the transaction seem so natural that the realtor just accepted it all. He showed him a couple of picture i.d.s, including a state driver’s license. Of course, these can be faked. He said his company needed an out-of-the-way location where he could work on a special project for a couple of months or more without distractions or drawing attention. Oh — and the agent said the man made a point of telling him that despite the ‘e’ the pronunciation of the name was like ‘D-a-y Z-A-R,’ with the emphasis on the ‘Z-A-R’ second syllable.”

Tim processed this information silently for a few moments, then responded. “Woww... I gotta say, this is all very mysterious-sounding. So why, after all this effort to keep things on the down-low, is he suddenly coming out?”

Kerry smiled. “Well, now, that’s the million-dollar question, isn’t it...? If he’s had a change of mind and wishes to expose his employer on some kind of wrongdoing, why does he want to do this in front of his whole family, as his letter suggests? Or will the family actually be there? And why does he also specifically say in the letter that what he is about to do ‘is in no way injurious to any party’? It just doesn’t add up.”

Tim could only agree. “No, it doesn’t. But I guess we’re about to find out, one way or the other: there’s

the ‘Welcome to Hopkinsville’ sign. How close are we to the house?”

“Pretty close. But we have one short stop to make first.”

“Really? ‘How come?”

“You’ll see.”

She motioned ahead, and a few hundred fenceposts down the road flashed the car’s turn signal, slowed up, and guided the vehicle into the parking lot of a local diner. Hopkinsville was pretty small, this being one of only four eating spots in the whole town.

“What are we doing here?” Tim asked.

“Look right there.” She pointed toward a town constable’s vehicle, now just in front of them. Two officers were sitting inside the car. “We arranged to have a couple of boys in blue — uh, I guess these guys are in brown — park outside the house until we’re sure that nothing’s amiss.”

“Makes sense. Are you expecting trouble?”

“No, but since we don’t know exactly what’s going on, it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

Kerry got out of the vehicle and went over to talk to the police. In less than two minutes she was back with Tim, and they were on their way again.

“Okay... I’ve asked the officers to drive over to the house, just behind our vehicle, and park out front with us, in plain view. DéZar’s letter said he would be fine with such a move. They’ll exit their vehicle and stand next to it, but not accompany us up the walk. Per the

letter's instructions, you should start shooting as soon as we get out of the vehicle and move onto the property. That makes me a bit nervous. Apparently DéZar wants the *whole* visit taped, as if it were being *documented*, more than just recorded. Are you okay with all this?"

Tim shrugged. "Well, I've been in tricky spots before — spots where it was apparent *beforehand* that things could go downhill quickly. I gather that's not the case here. Anyway: what the hell, no guts no glory, as they say!"

Kerry grinned. "That's the spirit!"

A few minutes later they arrived. "There's the house, on the left" she piped, glancing at her watch. "Good, we're pretty close to being right on time."

Tim inspected it as they approached. Yeah, Kerry was right: it *was* totally ordinary-looking — 'rural nondescript' might have been the right vernacular term to describe it. All the blinds and shades were still closed. The two vehicles slowed to a stop in unison, parking directly along the road, a little less than a hundred feet from the front door of the house. Kerry shut off her vehicle's engine, the police following suit a few seconds later.

Kerry looked over at Tim, who was in position to heft his shoulder-mounted video gear. "You ready?"

He nodded. "Let's do it!"

Slowly, the two got out of the car. A moment later the policemen emerged and took up a casual stance

leaning against their cruiser, in clear view. Tim raised the camera to his shoulder, and began to record. He and Kerry then moved cautiously up the walkway toward the front door, stopping right in front of it. Without looking back first, Kerry straightened her short blonde hair, knocked, and spoke out.

“Hello, Mr. DéZar! It’s Kerry Phillips from WMVZ News in New York! Are you there?”

After a short pause, a rather plain-sounding voice was heard from inside. “Yes, we are home. Thank you for coming. Give us a few moments to sit down as a family, and then open the door and let yourself in.”

Kerry stood silently for a moment, raised her arm and crossed her fingers for the benefit of the police, then in a low voice asked Tim, “Are you running?”

“Roger that” was the reply.

She drew a breath, then opened the door and peered into the inside of the house. Compared to the bright daylight outside, it was rather dark.

Seated neatly on a sofa, about twenty feet ahead through an open doorway, were four dimly-lit figures, quite obviously two adults and two small children. One of the adults spoke up right away.

“Good afternoon. Thank you so much for coming. I’m John DéZar, and this is my family.”

Chapter Three

Kerry stood still in the entranceway, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the change in brightness. When at last that had happened, she started. To say the least, the scene was not anything like what she had been expecting! Yes, there were indeed four figures seated on the sofa, but they all appeared to be wearing ghoulish, reptile-like masks. And Halloween was still months away!

A bit confused, she spoke without thinking. “Okay, so why are you dressed like this? Are these disguises so we can’t identify you?” Yeah, that would seem to make sense: a whistleblower might do that.

DéZar waited a moment, then spoke again.

“No, these are not disguises. This is the way we actually look.”

Kerry made a strange expression, took a moment to process, then whispered back to Tim.

“Are you getting all this?”

“Christ. Absolutely.”

Kerry, with a great effort at self-composure, took a few steps forward. Tim followed with the camera.

“What do you mean by ‘This is the way we actually look’?”

DéZar answered. “I mean just that. This is the reason I have asked you to come here.”

Kerry was speechless for a moment, but then got the brain cells back on track. Raising a palm toward

DéZar, she said “one moment please,” then turned to Tim, whispering “keep shooting; I’ll be right back.” With that she darted out of the house and over to the police, who were still standing near their vehicle. Trying to be as nonchalant as possible, she blurted out “Uh, look... Something pretty weird is going on in there, but I don’t think we have a dangerous situation. Please get back in the cruiser and stay there ’til I signal you that it’s okay to leave.”

They nodded, and did as asked. Kerry bounded back into the house. Tim, frozen in his shoes, was still shooting the DéZars from about ten feet away.

Kerry cleared her throat. She was beginning to locate interview mode.

“Okay then... I’m Kerry, and this is my cameraman Tim Van Meter. We got your letter, of course, and — ”

She was interrupted. One of the goblin-children, plainly terrified, suddenly broke into a full bawl, crying out uncontrollably. DéZar picked it — her? — up and tried to console it, speaking in words from some strange, unidentifiable tongue. But, they obviously meant something like “Now, now, dear, it’s all right, everything is okay. Daddy’s here and you needn’t be afraid.”

Kerry lost interview mode again. Her face crumpled. She was not used to terrifying — goblin children...

“I’m, I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to frighten her...”

The child slowly calmed down. DéZar put his hand up and spoke again.

“Yes, yes, I understand. We warned the children many times that you would look like the images on the television, but I guess this was to be expected.”

He paused, realizing he had yet to finish his introductions.

“I have been remiss in not introducing the members of my family. This is my wife Joan, and my children Tal and Valla.” They nodded to Kerry as they were pointed out in turn. Joan DéZar was trying hard not to show it, but her anxiety was palpable. “We have asked you here because we need your help, and, possibly, because you may need ours.”

Right... Kerry looked more closely at DéZar’s scaly, naked reptilian skin and face and couldn’t help but ask the obvious.

“How in heaven’s name did you come to look like this? Have you been in some kind of accident? Have you been this way since birth?”

DéZar smiled — that was apparent, at least, regardless of the rest of the way he looked.

“You are making the assumption that there is something *wrong* with us, but that does not seem to be the case.”

Kerry was understandably confused. “What do you mean ‘that doesn’t seem to be the case’?”

DéZar replied, simply, “Well, we appear to be functioning normally. We’re just not human.”

Of course, Kerry thought, they're just not human...

"Well, what are you then?" A dash of annoyance flavored the words of her query. DéZar read the tone immediately.

"I quite understand your skepticism; I would have some as well were I in your shoes. But unfortunately, we do not know exactly what we are."

This was getting more and more weird. Of all the crazy...

DéZar raised his hands. "Please let me try to explain in some detail. And please keep recording."

Kerry nodded. "All right. Enlighten me." Kerry was not above outright sarcasm when she suspected she was being taken for a ride.

DéZar put his arm around his wife, and settled himself.

"This is our story. For now I will just tell it; later you may have your turn at efforts to verify. Agreed?"

That was not unreasonable, she thought. "Fine. Continue."

DéZar paused for a moment to take a breath, then dove in. "About fifteen of your day-night cycles ago the four of us suddenly awoke, in unison, on this very sofa. We were highly surprised, to say the least. Although we somehow felt we knew each other intimately, we had no memories whatsoever of any events that might have taken place before we woke up. From all appearances, we seem to be suffering from what you term 'amnesia.'

We can only surmise that these circumstances have come about as the result of a deliberate act.”

“How’s that?” God, Kerry thought, this just gets better and better...

“Because... When we awoke, we saw, placed directly in front of us, a document. This is that document.” DéZar leaned over, picked up a single sheet of paper, and passed it on to Kerry. On it were printed the words:

To John DéZar and family:

Do not be afraid. You have been put here, at this place and time, to take part in an important initiative, the details of which, for the moment, cannot be revealed to you. Your memory of the past has been temporarily suspended with the understanding that the free mind you currently possess will be of greater value to you accordingly.

Your presence at this place and time does not come without potential dangers to yourselves, but be assured that in the end all will be made right, and that you will gain a wealth of knowledge and satisfaction from this experience.

To make sense of your situation, you are to do what comes naturally to you to do. We know that you will do the right thing, and that your acts will not harm those you come into contact with. But there are residents of this place and time who will be suspicious of your motives for being here, even if you are without motives. To protect yourself, you should make contact with a reliable public figure

who can make your presence and activities known to as many as possible, as quickly as possible.

You will find most of the technology of this place and time familiar, and should immediately begin to use it to identify and seek out an appropriate contact. Once you have found such a person and enlisted his or her help, you should attempt to make for yourself, as much as possible, a “normal life” for this place and time. John, you will find your superior knowledge of mathematics useful in this respect.

The ultimate reason for your being in this place and time will become apparent to you in due course.

It was unsigned.

Kerry was stunned. Could any of this be on the level?

DéZar continued his narrative.

“On reading this document, and critically considering the fact of our simultaneous ‘awakening’ and the evidence of our own bodies, clearly unlike those we began to examine through your electronic images programming, we concluded that, as the note says, we must be part of something much greater than ourselves.”

Not surprisingly, Kerry was having some difficulty putting all of this together. So... It was looking like she had been chosen as the contact who would make these beings known to all ‘in this place and time’... That was, of course, if the DéZars were not just a bunch of crazy people! Ah, but maybe there was a simple way to find

out... She pursued the thought, remaining aware that Tim was still filming.

“Mr. DéZar, I gather from what was just said that you’ve found yourselves to be anatomically different from human beings. Would you be willing to prove both to my satisfaction, and to the world at large, that this is the case?”

He bowed his head. “Certainly. Any examination that is not physically invasive or physiologically or mentally destructive would be acceptable. Consider, however, the other members of my family off-limits in this regard, at least for now.”

She nodded. “Understandable.” Kerry gathered up her courage, then asked “Would you be willing for me to examine you as closely as I can now, so I can decide whether to bring in others who would apply more definitive tests?”

“Yes, of course. You may begin immediately. Do not hold back, and rest assured that we do not share with humans a sense of shyness about certain bodily parts, especially those that are related to the reproductive acts.”

Great, Kerry thought. What have I just backed myself into?

Joan and the children were dismissed for the time being. She took them outside to play.

Moving closer to DéZar, and despite his assurances regarding lack of shyness, Kerry began her examination with parts of his person constituting relatively safe

terrain. After a minute or two of looking around the inside of his mouth, however, she realized she needed to touch base with the officers waiting outside. She excused herself again and left the house a second time. After assuring them that things were proceeding safely inside, she asked that they stay in waiting mode for perhaps another twenty minutes, at which point she thought it would be likely she could release them from further duty. This again raised no suspicions; they figured she was just carrying out some kind of interview. She also reported back to her office, stating for the moment that “everything was okay” and that she would get back to them with details when she could.

The more Kerry investigated, the more this DéZar person actually seemed to be other than a ‘human’ person. After the twenty minutes she went outside and sent the local police home — still without giving any indication of what was really going on inside the house, of course.

By the time another half hour of poking, prodding, pinching, and flashlighting was over, Kerry was beginning to think it might be time to call in reinforcements. Could this be the real thing: first public contact with a genuine alien lifeform!? If so, what to do? If this lifeform really had a mission to perform that was important in some greater sense, merely turning it over to the authorities might be entirely the wrong action. Probably no one but a select

few would ever hear from it again; such is the mentality of the military and the government.

Sure, if aliens, the DéZars might represent a security issue, but treating them in an unfriendly way also seemed problematic. Would we really want to antagonize some well-meaning alien population by allowing four of their unarmed and unbelligerent representatives to be kidnapped and sequestered? She began to believe that the agenda laid out in the message the DéZars found made sense: that they quickly be made so well known that the public would find any interference by a meddling institution like the government intolerable.

As Tim spelled his shoulder and camera for a moment, she got on the phone with her boss, on his personal cell phone. It was now mid-afternoon and Jim was still in the office.

“Hey boss!”

“Kerry — so how are things going? What’s it all about?”

Kerry drew a breath. ‘Where to begin?’

“Well, please listen, and listen carefully...” Yes, this *was* the boss she was speaking to, but she felt an urge to go dramatic. “I think we may have something here that is so fantastic that we never could have imagined it happening. Do I have your attention?”

Jim sat up straight in his chair. “Well... of course... What are we talking about?”

Kerry decided to just spurt it out. “Uh, ‘what we are talking about’ is very possibly a real contact with an alien being.”

Jim considered the remark for a moment, then broke out laughing. “Okay, sure... So what’s *actually* going on?”

Well — this reaction was predictable, really... Kerry decided to cut to the chase. “Look, here’s how it is. You and HOP need to jump into one of your cars and get up here *immediately*. You should bring with you a medical internist, portable x-ray equipment, and a PhD-level mathematician. You should pay the specialists whatever they require to make them drop what they’re doing to accompany you. Don’t tell anyone what you’re doing or why, and only make clear to the specialists that what they are getting involved in is safe, could be of historic proportions, and that they are sworn to secrecy, at least for the time being. Don’t use a car that has station markings on it.”

Jim was stunned. He sat silently for a moment, then barked into his phone: “Christ, you’re serious about this, aren’t you? Tell me this is not just a bad joke — I won’t be happy if it is!”

Now Kerry tried her best to sound sincere. “Boss, I’m being absolutely on the level. We walked in the door, and here’s this lizard-like ‘humanoid,’ I guess you’d say, sitting on the couch with what appears to be his — its? — family. He says he doesn’t understand how he got here — that his memory of previous events

has been wiped — but apparently he was given written instructions that he should contact someone who can make his presence here known to everyone. He seems to be afraid — and I can't say that I blame him — that the government or military might otherwise swoop in and make him instantly disappear.”

Jim scratched his head.

“Do you buy any of this?”

“I do — maybe. I just spent an hour examining his, uh, ‘physical person,’ and he decidedly is ‘different,’ as near as I can tell. But I think we need someone up here we trust who can verify the story. The doctor and x-ray equipment are obvious enough, but he says he has superior mathematical abilities, so we need to test that too.”

Jim was still stunned. Kerry could sense the uneasiness, but she knew how to bring him around.

“Boss, this DéZar guy may or may not be on the level, but consider the possible upside. He says he wants us to publicize his presence, to the point of documenting his every waking moment — maybe his sleep-time too, if he sleeps, for all I know. If we could do this as part of station programming, perhaps an hour a day or week of the more interesting stuff, imagine what that would do for our ratings! It would be the biggest thing ever to hit television!”

Jim’s eyes widened. Absolutely! Yeah, if it’s real... But what were the chances of that... !

He relented. “Okay okay, you’ve convinced me, for now at least. I’ll try to get it together, as you suggest. But I can already sense that it’s not going to be that simple, even if the reality of it all pans out. There’s no way we could just spring this on the public. Without their prior knowledge the government would find some way to shut us down within minutes of trying to break such a story. We would need to get them to buy in beforehand; to not feel threatened. That will take some doing.”

Kerry nodded to herself. She hadn’t thought it out that far.

“We can discuss this when you get here. I see what you’re saying, but I’m not sure they’re to be trusted on something like this...”

Jim cut in. “Again, I don’t think we would have a choice. Anyway, first things first — perhaps it will turn out to be some kind of charade after all, and we’ll all be scraping egg off our faces.”

Kerry tried to be convincing.

“Honest, boss, it sure seems like the real thing! Remember, I was in medical school for a year before I decided to switch over to journalism, so I’m not that easy to fool...”

“We’ll see. I hope you’re right. I also hope this isn’t the beginning of something awful, even if you *are* right. I’m worried about the DéZars’ convenient loss of memory. Still, it seems a distinctly unlikely way of starting an alien invasion, or something.”

Kerry *had* thought about that. “Yeah, it’s hard to imagine any reason to be so out front, when any number of other approaches would be easier. Jim, please let me know when you’re ready to leave, and when you’re a few minutes away from arriving. I’ll text you exact directions in a few minutes.”

“Roger that, Kerry. G’bye kid — ’never a dull minute with you...”

Chapter Four

Kerry put her phone away and returned to the living room. Joan and the children were back; they were all talking in the same unidentifiable language. Tim got onto the camera again as Kerry approached. John DéZar pointed toward his children and then spoke to her in English — perfect English, if with a slight, indescribably clipped accent.

“They want to go play in the other room. I’ve set up the computer so they can access a variety of games.” He motioned to them to do so, and they sped away. He smiled, then looked back at Kerry.

“You’ve not questioned me yet about my language skills. I assume they must interest you.”

Kerry nodded. But she needed to get something done first. “John, I’m supposing for the moment that you really are who you say you are. I hope you don’t intend to make a fool out of me. If you have somehow rigged all this, this will probably mean the end of my career.”

“I understand. I have no intention to lie to anyone about anything. My instructions seem to be clear to the extent that I should be as straightforward about everything as I can be. And I just do not feel it natural, somehow, to lie.”

Kerry hoped so.

“All right then, about language... Obviously you picked up English at some point, and quite perfectly, at that. How do you account for that?”

DéZar’s head bobbed a little bit. “I cannot. It seems likely, however, that in some prior existence I was trained in English, for the purpose of communicating in this place and time. But that is as much as I have been able to figure out, so far.”

Kerry seized on the remark. “Do you mean to say that you are actively trying to figure out how and why it is that you have come to, as you put it, ‘this place and time’?”

He nodded affirmatively. “I am indeed. It appears to be in my nature to try to understand such things, and in any case I am merely doing what my instructions say I should do.”

“Do you expect that you’ll be able to figure things out?”

DéZar shook his hands, apologetically. “Honestly, I do not know. Possibly I will eventually figure out what specifically I need to do here, and do it, but just as likely I will be told what to do at some point in the future by the controlling entities.”

Kerry was not quite ready for that remark. “The ‘controlling entities’? Who or what are these?”

DéZar shook his head again. “I have no idea. But there must be some; one cannot just not exist and then suddenly exist. Someone or something sent us here, deliberately.”

Kerry nodded in assent. “Do you have any theories on why these ‘entities’ should just put you here, and not go ahead and give you your mission at the outset?”

DéZar raised his hand and extended a digit. “Yes, on that I *do* have a theory. But I am not confident it is the *correct* theory.” He stopped.

Kerry waited for him to continue, but when he didn’t, prompted further.

“Well...?”

“I am not sure I should say this, but it *is* what I have tentatively concluded, so I will tell you. But it sounds — how might you say — self-centered.”

Kerry smiled to herself. For someone possibly about to become the most famous being on Earth, just about any thought stated or action performed would be viewed as ‘self-centering.’ She waited for him to continue. After a few moments, he did.

“Well, I have entertained the possibility or likelihood that I have not yet been told what I should do because the controlling entities want to see how we, as beings, are received by the humans of this place and time. I cannot see any other reason why they would want me put into the public spotlight so deliberately.”

Kerry considered the remark and thought it a fair conclusion. But she could think of no immediate follow-up, so switched topics.

“Getting back to language. We of course noticed that you speak a different language, one we cannot

identify, when communicating with your family. Is this, I assume, your native or natural tongue?"

"Yes, at least I am supposing so. But Joan and I are the only two who also speak English. The children do not. We find this a bit puzzling, and it is of course hard on them. They are unable to appreciate, except in a very general way, what is going on during your media broadcasts."

Kerry agreed that this was odd. She had a further question on that.

"Do you suppose this is meant to allow them to concentrate more on emotional content, such as that connected with music?"

DéZar seemed unconvinced. "Possibly, but I think it unlikely. More likely, it simply protects them from what they might otherwise perceive as threatening or confusing remarks. Of course, if we are here long enough they can simply learn English. Maybe this in itself is the object; it will give them something to do that will occupy their attention."

Kerry decided it was time to get Mrs. DéZar — 'Joan' — into the picture.

"May I ask your wife some questions?"

"Of course."

Actually, Kerry had no idea what she should say to her. "Welcome to Earth!?" "Did you move here because the schools are good?" "Do you have a good recipe for lasagna I could use? — I really like lasagna..." She smiled to herself, then gave it her best shot.

“Mrs. DéZar, is there anything in what your husband says that you can add to?”

Mrs. DéZar sat still. Kerry wasn’t sure she was going to answer her. But finally she did.

“Not really. I am even more at a loss to explain our circumstances than is he. But I see no reason not to go along with his conclusions so far.”

Kerry had a thought.

“Do you suppose that you and the children have been included in this ‘visit’ as a way of putting humans more at ease — that is, so we will appreciate you as being more similar to ourselves than your outward appearance might otherwise suggest?”

She thought about it for a moment, then nodded. “If what my husband suggests is so, then that would seem to make sense. But I have an additional theory that I think he agrees with.”

“Yes...?”

“Well, in your own society, spouses discuss conclusions and plans together. This is clear enough from your television programming, even if most of it is merely dramatization. And John needs to know that he is not a side of one, against this new environment.”

Kerry nodded. She was pleased with this answer.

“I see. So your presence makes it easier for him to come to his conclusions.”

“Yes. Conclusions may be reached logically, but they should also *feel* correct. It is a complex challenge to meet what our instructions call doing the ‘right

thing,' and it helps to have two perspectives engaged for each decision."

Kerry smiled. A woman — well, a *female*, at least — after her own heart!

The interview began to dissolve into simple conversation. Kerry found out that, not surprisingly, the DéZars had been quick reads when it came to picking up the basic details of day-to-day human living. The house had been fully stocked with foodstuffs in preparation for their arrival, but these were slowly but surely being depleted, leading to another, more practical, reason for making outside contact when they did. On about the third day they had noticed deliveries to the outside mailbox. Curious, they went outside after dark to retrieve the contents, and with some help from the internet quickly pieced together the principles of the public mail system. The house had been equipped with state-of-the-art cable, satellite, hardware, and software systems which they quickly learned to exploit. A message had been left them describing how to write checks to pay bills or for purchases, or alternately how to pay for things electronically. But they had decided to remain secluded until they found a sponsoring human.

All the while Tim kept filming.

Smaller and smaller talk ensued. It was almost like communicating with people who had recently been rescued from an entire life of blindness: the conclusions the DéZars were piecing together were both a challenge to them, and exciting acts of discovery.

Microwave ovens, flush toilets, fuse boxes, television schedules, advertisement flyers, etc. etc. — all were new to the family, at least to the extent of their details of function. Yet they had just enough basic knowledge to figure out those details.

The time was now past six. Kerry's cell phone buzzed. It was her boss.

"Hey... Okay, I've done as you suggested. We've found a couple of professional people to help us out; they've sworn themselves to secrecy but are excited, though skeptical. Well — so am I... We're just about ready to leave. Do you have any final requests?"

"No, just try to be as inconspicuous as possible. You'll probably reach here after eight o'clock, and it won't be entirely dark yet. The neighbors' houses are fairly close in either direction — maybe a few hundred feet away — and we don't want them getting curious. Give me a call when you're about ten minutes out."

"Will do. And Kerry — this better be on the level. I will not be pleased if it isn't."

For a moment Kerry saw all she had been working so hard for possibly crashing down around her. It was not a pleasant image.

"I understand. I can only say that to the best I can tell, this looks real."

"Okay then. 'Talk to you shortly."

* * * * *

Evening shadows were getting longer and longer as Kerry continued to ‘interview’ the DéZars. John was especially interested in just how much reliability could be put on the television programming he and his family had been taking in. Was it a real source of information, or just some kind of self-serving stylization of human cultural reality — a fantasy? What about the internet? Could either or both be considered a source for facts, or should one approach them as actually saying more about human dreams and delusions than the reality of things?

The phone rang. Kerry was discussing some of the things about human beings the DéZars found peculiar so far, like why it was that most of the commercials on television that make fun of their characters leave men, not women, the butt of the joke, and had lost track of time. She answered.

“Hello.”

It was Jim. “Hi, it’s me. We seem to be getting close. Are your instructions good enough to get us right there?”

“I think so. It’s a small town. Don’t you use Google maps?”

“Uh, no — I’m old school, yunno... Anyway, ’see you in a few!”

Kerry put her phone away and turned back to the DéZars. “You realize, when they get here, they’re gonna want to do a lot more pinching and prodding...”

Mr. DéZar nodded. “Yes, of course. This I fully expected, and have no issues with. Ultimately, the authorities will have to be fully convinced that I am who I say I am before the public can be informed.”

A few minutes later they heard a vehicle approaching outside. It slowed to a stop, then shut off. Moments later there was a knock at the front door. Kerry went out to greet the visitors.

On opening the door she saw that, sure enough, four people were standing and waiting. Their expressions belied nervous anticipation; no surprise there! She smiled.

“Hi boss; HOP!” Beyond them were rooted two strangers. Kerry gestured. “I gather these are our experts?”

Jim nodded. “Yes indeed: Kerry Phillips, this is Dr. Maynard Small, and Prof. Ann Schelling, both from NYU.”

Kerry stepped forward and shook hands; “Nice to meet you both” was all she felt necessary to add. “I hope you all had a pleasant drive out here...?”

Jim’s mood was not detectable. He replied, somewhat stiffly, “It was okay...”

Silence for a moment, then Jim spoke.

“So how are things going here?”

Kerry smiled. “Fine. You’ll see. Uh, I assume you’ve fully let Drs. Small and Schelling in on their mission?”

“Uh-huh. So let’s get on with it. Where are the DéZars?”

“Inside, in the living room. Their children went to bed a few minutes ago. ‘Probably just as well. Shall we proceed?’ He nodded, and the group moved inside.

Joan and John were sitting on the couch, looking more relaxed than one might have foreseen.

As the parties came together, Tim was still filming. Kerry made introductions. After a brief silence, and a lot of strange looks, John spoke up first.

“Well, can we get you something to drink — some water perhaps?” He passed separate glances around to the four newcomers, for responses. Jim recoiled momentarily, then politely replied “Okay, thanks.” HOP was standing speechless; the best he could do was to weakly wave his hands “I’ll pass.” The two doctors followed suit.

John had apparently been absorbing his sit-com television. He motioned to Joan, asking her to get some water for their guest from the refrigerator. As soon as she left, Jim took a step forward, and forced himself to deliver a first statement.

“Look, Mr. DéZar, you must understand how difficult all this is for us to take in, or believe. I trust Kerry’s instincts, but, after all, our first thoughts on this were that it must be some kind of hoax. If this is the case, then even a five thousand dollar check is not going to make things right.”

Joan was back with the water, and handed it to Jim. He examined her face, looking into her eyes. “Thank you...” he stuttered.

John now replied. “First, I would like to thank you so much for actually coming, and Kerry and Tim for being patient with us. I promise you that all of this is completely on the level, at least to the extent that we ourselves can confirm it.”

Jim looked at him quizzically: “What do you mean?”

“I mean, and as I have told Kerry, we have no memory of events before our sudden simultaneous appearances here, so what we are and why we are here is at present something of a blank page. We might be what you term ‘aliens,’ or even, in theory, some aberrant kind of human, or form of artificial intelligence. To the extent I can determine, however, the last two possibilities seem very unlikely.”

Jim stood still, processing. “Okay, fair enough. We can proceed as planned for now, and try at least to establish what you are *not*. But even if we come up with a tentative answer, the notion that you have no memory, or acknowledged mission, is not going to make anyone happy.”

John nodded. “I fully understand. Nevertheless, whatever the reasons are for our being here, they must have some considerable significance to your race. I personally feel obliged to pursue this, and hope that you can understand the gravity of the situation.”

Jim stroked his chin. “Well I admit that I was contemplating this very point on the car trip up here, and agree with your point. So let’s get started with the examination. Doctors Small and Schelling, shall we unload the equipment from the car?”

Within minutes everything was set up, and the poking and prodding began anew.

* * * * *

Ten o’clock, eleven o’clock, and midnight came and went. A bit short of one o’clock Jim, HOP, and the two docs gathered together with Kerry and Tim in the living room. On finishing up with the examinations, John had been allowed to turn in for the night. Kerry, HOP and Tim were present during all of the ‘poking and prodding,’ but after a while Jim had decided to take a nap, as he probably would be the one driving back to New York in the wee hours after all was finished. He was eager to get an immediate appraisal.

“Okay, Dr. Snell. You’ve had a fair amount of time to examine DéZar: what do you think?”

Snell tilted his head a bit, then started in. “It’s getting late, and I’d like to get back to the City. I’ll take a day off tomorrow and write up a full report, so I think I’ll just give you a quick verdict...”

All eyes were on him. “I must say, I have never seen a *human* specimen that even borders on what I just saw. I have taken some tissue and fluid specimens for an additional look back in our labs, but physiologically

and morphologically ‘Mr.’ DéZar simply does not appear to be a member of the *Homo sapiens* family. I don’t know if he is an alien or not, but he certainly doesn’t appear to be human. He seems to be more reptilian than mammalian, I would say, but even that appraisal may be off-target.”

Jim’s eyes widened. Damn! Hot shit! Restraining himself, he turned to the mathematician.

“Uh, how about you, Dr. Schelling...? Is DéZar as talented a numbers guy as we’ve been led to believe?”

Schelling smiled approvingly, and nodded. “Well, I brought with me three moderately difficult mathematical problems I figured I could ask him to solve. The first one he actually had a bit of trouble with at first, but then succeeded. He then whizzed through the last two faster than I have ever seen them solved, including by well-established professional mathematicians. He is obviously highly competent; how much better than even that I’m not certain I could say without further study — maybe a *lot* of study.”

Jim stood silently for a moment. He wasn’t sure what needed to be said next. Finally he spoke. “I guess that does it, then. Drs. Small and Schelling, we are much indebted. Can you please put your equipment back in the car, and give us a few minutes here to discuss what comes next?”

‘Nods all around, leaving Jim, HOP, Tim and Kerry to their big decision.

Actually, of course, it was all up to Jim. He plunged in.

“Well, I guess I’m pretty impressed. ‘Sorry to doubt you at first, Kerry... But obviously we possibly have something special going on here. I’m still not one hundred percent sure of that, but I think we have enough to go on to move to the next level. In this instance I think ‘the next level’ means the *top* level. They can always overrule us — I can already imagine several grounds — but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t at least put it out there. I’ll try to think it out on the way back to New York. In the meantime, Kerry, we’ll have you and Tim stay here and continue to document the situation. Leave a note for the DÉZars telling them we will take up their cause, then find a local motel to overnight. Come back here in the morning, and consider this your post for the time being. Tim, I’ll call your family to let them know you’re going to be on special assignment for a few days. Does all that sound okay?”

Nods all around.

“Alright then — ‘back to the City.”

The long and eventful day was over. Or maybe just starting.

Chapter Five

The voice on the phone sounded appropriately deferential.

“Mr. President, hello sir, this Jim Whittaker, station director at WMVZ in New York. Thank you for speaking with me.”

President Coady cleared his throat. “Uh, yes, hello Mr. Whittaker. You have my attention — after all, it’s not very often that a civilian calls the White House on a ‘matter of the highest importance’ and even specifically requests a secure connection. I hope you are not wasting the taxpayers’ time and money.”

Whittaker gulped. “Yes sir. What I am calling about is a serious matter, and I hope you realize that my reputation will be on the line, and that I am perfectly aware that’s the case.”

The President was accepting. “Okay then. Proceed. What’s this about?”

Whittaker paused, then began to spell it out.

“Sir, a few days ago we at the station received a request to meet with someone residing in a small town upstate. To the surprise of our reporter, a family of four had asked for her — our — assistance in making their presence known to the public at large.”

President Coady cut in. “Fine... What was the reason for this request?”

Jim knew he had to just spit it out, but that was not easy...

“Sir — and please know that I say this in all seriousness — it turned out that we are dealing with, in all likelihood, a family of alien beings: ‘alien,’ that is, as from ‘Outer Space’.”

For a moment, not surprisingly, there was silence at the other end of the line.

Coady could only say “Honestly... Are you being quite straight with me, Mr. Whittaker?”

Jim was quick to reply.

“Yes sir, I’m afraid I am. Our reporter contacted me, asking us to bring out some professional people to verify the authenticity of the claim. We did — and I went out too — and damned if the whole thing doesn’t seem legit. There really does appear to be a family of four alien beings out there who are asking us to put them out into the public spotlight.”

Coady shook himself. Could this really be happening?

“Alright. Saying for a moment that this is not some kind of hoax, or joke...” Coady’s staff had already verified that Whittaker and the station were real, and that the call was coming from where it was supposed to be coming from, so at least that was not a problem “ — and by the way I am aware of your reputation, and can accept you could be sincere in thinking this is what’s going on — what’s the point? That is, where is this family from, and what do they say they want?”

Whittaker gulped. “Sir, I’m afraid it doesn’t get any better on that score. The family — they go by the name

DéZar — claims not to have any memory of events preceding the last two weeks. Mr. — ‘John’ — DéZar says they just suddenly woke up as a group on the sofa, facing a sheet of paper with a short message on it that gave no hint of why they were there, just that they shouldn’t worry.”

“Should we worry, Mr. Whittaker?”

Jim caught the inference right away. “I could sense no immediate threat, sir. John DéZar came across to us as being quite sincere. Still, I certainly understand your concern...”

Indeed, thought Coady. “Fine... So what are you suggesting we do next?”

That remark surprised Jim. He had heard Coady was a reasonable person, but this was the United States Government, after all...

“Sir, the way we see it, if this continues to look like it’s on the level, it’s got to be one of the very most important events in our history. If it foreshadows something bad, I’m not sure it’s something we can avoid anyway. On the other hand, and assuming the DéZars actually *have* been put here by some alien intelligence, we would not be making a very good impression were we to suppress their wishes, straightforward as they are.”

The president looked upward, toward the ceiling. Visions of little green men — *angry* little green men — filled his mind. “Yes, Mr. Whittaker, I quite get your point.”

“Mr. President, if I may, sir... Perhaps we at WMVZ, with the government’s approval and assistance, could bring the DéZars to the public at large in such a manner as to be informative and non-threatening — we could monitor their efforts to understand their situation, on our station. It might end up as being a combination of a continuing news story, and a reality drama. ’Not a fictional drama, you understand; more like a serial documentary.”

Coady was immediately intrigued, but far from entirely won over. Still, his reply gave Jim hope that the stormtroopers were not to be expected, just yet.

“Interesting idea, Mr. Whittaker. I will solicit opinions on this from my staff and advisors. We will try to get back to you with a decision by late tomorrow afternoon; please make yourself available at your New York office until at least 7 p.m. Thank you, sir.”

Jim had barely enough time to utter “And thank you, too, sir” before the receiver clicked off at the other end. He immediately phoned Kerry to give her the news.

President Coady was not a man to avoid a challenge. He had just been able to get some new health programs legislation through Congress, and was feeling in a decisive mood. He buzzed his secretary in the other room.

“Elaine, please have Jason drop whatever he’s doing and come over immediately.”

No problem. His Chief of Staff was knocking at the door less than two minutes later.

Coady motioned him in. Before he even reached the desk Coady delivered some marching orders.

“Mr. Abruzzi: Please arrange for an emergency meeting here in the White House the first thing tomorrow — 7 a.m. would be good. Direct those Cabinet members, joint chiefs of staff, and top science advisors — especially biologists, physicists and astronomers — who are currently local to attend. Tell them it is on an important matter of national security, and needs to be kept *completely* — emphasis *completely* — under wraps for now.”

Abruzzi nodded. “Is that it, then, sir?”

“Yes. Please get started on arranging this, immediately.”

Abruzzi saluted, turned, and left the Oval Office. The President sat back in his chair.

“Hmmm... here we go...” he thought.

* * * * *

The room was buzzing as President Coady entered it early the next morning, at seven. Two-thirds of the Cabinet had been available, along with three military men and seven scientists. No one, of course, had any idea of what could be important enough to pull them away from everything else so abruptly.

Coady wasted no time.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I have summoned you to get your advice on something that may be of great importance to us. Alternately, it could just be a stupendous hoax.” He paused and looked around the table, trying to gauge the response. Not so unusually, most of the faces were largely blank. Great, he thought, this is what happens when you live in topsy-turvy-ville. Perhaps a little additional set-up was needed... What would Lincoln, or Kennedy, have said at a time like this? He did his best to set the stage.

“We live in a world that depends on continuity. New things are often treated with suspicion; I think this is generally a good thing. Today, however, we are tested with something so new that we may need to reset our standards of evaluation.”

Again he paused. But he was still surrounded by blank faces. Most seemed only half awake, sipping at their first cup of coffee for the day.

He persisted. “Here it is. There is some real possibility that first *public* contact with extraterrestrial beings has been made. A family of four such beings has appeared in a town in upstate New York, contacted a local New York City television station, and requested their presence be made known to the entire population.”

This time a number of eyebrows started to move up and down. But it took a moment for someone to dare make any kind of verbal comment. Secretary of the Treasury McCandless was the first to respond.

“Mr. President... it’s not April Fool’s Day, so I must assume that your drawing together this sizable group is based on some tangible intel on this?”

“Yes, Anna, it is. An initial investigation by the television station, including a medical examination, suggests we have at hand an intelligent being that is truly non-human. We of course wish to further confirm that finding, but the question is, if we move, and this *is* confirmed, what should our following course of action be?”

There was no immediate response, but at last the group was showing some signs the wheels were beginning to turn. The President continued.

“I would like to get your opinions on whatever seems relevant, but especially, of course, on the threat component. We could just go in and take over, I suppose, but I’m not sure that this approach is warranted. The television station, WMVZ, has suggested a course of action that might be viable: in effect they want to create an ongoing reality show around the situation; that is, they intend to provide round-the-clock monitoring leading to weekly or daily aired reports. We could control the situation with our own on-site monitoring.”

Secretary of State Delmonico now chimed in. “First things first. What are these aliens’ stated reasons for being here? What do we know of their motives?”

President Coady knew what he would say next would elicit expressions of concern.

“Well, this is where things get a bit dicey... According to the manager of the station, one Jim Whittaker, the four humanoids say they have no memory of anything in their pre-appearance history, nor were given any concrete indication of why they are here. It’s as if there is some controlling entity that wants them to figure this out on their own, on the job.”

For a few moments, more blank faces. Finally one of the military men, U. S. Army General Carl Klesko, spoke up.

“Mr. President... Assuming for the moment this is not just some kind of prank, and we’re really dealing with a first-public-contact, this state of affairs seems rather suspicious, don’t you think?”

Coady nodded. “Yes, initially that’s what I thought. But on thinking the matter over, I could not come up with a reason for a public introduction of this kind intended to lead to an act of aggression. Surely, if there were an intent to attack us in some fashion, this could be done in any number of other ways that would give our attackers a far greater advantage.”

Klesko, crusty old veteran that he was, was not convinced. “Sir, I am still not comfortable with this. Regardless of any apparent friendliness, we should not ignore the possible danger. Not to mention possible panics on the part of the population, and all sorts of likely international political upset at our trying to act as exclusive host. It seems to me we should immediately

sequester this family, and prepare for a possible aggressive strike...”

Sitting a ways down the table was one of the Executive Office’s scientific advisors, an internationally-known biologist named Stephen Tansley. On these words he fairly exploded.

“Mr. President, *sir*, with all due respect to the General, we’re not living in a 1950s movie! Think about this logically. I am supposing I’m not privy to at least *some* things about my government’s possible dealings with aliens, but let me point out that if these really are alien beings who have come from some distant world, the mere fact that they have accomplished this makes it absurd to consider contact in terms of an effort to resist an invasion. Think about it! To be here at all means they must be at least a hundred years ahead of us technology-wise, and more likely hundreds or thousands or even millions of years. Any such civilization would undoubtedly be able to squash us outright if they really wanted to, probably without us even knowing it, naïve Hollywoodesque defense-of-the-world scenarios notwithstanding. It is clear to me there are only two kinds of outcome that we can expect with regard to alien contact: first, an unresistable annihilation should someone actually want to take us over, or some form of eventual introduction on peaceful grounds.”

President Coady nodded. “Yes, actually this has always been my thinking as well. Still, we should try to

observe protocol to the extent it exists. Wasn't there a document drawn up — when, back in the 60s? — that outlines a thought-out response to contact with aliens?"

General Klesko responded. "Yes sir. I believe you are referring to the Brookings Report of 1960..."

Tansley spoke out again.

"Oh great! Ideas from three generations ago! It recommended contact be kept concealed, mostly because its writers thought a panic would ensue. But in their wisdom the authors did not consider how pointless resistance would be to a truly malevolent invader, nor did they consider at all the kind of event that seems to be unfolding now."

A few moments of silence fell. In a decisive turn to the conversation, the President broke it off. He looked back at Tansley.

"Okay then, Dr. Tansley, what would *you* suggest we do?"

Tansley, a small, fiftyish man with the energy of a perpetually wound spring, was ready with an answer.

"Well, I think Mr. Whittaker's suggestion, strange as it sounds, has possible merit. Once we verify this really is an alien entity, we could effectively — and legitimately — put him and his family under public house arrest, allowing the television people to chronicle their every move. Of course there will be various political and other implications, a few of which may be somewhat seriously troubling. On the other hand,

contact at this time may be related to a future danger we are about to face; that is, we may actually have some ‘protectors’ out there that we wouldn’t want to — uh, alienate...”

The President cut in.

“Please elaborate on this last point, Dr. Tansley.”

Tansley stroked his beard for a moment. “It could be any number of things. ‘A future collision with a comet or large asteroid requiring countering abilities we don’t yet have, for example. Or, actually, an impending near-future confrontation with some other alien civilization that *is* malevolent.”

General Klesko broke in.

But what of the public’s reaction? Wouldn’t the sudden revealing of an alien entity on earth cause widespread panic?”

Tansley shook his head. “I don’t think so, at least not to the kind of contact we’re seeing here. This mode of introduction — involving what sounds like a simple family of civilians — seems to be deliberately designed to minimize reactive trauma. Plus there are at least two important reasons why public reaction may well not be prohibitively severe. First, we’ve just gone through some seventy-five years of constant discussion, both within scientific circles and among the public, as to whether there’s ‘someone out there.’ As long as a flying saucer doesn’t suddenly land on the White House lawn and start peppering us with death-rays, we should be alright. Second, my prediction is that at least half of

the public will not believe that what they are seeing are actual aliens anyway — rather, a good portion will think, no matter what we say or do, that it's all a hoax, and stick their heads in the sand. Another good portion will view it as some kind of government conspiracy, either to gain an inapparent political advantage or cover up something a good deal more insidious. The confusion will just serve to dampen reaction.”

General Klesko again broke in.

“What about this ‘loss of memory’ business. Isn’t that just a bit too convenient?”

Tansley nodded. “I agree, it’s odd, to say the least. I admit it does make me think there is some angle to this that is not immediately apparent. Nor can I suggest what that might be — perhaps with a bit of study something will occur to me, or to the alien himself. Actually, that might be the point: perhaps the struggle to figure it out will be central to this entity’s engagement with our society. I have to say, the whole thing is very exciting!”

Klesko was not an ‘excitement’ kind of guy. He persisted.

“So are you saying we should be completely open on this? When has such a strategy ever worked?”

Tansley frowned. “Look, sir, times change. Sure, we should try to defend ourselves if aggressively confronted, but the reality is that resistance would likely be ‘futile,’ in the immortal words of the fictional Borg. Let’s say we face tormentors that are even only

150 years ahead of us in their technology... Think for a moment. Would a Civil War period invading force have a chance against *us*, today? Ironclads and cannonballs and observation balloons against ICBMs, lasers, and stealth aircraft? C'mon!"

Klesko wasn't done yet.

"Okay then... What if this DéZar character is here to gather information he can relay along to his superiors? Is the plan just to let him loose on all of our available resources?"

Tansley made an effort not to roll his eyes. "You mean, like all the radio and television broadcasts we've been pumping out freely into space for almost a hundred years? Gee, we've done a really good job of disguising all the elements of our civilization for anyone who wants to listen... Oh yeah, and we can also probably assume that outside civilizations that are hundreds or thousands of years ahead of us technologically have not figured out how to hack even the most closely kept secrets that reside on the internet and servers of the world, right?"

President Coady intervened.

"Fine, Professor, we get your point. There's no need to be sarcastic..."

Tansley waved weakly. "My apologies, sir — I felt I needed to emphasize..."

Discussion continued for another twenty minutes, but limited further insight was produced. Around 7:45 President Coady decided he had heard enough for the

time being. “Okay, ladies and gentlemen, thank you. I think that’s it for now. I’d now like a few minutes alone with my Security Circle to further talk it through. And — absolutely sealed lips on this for now, of course.” He pointed his hands toward the door and motioned ‘away’ with them.

Not much ‘buzz’ was evident as the lower-level-security-clearance members in the room departed; likely that would take place only after everyone was out of the President’s range of hearing.

President Coady closed the door to the room as the final person exited. He turned around to look at the remaining, reduced, audience.

Moving back to the table, he leaned heavily on it with both hands and said, laconically: “Okay... So I noticed there was not as much dissension among you over this as I thought there might be...”

National Security Advisor Grant spoke up. “Mr. President, do we necessarily find this situation entirely surprising?”

Coady was at first taken aback by this remark. But then the words ‘plausible deniability’ flickered across his mind. Even as President there were some things he was not told, and he was okay with that. He nodded, then slowly replied.

“No, perhaps not.” He paused. “But why now?”

Grant replied, straightforwardly. “Well there’s the jackpot question. If this ‘visitor’ and his family really are aliens, and even if they are being truthful about their

lack of knowledge as to their situation, they still must be here to get us to do something.”

“But what kind of ‘something’?”, offered Secretary of Defense LaFollette. “Do we trust the visitor to figure this out on his own? Would we be able to, even if we tried? Perhaps, as Professor Tansley suggested, something really bad is about to happen, something we are largely powerless to prevent on our own.”

No one said anything. He continued.

“Actually, I think this has all the appearance of being some kind of test. It could be they are not sure they trust *us*, but may be willing to take a chance.”

President Coady nodded. “I see your point.” He paused. Silence around the table. A decision was needed.

“Well, since no one can suggest any scenarios involving obvious, or even likely or possible, danger, I think we will consider what Mr. Whittaker suggests — at least to the extent of sending some people up to New York to verify our ‘visitors’ identities right away.”

This didn’t provide enough closure. He continued.

“Frankly, folks, I don’t want to be remembered as the world leader who rejected the biggest advance in human history, and brought some existential — not to mention, possibly permanent — calamity down on our heads. That said: John, get together, secretly, a panel to further explore this matter. They will report to you. And absolutely no leaks on this, on penalty of — well, something threatening enough to keep there from

being any leaks. He stopped for a moment, to think. “Meanwhile, let’s figure out exactly what conditions we would want to impose on our visitors’ activities, should we decide they’re the real thing. And — Dr. Grant, set up a special NSC meeting on this tomorrow morning, right here.”

The meeting continued until nearly noon.

Chapter Six

Jim Whittaker had just finished his last coffee of the day when his secure phone line lit up. He punched the “respond” button. He was immediately rewarded.

“Mr. Whittaker, this is the President.”

Jim gulped slightly. Even though he had been ready for the call for several hours, one does not react lightly when hearing those words.

“Yes sir. Thank you for your attention.”

“May I call you Jim?”

That sounded good. “Yes sir, of course.”

“Well then, Jim, I have decided to go along with the disclosure scenario you suggest. There are, however, some several conditions, and these are not negotiable.”

Jim had been ready for this as well. “Yes, sir...”

“Thus far no one has been able to convince me that the situation represents any kind of immediate danger to our population, and, indeed, it could turn out to be the most important positive thing that has ever happened to us. Still, there is bound to be both social and political fallout, and we must be ready for it. That being so, we must have, at the very least, a complete and ongoing system of surveillance — that is, one going far beyond the mere videotaping you have suggested.”

Jim gulped again: here it comes...

“What do you have in mind, sir?”

“To begin with, we must assure the DéZars’ safety. I will therefore authorize that a zone surrounding the

house in New York be set up by our military forces, and the highest standards of security be maintained regarding access to it. This will include armed guards, aerial surveillance, etc., etc., and probably keep a hundred or more people occupied at any one time. Thus there will be some considerable expense involved.”

Jim was surprised at all this.

“Can that kind of money be found so easily?”

The President was not rattled. Here was a chance to be — Presidential.

“Now Mr. Whittaker: let *me* worry about that...”

He paused briefly, a move designed to make Jim feel he had just asked a stupid question. He then continued.

“We also insist on having our own people stationed on the premises at all time, and being given complete access to your videotapes, and any other kind of record of the events, before they are released for public consumption. Should there be anything sensitive on these we will reserve the right to suppress.”

Jim was somewhat relieved; it might have been worse. But there was still one more matter.

“Mr. President, sir, what of our station’s rights to... uh...?”

Coady laughed. “Well of course I also understand your interest in this from a purely commercial point of view... It is only fair, considering that the DéZars contacted you in particular, that access to their story remains your property — at least for the time being.

Thus we are willing to authorize you exclusive rights in the manner you have suggested up to the point John DéZar identifies his actual 'mission,' whatever that turns out to be. At that point — or should he be unable to accomplish this within a reasonably short period of time, to be decided by us — you will be asked to relinquish your exclusivity. We can have our lawyers work this up in writing.”

Jim was quiet. Coady was not sure how to interpret this.

“Now Mr. Whittaker... We believe we are being quite lenient on this matter. In point of fact the DéZars are, by our law, illegal, undocumented, immigrants, and we have every right on this basis to detain them more strictly were that our wish. And in fact if anything suddenly goes south, we will do just that.”

Jim, actually, was just overwhelmed. The government was really going to let him make a pile of money!

“Yes Mr. President, of course... I certainly am not complaining about your conditions; they seem very generous. What next, then?”

“The first thing your people can expect, tomorrow morning, is a team of medical experts sent to verify your identification of the DéZars as alien entities. I have been told that the examination will take four or five hours. All the other arrangements will of course depend on our agreeing with your conclusion that these really are alien beings. Okay?”

“Yes sir. That’s apparent.”

Coady continued. “We will be sure to make the visit discrete. My aides will contact you in a few minutes for directions and details — though you surely realize that we already know where the DéZars are.”

Jim swallowed. He decided not to ask how the Government had found out; some things were better left unquestioned.

The President droned on. “Assuming we can confirm your findings, my aides will contact you about the further preparations very soon — later tomorrow, most likely. I can say already that you may proceed with your own plans as you have sketched them out for us. Most likely we will have a perimeter set up around the house within a few days, assuming we decide to let the DéZars remain at that location — which we probably will. As soon as it is ready, I will make an announcement to the world, live on all the media, as to what is going on; I will then pass the baton to your folks, allowing them to break the news in more detail. We cannot possibly allow you to do this without official sanction, as it could cause immense confusion, or even a panic. I should add that this initial newsbreak and any subsequent ones will be subject to our word-by-word approval.”

Jim was still glowing. “Yes sir, of course. Thank you for this.”

“Don’t be too thankful just yet, Jim. I doubt this will go entirely smoothly. Good-bye for now, sir.”

“Yes, good-bye.”

* * * * *

It was seven o'clock at the McCann residence, and the family was settling into various activities after the end of a late dinner. Arnold “Arnie” McCann, a fifty-ish Navy veteran who for many years had made his living delivering fuel oil, was in the study watching the first quarter of an NBA playoff game. His wife Emily, a part-time school bus driver when she was not tending to the family, was in the initial stages of cleanup in the kitchen. Eight-year old Stephen was glued to his Nintendo in the living room, while older sisters Glenn and Anna were in their rooms, gossiping on the phone with a friend, and listening to some pop music, respectively.

It was a scene whose like had played out many hundreds of times; the McCanns were happy with their rural existence at 428 Stuart Drive. They had carved out a small but stable piece of the American dream. But tonight there was going to be a disruption.

The doorbell rang. From the study Arnie yelled out “See who it is, Stephen!”

There was no sign of movement in the living room. Arnie yelled a little louder.

“STEPHEN! THE DOOR!”

This time Stephen leapt to his feet and scrambled over to the front door. As he opened it a big chunk of cookie tumbled from his mouth.

There, right outside on the landing, stood two men: one dressed in a conservative dark suit, the other in a glistening military uniform.

Stephen's eyes widened. Looking beyond the men, he could see a small fleet of somber government vehicles parked along the street, and about a dozen soldiers milling around. The man in the suit spoke first, in an attempted friendly voice.

"Good evening, son! Could we speak with your mom and dad, please." The man obviously had had much experience in turning questions into orders.

After a moment, still a bit startled, Stephen turned around and yelled "Mom! Dad! Come quick!"

The McCanns heeded the call. Now it was their turn to show widening eyes. The man in the suit stepped forward to shake hands.

"Mr. and Mrs. McCann — good evening. I'm Assistant Secretary of State Phil Everett..." "from Washington" he added when the McCanns' facial expressions did not change. They still did not change.

"Uh, my boss is Secretary of State Delmonico..."

That apparently didn't help much either, so he just kept going. He motioned toward his companion.

"And this is Colonel Nast." Nast tipped his cap; for some reason that seemed to break the ice. The McCanns smiled in acknowledgement. Everett waited, then got down to business.

"Sir, ma'am, we apologize for swooping in on you like this, disturbing your peace and quiet, but we have

an important matter of national security to attend to. First, however, let me assure you that you are in no sense in any trouble or danger — it's just that this immediate area is about to become involved in an important series of events, and we are obligated to relocate you for a short period of time."

"What!?" thought both McCanns, but just as they started to speak Everett cut them off, making a show of hands.

"Please let me finish. It is not our wish to cause alarm or major inconvenience, so we've settled on the following plan, which we hope you will find tolerable. It will first be necessary to place you incommunicado at a nearby military base for about two days, during which the first stages of the anticipated event will take place. You will then be relocated back to Hopkinsville to stay at a comfortable motel for an undetermined length of time. We will need the use of your house here during your absence, and for such use you will be compensated five hundred dollars per day. All costs of your stay at the motel will be covered by the government. This includes both housing and food. Finally, I have been authorized to offer you a special "displacement compensation" of one thousand dollars per each full week of inconvenience experienced. Does all this sound reasonable, at least under the circumstances?"

Arnie looked at his wife quizzically, but got no clear message back from her. He replied with the obvious conclusion.

“Well, I gather from your tone that we really don’t have much of a choice, anyway...”

Everett nodded. “I’m afraid not. This is something pretty big, and we must act accordingly. You may find there are some additional things on the ‘plus’ side of the ledger, however. As a ‘big event,’ and, we hope, a *positive* one, you will be able to hand this down through your family as a ‘we were there’ kind of remembrance. Also, there is this...”

Everett reached into his suit and pulled out a sealed envelope. He handed it to Arnie.

“Sir, this is a letter of notification drafted by, and signed by, the President of the United States. It authorizes the actions we have described. I have little doubt that it will become a very valuable document, both in terms of its personal associations, and most likely in dollar terms as an artefact of American history.” Everett was now laying it on a bit, but he reasoned that it would make the relocation pill a little less bitter to swallow. Besides, it was all very likely true.

McCann sighed. “Alright then. If that’s what has to be, I guess we can go with it.”

Everett broke in. “I should repeat that for the next two days, beginning immediately, you can have no contact with friends or relations. Failure to observe this restriction will have very bad consequences, as it might

even be interpreted as an act of sedition. Make this clear to your children! If, however, you do need to be in touch with anyone during this period, we will provide an aide who can communicate just enough information for you to make it apparent to your friends and associates you are in no danger. Beyond this two-day period, there should be no restrictions.”

McCann was starting to buy in. “So what’s next?” Colonel Nast took over.

“It is our orders to implement this plan immediately. Get the family together now, and have them pack up enough essentials of snacks, toiletries, clothing, etc. to keep them going for a few days. We brought some packing boxes with us to help you. Both over the next couple of days and after that there will always be someone available to you to move further items from the house over to your temporary quarters. With any luck, once you are in the motel there will be no restrictions of any kind, save your inability to return to this house before the full sequence of events plays out.”

McCann nodded. “I don’t suppose you can give me some idea of what’s actually going on, and how long we’re gonna be away...?”

Everett smiled. “No, I’m afraid we can’t say right now. But on the first question, at least, you will almost surely know in less than a week.”

That was it. A family meeting was called, and less than a minute later everyone was scurrying this way

and that to collect staples. In less than an hour the caravan of dark vehicles was on its way to the McCann's new digs, and the house was devoid of humans.

There was only one other house, 420 Stuart, in the immediate vicinity of 423, and conveniently it had been vacant for a few months while its owners were settling in at a new location several states away. Thus no one besides the McCanns had to be displaced.

Kerry and Tim had spent the last couple of days shuttling between New York and Hopkinsville, and were at the latter when the McCanns were evicted. They knew of the 'house arrest' plans that had been adopted for the DéZars, and while they didn't much care for them on philosophical grounds, they agreed there wasn't any other realistic option, and were ready to proceed. What they were *not* ready for was the commotion that greeted them the next morning when they drove over to 423 Stuart from the motel.

As soon as the McCanns left, hefty 'road closed' barriers were placed on Stuart Drive about a thousand feet in either direction from 423 to stop all traffic, forcing turnarounds at each spot. Stuart Drive had a nearly straight and flat east-west orientation for about a half mile centered on 423, then curved a bit in each direction beyond where the barriers were placed. The nearest houses outside the barriers in either direction were several hundred feet beyond them around the curves; as a result none of them had an unobstructed view of the blockage.

In this area the landscape consisted of a mosaic of small open fields and patches of mixed forest. The government had reviewed all this before deciding to let the DéZars stay in Hopkinsville; they could have been relocated anywhere to observe the same basic monitoring conditions, but the Hopkinsville location also seemed 'defendable,' and in any case it 'looked better' to allow them to stay there, than to forcibly move them to some other location.

Once the road barriers were up, soldiers were stationed at each to make sure civilian vehicles that approached were turned back, using the excuse that the military was undertaking 'war games' in the area for a couple of a days and could not be disturbed. The residents of the nearest houses were also handed this story, and assured there was no danger so long as they did not try to enter the restricted zone.

This not-so-white lie concealed what was actually taking place. Consistent with the 'war games' ruse, military supply trucks started to arrive from each direction as darkness fell. These were allowed to pass through the barriers, and several hundred feet closer to 423 from either direction they began to unload their cargoes.

As Kerry and Tim approached the area from the west in the morning, they came upon the westside barrier. They were flagged to stop by one of two soldiers. Kerry slowed her vehicle to a halt, then stretched her head out the car window.

“Good morning! What’s up? This was open yesterday.”

The soldier took a close look at Kerry and the vehicle. “Yes ma’am. Are you Kerry Phillips?”

She smiled, a bit nervously. “Uh, yes I am. What’s this about?”

The soldier pulled out a communicator, punched in a couple of commands, and looked back and forth between it and Kerry.

“Sorry, ma’am, we were told to expect you. You may proceed. Be careful though, there’s a lot of construction going on ahead.” He walked over to help his mate move the barrier enough to let her pass. He then waved her on. “Have a good day, ma’am!”

Kerry put the vehicle in gear. She looked over at Tim.

“Well, I guess this is really coming together... Look what we’ve done!”

Tim laughed. “Yeah, I guess we’re big-time troublemakers now!”

Kerry peered ahead. Some changes were evident in the approach to 423. A full-blown entrance gate had been put up across the road, complete with guard station, at a distance of 500 feet from the house. Perpendicular to the guard station a fence was now standing, the kind of fence meant to keep people out — no, to keep *attackers* out — and it did not seem to end. In fact, it extended in a circle all the way around 423: the ‘compound’ thus produced had a diameter of a

thousand feet and a boundary length of about a kilometer. It surrounded, in addition to 423, the two nearby vacated houses along Stuart Drive, and several small open and forested areas. At the east end of the zone there was no corresponding entrance along Stuart; it was just entirely blocked off. Thus the only way into the zone was that which Kerry was now attempting to navigate. The two approached the inside guard station.

“Good morning ma’am!” came a pleasant greeting from a well-armed young soldier standing in front of the guard station. “You must be Miss Phillips?”

“Roger that!” she shouted, almost saluting before she thought better of it. “You folks have been pretty busy since yesterday! Where are you from?”

He grinned. “Well, from all over, I guess. I don’t actually know most of these folks. Here, let us let you in.” He motioned to another private to open the gate.

“Thanks, guys!” Kerry waved to both as she passed through.

She looked to the left, where a large tent-like structure was going up. Next, on the same side, the third house, and just beyond that, right along Stuart, another large tent structure. Dozens of people were scurrying around, obviously with time-sensitive duties to attend to.

After they went through the inside gate, Tim’s attention was drawn in the opposite direction, to the south side of the road. In a small field a helicopter had just landed; it looked like the area was under re-

purposing as a heliport. Right next to it a small prefab was undergoing assembly as a fleet of drone devices was dancing around outside, apparently being tested pre-service.

As they approached 423 a few feet further on, Tim looked over at Kerry and pointed around.

“My God, busy-y-y!”

Kerry nodded. Computers, electrical equipment, bedding, chairs, tables, etc., etc. were disappearing into one structure after another, even as some of their outsides were themselves going up.

They exited the vehicle and walked up the steps to 423, knocking on the door. Joan DéZar greeted them through a small crack of an opening.

“Good morning, Kerry and Tim!” She motioned outward. “Look at all this! Isn’t it amazing! We have been afraid to go outside.”

Kerry was surprised. “Weren’t you warned before they started?”

She looked a bit sheepish. “Well, yes, we were, but we were also told not to get involved until you showed up this morning.”

John now walked up to join his wife, and the two.

“Good morning, Kerry and Tim. Mr. Whittaker called us late last evening to advise us of the preparations. He told us to tell you to find Colonel Raisz, who is in charge of all this — he should be out there somewhere, organizing things. Mr. Whittaker also told us that preparations are being made in the

house at 428 for you and Tim — that is, so you can stay near us rather than having to use a motel.”

Kerry nodded. “Okay then, we’ll go look for Colonel Raisz, and get back to you in a little while.”

“Goodbye for now, Kerry and Tim” said the DéZars, in near-unison harmony. The door closed in front of them. Tim kept the ball rolling.

“So let’s find this guy Raisz, whattayasay?”

Kerry was game. “Sounds good!”

Off they went. It was not going to be a tough assignment. A few seconds later a soldier crossed their path. Kerry tapped his shoulder.

“Excuse me, private: can you direct me to Colonel Raisz?”

He eyed her as if thinking “Wow, this assignment is not going to be so bad, after all,” then returned to earth, replying “Yes ma’am — he should be over in the first tent, near the gate.”

She thanked him, and they walked on. Thirty seconds later, after passing the closer tent and the house at 420, they were standing at the entrance to the first tent. Another soldier was standing there; she spoke as they approached.

“Good morning! I’m Kerry Phillips, here to see Colonel Raisz.”

“Do you have an appointment?” he replied.

“Well, he’s expecting me, I understand.”

He nodded. “Stay here please. I’ll bring him.”

A minute later a trim forty-ish man in field uniform approached them. He smiled broadly and held out his hand for a shake.

“Miss Phillips! ’So glad to meet you! I’m a big fan of your reporting!”

Kerry blinked. She was not averse to occasional fan worship...

“Well thank you so much! I try!” She blinked again, then motioned toward Tim. “This is my cameraman, Tim Van Meter.” Tim nodded, and extended his hand.

“My pleasure!”

A short moment of awkwardness followed, especially as Colonel Raisz was cut from finest Mickey Mantle or Brad Pitt cloth, and Kerry had noticed. “Uh, Colonel, I gather you are our contact here concerning all this... preparation?”

“Yes ma’am.” Kerry was not sure how to deal with all the ‘ma’am-ing’ she was getting. Yes she was... She liked it, in spite of herself...

“Can you give a quick go-over; after all, it looks like we’ll be working together...” Oh god, did I actually just say that... ?

“Yes ma’am... From what I understand, we are building this compound in an effort to protect, and facilitate communication with, a very special visitor. I have been onsite since yesterday evening, but was told not to approach him and his family until you arrived. It is also my understanding that we are here to serve your wishes regarding his activities. However, I know there

are restrictions on your efforts as well, both from your own station and from various elements of the government. Last night I learned of one of the latter that you might not be aware of just yet.”

That sounded ominous. She could only reply “Oh really... ?”

“Yes. I was informed that along with yourselves, representatives of the Secret Service are to be embedded. Two or three teams of three each are being assigned to add to the round-the-clock liaison and protection services. The first team will arrive tomorrow or the next day; they will share quarters with you and your crew in House 2 — uh, that’s the one at 428, at the other end of the compound, owned by the McCanns.”

Great, thought Kerry. In-house jailers for the DéZars. Will they have to wear electronic bracelets as well? Her face gave away her thoughts. Colonel Raisz thought he was up to the situation.

“Not to worry, ma’am. I know these men. They are strictly fine people. I worked with them for several years in Washington, and they are the best. Mark my word.” He had slightly misread Kerry’s reaction.

But she understood that. Not wishing to seem uncooperative, she nodded. “Okay... I guess that really doesn’t change our mission any.” Colonel Raisz got back to his briefing.

“So... As you can see, we have erected a protective fence around 423: circular, with a diameter of 1000 feet. House 3, right there at 420, is being set up to

accommodate our security efforts. You probably needn't get on top of all of these, but I can tell you they feature round-the-clock satellite monitoring with imagery from space good enough to distinguish brown from blue eyes, equally continuous near-surface drone monitoring, motion-triggered and infrared security cameras posted every 125 feet along the fence, random but continually operating personnel sweeps along same, and some other devices that are secret technology and I am told I should not discuss with you. The two tents will house a rotating assignment of military personnel, including myself — actually I'll be here in person most of the time, at least for a couple of weeks, or longer if that's necessary. We are in direct contact with the nearby military base: it's less than fifteen minutes away, by helicopter."

"About how many military personnel will be, uh, 'stationed' here at any given time?" Tim asked.

Colonel Raisz took off his cap and scratched his head. "Lessee... Eight, at the gates and barriers, two at 423 as guards/facilitators, a couple of patrollers, probably a dozen technicians and drone operators, and around ten doubling as maintainers, mess, motor pool, and custodial workers. So, maybe thirty-five. There are probably as many again connected to various kinds of support back at the base. And, of course, that's times more than three for 24-7 coverage."

Tim was surprised. He made a quick calculation, and whistled. "That's close to three hundred people! That's a lot of money!"

Colonel Raisz nodded. "Our taxes in action, I suppose... I don't know who our guest is, but I guess he must be really important."

Kerry raised her eyebrows. "You mean, they haven't told you about him yet?"

He shook his head. "I'm just a colonel. That's way above my pay grade. I'm honored just to be here. But I am curious, of course."

She understood. "I'll tell you what. One of my first 'wishes' is that you have dinner with our 'guest' tonight. His identity will be released within a couple of days anyway, and I guess I can trust you to secrecy until then, can't I?"

Raisz grinned and checked his schedule. "Yes that would be fine; I can do that! What time?"

"Let's make it six o'clock." She looked down at his finger. Gold ring. She decided to flirt anyway. "Our first date! 'See you then."

They turned away. As soon as they got far enough off, Tim chided her.

"Shame on you. Was that a blush I saw? I'm going to start calling you bad names if you're not careful!"

Now there *was* a blush. "Oh come on... Give a girl a break! He's gorgeous!"

But Tim, character that he was, was not likely to let it go that easily. She would just have to be more *professional!*

Chapter Seven

Six o'clock came around quickly. Colonel Raisz was right on time. Kerry heard the knock and answered the call. This time he was in his dress uniform, looking even more handsome, but with considerable effort Kerry played it straight.

After a courteous greeting, she asked him, would he like to meet the 'guests'? He smiled and nodded. "Of course, it will be an honor!"

Kerry began to lead him toward the living room, but stopped abruptly to turn around and face him. "Look," she said, "I've been a bit misleading to you. There's nothing wrong, but you need to prepare yourself for something quite extraordinary. Okay?"

He gave her a strange look, but nodded in assent. She turned and moved into the living room. The DéZars, all four of them, were seated inside, much like they had been when Kerry first met them, only nine days before.

She raised her hands to tip her fingers. "Colonel Raisz, meet the DéZars, John and Joan, and their children."

The Colonel's mouth dropped open in surprise. John spoke up right away.

"Colonel, we obviously have you at a disadvantage. We are, to the best of our abilities to determine, alien — nonhuman — beings. To cut a very long story short, we have requested that your government make our

presence known to the population as a whole, and Miss Phillips is helping us in this endeavor. We greatly appreciate your own efforts, as without them this will not be possible.”

Colonel Raisz was still standing speechless, dumbstruck. At last he realized it must all be so. No prank or hoax could possibly explain what he was witnessing at the moment! Frankly, he was just not important enough to be taken for such an extreme ride! This realization helped. He could now just take part.

“Amazing, absolutely amazing! I never imagined...”

Kerry broke in.

“Join the club, Colonel. I know how you’re feeling. I felt the same way when I first met them. I know you must have a million questions. Let’s proceed right to dinner — which by the way was prepared entirely by Mrs. DéZar — and perhaps we can answer some of them for you.”

* * * * *

Dinner went well. Joan DéZar proved to be a pretty fair preparer, and no one seemed to miss the absence of meat on the menu, the DéZars being vegetarians. As the plates emptied, talk turned to the personal histories of Tim, Colonel Raisz, and Kerry. Tim and Colonel Raisz both pleaded rather conventional lives, so Kerry, as the relative celebrity of the group, was targeted with the brunt of the scrutiny.

Colonel Raisz posed the basic lead-in question.

“So Kerry, what caused you to decide to become a journalist?”

As the last piece of rhubarb pie went down the hatch, she wiped her mouth dry and replied.

“Well, I guess it began Senior year as an undergraduate. Two years earlier I had decided to major in Biology, planning to continue toward Med School and become an M.D. By Senior year I had most of my required courses completed, and was doing well enough that the goal seemed an achievable one. I took a couple of elective courses that last year, one being a survey course on the great philosophers. I was impressed most by the ideas of Immanuel Kant, especially those of his related to ethics and morals. In particular, I sympathized with his argument that truly ethical actions are incompatible with largely self-serving motives.

She stopped for a long sip of coffee.

“So... I got into Med School, and began my course of studies. But I soon realized that the subject matter was a bit on the dreary side, and worse, that many — perhaps most — of my classmates seemed to be in it more as a dependable way of earning a big paycheck than because of any goal of improving the world. I thought back to my Kant, and began to wonder how many of them would be doing what they were doing if they knew they were looking forward to the kind of pay a social worker or librarian gets. I had to conclude that most of them probably wouldn't.”

Another stop, and sip of coffee.

“To make a long story short, I began to realize that I couldn’t see myself as a glorified, well-paid, plumber. Remembering the ideals of another of the philosophers covered in the survey course, Spinoza, I decided I wanted to do something that somehow both improved me, and the world. It was a refreshing thought. I thought I might be able to accomplish that through journalism: especially to the extent of exposing instances of greed, selfishness, and unconsciously unproductive acts.”

Colonel Raisz spoke up. “Okay, I think I follow you generally, but how can one avoid selfishness in the real world? The average animal out there is pretty selfish when it comes to just trying to keep itself alive. And people — why, most people seem not to have special talents, or at least the energy, concentration or opportunities to develop the ones they *do* have. Or maybe ‘have to deal with outside circumstances that keep them down, no matter what they try to do.”

Kerry nodded, through another sip.

“All true. But everyone should still strive for more knowledge of themselves and outside circumstances. Spinoza was clear on this. Sure, you may be poor and not have special talents, but even a janitor or maid can try to be effective at what they do, and also aspire to be good parents and citizens. And, though making large amounts of money is not necessarily a bad thing, it is too often spent back out — wasted — on ultimately

pointless or destructive things. And this doesn't even consider the actual deliberate corruption and crime of one kind or another that is rampant in our society."

Colonel Raisz broke in. "Why, Kerry — I didn't realize you were such a moralist!"

She stopped short. Yeah, it was starting to get a bit too close to soap-boxing...

"Well, I'm just saying... What goes around, comes around, after all. And not just to individuals, either."

"How so?" Raisz asked.

"Social norms. These are pretty much self-reinforcing. 'Probably because it's just easier to 'go along' than it is to rock the boat. But social norms can hurt too, if they're bad ones."

Raisz raised his eyebrows. "Hmmm... It sounds like we have a liberal among us!"

Kerry didn't flinch. "Well, what kind of investigative reporter would I be if I didn't believe things can be better than they are?"

The Colonel smiled. "I suppose. I just wonder, though, whether there would be a different slant put on the DéZars' visit were a conservative news media person in charge. What do you think?"

Kerry did have some thoughts on that matter, but decided to keep them to herself. Instead, her reply was somewhat evasive.

"I don't know; that's hard to say. Apparently the military folks were willing to go along with President

Coady's decision, and most of them are on the conservative side. 'So, maybe not so different.'

That was good enough for Raisz. He didn't want to push further, and changed the direction of the conversation to John's and Joan's perceptions of human beings so far. Talk continued for another couple of hours, at which point the Colonel excused himself and left.

After he was gone, Kerry turned to the DéZars and asked "Well, what do you think? Do you suppose we can all get along well enough to move forward?"

John replied "I can't imagine why not. He seems to be, how do you say, 'on board'."

Yes, — he does, she thought.

* * * * *

Two days later it was announced in the morning that that evening the President would be making a special television appearance no one should miss. Simulcast on all the main networks, a hefty worldwide audience was tuned in when the time came. Coady spoke from the Oval Office.

"Good evening, my fellow Americans, and citizens of the world" he began. "I have asked for this time because there is some really extraordinary news I wish to convey to you. Often under such circumstances, historically, the news relayed has been *bad* news, but in this case I am happy to report an event that gives every indication of being good news of the highest order. This

event is: our first *public* contact with advanced alien lifeforms.”

He paused briefly to let the words sink in. Hundreds of millions of watchers around the world thought, in their various ways, “Wow!” Hundreds of millions of other watchers thought, in parallel fashion, “Right...”

He continued.

“About two weeks ago representatives of independent television station WMVZ in New York City were contacted by four individuals in a small town in upstate New York. They were seeking help in making their presence known to the population in general. Subsequent investigation by the station, and then by federal government investigators, has appeared to verify that the four individuals, a family unit of parents and two children, are not of our human species.” He paused, then went on.

“Our investigation has revealed no sign of malevolent intent, nor danger to our population. For this reason we have decided, at least for now, to allow the family, known as the DéZars, to pursue their goal of introduction, though under the supervision of the government. Thus they have been placed in protective custody, for their own safety. Nevertheless, I feel we should regard them as honored guests of our country.”

“For the time being, WMVZ will be given the privilege of hosting their visit — though again, under the auspices of the federal government. This

arrangement is not viewed as a permanent one, but the initial setup seems only fair, under the circumstances. The situation, however, is a fluid one, which we will monitor very closely.”

President Coady paused again, primarily for dramatic effect.

“My fellow Americans, and other citizens of the world: I should not have to emphasize how important this event could be. The circumstances of the DéZars’ appearance make it clear that this is a *deliberate* effort: that is, it appears there is an extraterrestrial population of advanced intelligence that wishes to make itself known to us. A malevolent force would not approach us in this fashion. We should feel honored with this attention.”

“The coverage of this event will now pass to WMVZ. The present simulcast will first be turned over to WMVZ reporter Kerry Phillips, the person originally contacted by our visitors, for a brief introduction to them. Good evening, and God bless America.”

The President’s image faded from the screen, and was replaced by a from-the-waist-up shot of Kerry, straight from the 423 living room. She waited a moment for effect, then launched into her introduction.

“Good evening. I’m Kerry Phillips, WMVZ News, New York. We are broadcasting at the moment from an upstate New York living room whose location will be revealed tomorrow. It is my pleasure and privilege tonight to make this historic introduction. As President

Coady has indicated, four representatives of an intelligent nonhuman species contacted WMVZ some thirteen days ago, wishing to be presented to the public at large. The United States Government has been far-seeing enough to allow this to happen, though it was deemed appropriate, for their safety, that they be held in protective custody, for the time being, in the house in which I now stand.”

“There are a good many questions surrounding the object of this visit to our planet, but no one has presented any reasoning that would support thoughts of malevolent motives. It is our intent at WMVZ to document the DéZars’ stay, and to make it as transparent as possible under the circumstances; this will mean setting up opportunities to communicate with them and becoming more familiar with their appearance and character. We intend to have regular broadcasts describing and documenting upcoming events and discoveries, beginning tomorrow night with a two-hour special featuring background and a long interview with Mr. John DéZar and his wife Joan.”

“For the moment, we will just briefly meet the DéZars, here in their living room. Viewers are warned that they do indeed have, to us at least, a rather ‘alien’ appearance, though I believe the fair observer will have to admit that they merely look ‘different,’ and not ‘monstrous’ or ‘terrifying.’ Judge for yourself...”

The camera slowly panned to Kerry's left, where John and Joan were sitting on their sofa, trying hard to look at ease, and almost succeeding.

Reactions around the world varied as expected. At least five hundred million viewers raised their hands to their mouths and gasped "Oh my God!"; the next, nearly as common utterance was the predictable "Holy s___!" Many millions more just broke out laughing. But there were also millions who merely stared in horror, or disbelief, or both.

Kerry made her way to a chair placed to the side of the sofa, and sat down. She started in with something simple, to break the ice.

"John and Joan — May I call you by these names?"

John spoke right up.

"Of course, Kerry. 'DéZar' is our last name, by the conventions of this place and time."

"Well then... You must of course understand that your sudden appearance here will cause a good deal of questioning by our citizens. Can you say anything that will put their minds at ease?"

John nodded. "I will try. My family and I are by all appearance messengers, though it is a problem for us, personally, that we have not been told what message to bring. We have, in fact, been left to our own devices to determine what that message should be. It is our intention to be as open as possible about our efforts in that direction, and it is certainly a top priority for us to keep everyone informed on our progress."

Kerry thanked John for his frankness, then posed what she figured must be a primary stumbling-block for the public.

“John, what can you say, in brief, that will convince viewers that this whole thing is not some kind of hoax, or publicity stunt?”

“Yes, I realize that many of your viewers will have such concerns. I can first reply that government specialists have unanimously expressed their verdict that we really are nonhuman entities; further, over the next several days I expect to be receiving teams of experts from a dozen or more nation-states, professional associations, and public groups, unions and individuals to provide further verification. Also, I would point out that our presence has Presidential sanction, as you have just seen.”

Kerry nodded.

“Thank you.” Kerry turned away from the DéZars and toward the camera, which panned in on her.

“That is our introduction for the night. If you are intrigued and interested in follow-up, you can begin by tuning in tomorrow night for a lengthier treatment. Consult your online schedule guides for information on broadcast times, which may vary from station to station. Thank you, and goodnight!”

Screen fade.

The introduction had gone well. In Hopkinsville, Kerry struck out a victorious fist. Back in New York, Jim’s staff clapped and shouted out their

congratulations. But he wondered if the world was going to be ready for its new responsibilities.

* * * * *

Early the next morning Kerry was awakened by a knock on the front door of House 2, her new home for the time being. On opening the door, she faced three gentlemen in suits. One of them, a good-looking man in his mid-thirties, took a half-step forward.

“Good morning Miss Phillips... I was told you’d be expecting us. I’m Special Agent Greg Towner, Secret Service. These are my colleagues, Special Agents Windholz and Hoquet.” They nodded in turn.

Kerry’s first impression was that they didn’t look very friendly. Or maybe she was just embarrassed that she had forgotten about the meeting...

She tried to smile. “Hello... ‘Glad to meet you all. I gather your group will also be calling the house here your home while you’re in the compound?” They nodded.

“Well, come on in. I think I know which rooms have been set aside for you. There’s two of them, so you’ll have to double up. What kind of schedule will you have?”

Towner seemed to be in charge, and relayed the details. There would be eight or nine agents altogether, scheduled such that two or three would be inside the compound at any given time, while there would always be at least one on duty at 423 itself around the clock.

Towner, like Colonel Raisz, would be present almost all the time, again depending on how long the whole affair lasted.

Kerry and Towner sat down for a cup of coffee while the other two agents started to unload their gear and set up shop in their two assigned rooms. Kerry asked about Towner's background.

"Well, after my B.A. in Communications I enlisted, and soon got accepted into Special Ops. 'About five years and a dozen big missions in that. After getting wounded in the last one, I decided that was enough, and switched over to the Secret Service."

Kerry was impressed. "Well, you must be good! 'Just a few years, and a team leader already! They figured they could spare you?"

Towner grinned. "Yeah, I guess. But not so quick — this is my eighth year in the Secret Service."

Kerry was warming up. She smiled. "You don't look that old..."

Towner grinned again. "'Clean living, I guess."

The wedding ring on his left hand attracted her attention. She pointed to it.

"I gather you're married. 'Any children?"

"Yeah, two. 'Girls, Jenny and Sam."

"'How old?"

"Twelve and fourteen. Jan and I married right after we finished college."

Towner was apparently done talking for the moment. Leaving his coffee half-finished, he suddenly stood up.

“I guess I better go help the guys move in. I don’t want them thinking I’m lazy...”

He smiled and turned away to join them.

Kerry called after him. “We can talk more later — I need to go over some basic logistics — on how we’re gonna do this...”

“Roger that!” Towner motioned with his hand without turning back around.

Kerry was pleased with the introduction. Perhaps the extra bodies would not be a problem after all...

Chapter Eight

It didn't take the public and media long to discover where the DéZars were being kept, even before it was formally announced. Around the same time Kerry and Special Agent Towner were having their get-to-know coffees, vehicles started arriving in droves at the two barriers. Those that approached from the east were forced to turn around, eventually finding their way to the west side of the compound, where they faced a sorting procedure.

The original plans recognized that there would likely be more than enough interest in the DéZars to generate a media and public information feeding frenzy. Accordingly, the five hundred feet of Stuart Drive between the two western barriers had been partitioned into two sections where the public and media reps could set up shop. Zones two hundred feet deep were measured away from the road, then fenced in, and within these media vehicles and the public would be allowed to squat. In the 250-foot-long 'public zone,' 'pro-alien' and 'con-alien' zones were then assigned to the north and south of the road, respectively, anticipating a combination of contrary reactions to the DéZars and their mission. Rules for maximum number of occupants at any one time were established, various kinds of length-of-stay passes created, etc., etc.

Actually, this plan worked pretty well, right from the beginning. What *didn't* work so well was

management of the roads, fields and forest immediately *beyond* the encircling compound. Many of those who could not get into the two public squatting zones began parking on the sides of the road beyond the outer barrier, forcing authorities to enlist an ever-increasing number of state police to roust them. Worse, an incessant flow of hikers began trekking in through the surrounding woods to set up impromptu camps nearby; understandably, owners of the lands complained, and more and more police and guardsmen had to be assigned a trespasser-chasing role. Garbage quickly piled up in the woods. This attracted flies and vermin.

Within the two hundred foot zones, the three camps of onlookers settled into a routine. The media folks and their vehicles were closest to the inside gate; once they had figured out who was important they started harassing them for statements or interviews every time they tried to pass through the inner guard station gate.

The squatters directly to their west, meanwhile, were primarily engaged in constant demonstration. On the south side of the road, placards reading 'Aliens go home!' and the like were paraded from dawn to dusk. Just a few feet away, on the north side of the road, the 'Welcome, aliens!' folks were trying to outshout and outflash their cynical counterparts. Since the maximum length of time a squatter was permitted to stay was only forty-eight hours, a constant supply of new

remarks was available to reporters when they tired of waylaying official visitors for updates.

There was a continuing problem that many people who wanted in could not gain access right away. There was thus a constant danger of vehicular gridlock. A partial solution was forged by placing, at an intersection a half-mile down the road, a sign which kept track of the number of “squatting” vacancies available at that time. This was augmented by a web page which kept the same information up to date.

Colonel Raisz was put in charge of alerting everyone within the compound of these trends, mostly by email. After a few days, it looked like things were going fairly well.

Meanwhile, Jim, Kerry, HOP, and the rest of the staff at WMVZ had shifted into overdrive, trying to move from the level of simple news coverage to an ongoing documentary approach. Not only did they need to identify target subjects, but also how often they should broadcast, lest immediate overkill result.

They decided to start with three forty-five minute new broadcasts a week, on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, at 7 p.m. each night. Each broadcast would be re-run late in the evening, in the wee hours, and at nine a.m. the following day. Different elements of the DéZars’ visit would be treated each night, with the last fifteen or twenty minutes of each broadcast featuring call-ins from the public posing questions to John, live.

Obviously, excitement caused by a Presidential announcement and the reporting that directly followed it could not be allowed to lapse. The first of the new broadcast series, soon to be multi-syndicated nationwide, was scheduled for a mere three days later. Kerry was of course to be the host of the show. All of her other duties were suspended for the time being; this, so she could be given full leash as an information collector and host, and considerable power in choosing subjects.

For the first 'episode,' she was able to get the others to agree to presenting a short 'history of the universe' as a lead-in to the subject of ufology and, ultimately, the appearance of the DéZars. The show was pretty impressive, especially for an unaffiliated station: they only had a few days to get it together and the results could have been disastrous, but in the end the production was not an embarrassment. The first live call-in question to John at the end of the show went:

"Hello, I'm Jason from Rye. I saw a ufo once. How do you make them go so fast?"

John passed on an answer. Question two was only just a little bit better:

"Hi. This is Celeste, from Jersey City. What's the weirdest thing you've seen in your travels?"

John replied that he didn't remember seeing anything 'weird,' but that the GEICO advertisements on television seemed pretty strange.

Kerry broke in, reminding the ‘television audience’ to please stick to serious questions.

Phone call three more closely fit the bill.

“Good evening. I’m Janine, a physician and linguist from Great Neck. If you really are an alien, can you say something in your native language that will convince me this is so?”

John paused, then spilled out a rather long sentence in his native “DéZarian.”

“What does it mean?”

“It means, in English, ‘I swear by Apollo Physician, by Asclepius, by Hygieia, by Panacea, and by all the gods and goddesses, making them my witnesses, that I will carry out, according to my ability and judgment, this oath and this indenture.’ I take it you recognize this quote?”

“Yes, of course. Thank you.”

The fourth and fifth questions crossed over the boundary into profanity, and were eliminated, thanks to the use of broadcast delay technology. The next one was deemed reasonable enough, if somewhat trivial:

“Okay, what I want to know is, do you all have tails?”

John answered in the negative.

Question seven was from a child.

“Hello. This is Morris. What kind of food do you like best?”

John answered that he had become quite fond of carrots.

Morris was not impressed. He uttered “Ugh!”, then hung up.

There was only time for ten more calls, none of which was characterized by much inspiration. But the overall set of exchanges had served its purpose. John was onscreen, live, for nearly the whole fifteen minutes, and some expert camera work gave viewers a good look at him, from many angles.

A couple of days later, after the second show in the series and more questions from the viewership, the results of the first of a continuing series of national polls concerning the DéZars was taken, and published. Forty-six percent of the people polled characterized the DéZar visit as a likely hoax; fifteen percent of the responders claimed no opinion. That left only thirty-nine percent as leaning toward accepting the reality of the situation, and of these only about half believed everything was as it was being reported.

* * * * *

Earlier the same day, John began a series of what he termed ‘thematic investigations’ into various major subjects that seemed to be basic to human society: broad subjects like war, American and world history, capitalism, art, and so forth. He had spent most of his first days as a ‘guest’ familiarizing himself with the technologies and sources of information available to him, and now it was time to get down to business. The

first subject of investigation, he decided, should be 'love.'

He could see right away that some sort of framework would be necessary to help reduce what would otherwise be an impossibly large task to manageable terms. When in doubt, he had been told, consult the online encyclopedia Wikipedia as a starting point. He did so.

There he found a rather long article that provided a quick review of many of the important aspects of the concept. This was quite helpful; he spent some hours considering these, but came to the conclusion he still needed some further kind of organizing scheme to serve his needs. Thinking back to his 'place and time' philosophical framework, he soon came up with one.

It seemed apparent that 'love' — or even just 'like' — could be focused in a good many directions, but that not all of these sympathies ultimately led to net positive outcomes. Perhaps one could relate this nebulous power to personal acts that *generally* were good for us in the short or long term; if so, 'love' could be viewed as functional in an evolutionary sense. Indeed, the whole thing might be reduced to a consideration of how 'like or dislike' decisions ruled our progress, both as individuals and as societies: simply, as a species people might be attuned to the degree to which their personal decisions produce results that are in harmony with the general order of our universe.

John could see already how this would explain a lot about human behavior: people were forced to play the hands dealt to them; some people ‘played well’ and others did not. ‘Love’ was just a focused form of ‘like’ and sometimes what people liked in the short term was not consistent with their happiness in the longer term. Social organization was about helping people to love what could lead to longer term self-realization; bad social organization would ultimately fall in on itself.

Yes, he thought to himself, that seems to work. A person might ‘love’ chocolate, but a diet consisting only of chocolate would be fatal in no time...

He sat back in his chair and relaxed. “Okay, now, let’s take a quick look at all the things I can find that prove that humans are not evil beings, just creatures that do the best they can amid a sea of influences they only partially understand,” he mused.

A good first consideration, he thought, would be sexual behavior. He pulled up a series of free online sex videos for reference.

After an hour or two of bemused inspection, he concluded that his model was on the right track. The sexual act could obviously be a physically pleasing one, but precious little of what he was seeing seemed to be anything more than bad acting. There was little evidence of ‘long term’ love on display, just, in one way or another, a trade of money for services rendered. Even in the short term, a genuine goal of honestly trying to please the partner was only rarely evident.

He sat back. It was sad, he thought — all this misplaced energy. Yet even so, behind it there seemed to be something real and functional.

He spent the rest of the day examining bits and pieces of other loving contexts, ones involving honest expressions of caring and concern. Even these, he slowly recognized, were sometimes misplaced, but nevertheless he was quickly satisfied that overtly selfish motives were not the only ones humans possessed.

Chapter Nine

It could hardly have been otherwise that John DéZar rapidly became quite the celebrity. It was therefore no shocker when after only a few more days he was invited to appear on the top public television interview show, “Adam Bennett Asks,” hosted by the inimitable Adam Bennett. Bennett’s show featured guests from all walks of life, but especially those who had a new book or movie coming out, or were involved in ongoing political intrigues, as actor or observer. With John DéZar, however, he had something entirely new on his hands. Though the viewer ratings were bound to be astronomical — how could this be anything less than the crowning point of his career? — he was just a bit nervous about the whole thing.

There had been no real opportunity to touch base with the DéZar camp beforehand, and somewhat to Bennett’s surprise there had been no government interference as to what subjects he might bring up. This seemed contradictory, and made him suspicious: he was already on the fence as to whether the whole thing was a big hoax, and he worried that his involvement with it could end up being a serious embarrassment.

Bennett’s show was staged on a small, dark, set with no audience, and only a table and chairs. He was warned that for security reasons he would not be told until just minutes before that DéZar had arrived, or for that matter, on what day he would come. It was

expected Bennett would be fully prepared beforehand; those were the conditions.

For such a coup Bennett was okay with these conditions, and when the time came only a day later he was ready. When DéZar was ushered in and onto the set, Bennett was already seated and ready to go. He had decided, however, that before filming started he would test the waters a little.

Bennett eyed John carefully as he was brought in and seated. “Well,” he concluded to himself, “if this is a hoax it’s a five-star one.” He held out his hand for a shake. John responded.

“Hello Mr. Bennett. I’ve watched your show a good number of times. It is most informative.”

Bennett smiled one of his best “thank-you-for-helping-to-make-me-a-wealthy-man” smiles.

“Thank you John — may I call you John?”

DéZar nodded in assent.

Bennett started in slowly.

“I think this interview will be most interesting — perhaps the most interesting one I’ve ever done.”

DéZar said nothing, sitting quietly. Bennett tried again.

“You must realize, of course, that I will be expected to explore as many elements of your sudden arrival as I can in the short time we have. I must confess to you up front that I’m still not convinced that this whole affair is on the level — of course I hope it is, and that something good, maybe even wonderful, will come out of it — but

the fact remains that more than half of the public believes some kind of hoax is being perpetrated. Under those circumstances, some of my questions may be a bit aggressive.”

He stopped, waiting for a response. John’s reply was measured, but not stiff.

“Of course, Mr. Bennett. I realize you have responsibilities, and that it is important we address those elements that you feel will inform viewers. Notwithstanding the unusual situation, I have nothing to hide.”

Bennett nodded non-committedly. Perhaps this would be more routine than he’d expected.

They talked for several minutes. Bennett gave John a few tips regarding ‘interview behavior,’ all the while trying to decide whether his guest was a lizard-man or a man in a lizard suit... At last he felt they were ready to go, and gave his signal to the production team. After the intros, he turned to his guest.

“Well, Mr. DéZar, let’s start with the big question, the one that has everyone talking. Actually, I guess, there are two big questions. First, are you really an ‘alien’ being, and if so, just why are you here?”

DéZar felt ready to field these; by now he had already done so several times.

“Honestly, Mr. Bennett, I cannot give a full response...”

Bennett cut in immediately. “Cannot, or *will* not...?”

John was unphased. “*Cannot*,” he repeated, with some emphasis. “Obviously we are quite different from humans; I have permitted around ten teams of specialists representing groups ranging from labor unions to national governments to examine my physical person, and they have all concluded I represent something real — that is, I (we) are not some kind of hoax. I can appreciate that, even so, many among the general population remain skeptical. I realize it does not help that we have no memory of events before our appearance and have not been told why we are here — and of course these facts are disturbing to everyone: I realize that for all any of you may know, we could be lying and have some terrible secret agenda. I can only state once again that we are speaking the truth, and that as soon as we discover anything regarding our reason for being here, we will let everyone know.”

Bennett wasn’t showing any emotion — he was far too experienced a professional to do so — but he was ambivalent, not sure whether he should go on the attack. He settled on a slightly less aggressive course.

“All right then, giving you the benefit of the doubt for the moment and assuming that you have been straight with us” — he tilted his head — “and that’s a big assumption, Mr. DéZar — what are your latest thoughts on what you have sometimes referred to as your ‘mission’ here?”

DéZar realized that this line of questioning was not going to go anywhere useful, but he was trapped. “I

have discussed this on several occasions now. Unfortunately I have made no progress yet on figuring this out on my own. It is very frustrating.”

Bennett went along. “Well, you have mentioned that part of the mission might simply be to test the human population’s response to you and your family. Do you still believe this?”

“Yes, I do.”

Bennett could not resist jumping to a new conclusion.

“Does this mean that sometime in the not-too-distant-future we can expect a larger delegation of your kind to appear somewhere on our doorstep — like on the lawn of the White House or The Mall — if we are deemed respectable hosts?”

John suppressed a sigh.

“Possibly, but I sense that something else beyond that simple scenario is involved. I continue to think it over.”

John didn’t pause at this. He decided it was a good time to introduce some new facts people might find interesting. And, it might get Bennett off his back on subjects he felt uncomfortable with.

“I think your audience might be interested to learn that your scientists have come to certain conclusions about our biological makeup. This comes primarily from analyses of my DNA.”

Bennett wasn’t so sure about the interest angle, but he went along.

“Really? Please explain.”

His guest did so. “Actually, your scientists are a bit confused. I am not knowledgeable in biology, and can only repeat what they have told me. It appears that a good deal of my DNA resembles human DNA, but also shares seemingly random affinities with birds, reptiles, and even other creatures from this planet. But not in the usual evolutionary sequence. Thus I am not directly ‘derived,’ ‘phylogenetically,’ I believe the term is, from your animal species here, but nevertheless share many of their genetic sequences. I would not care to speculate on what that means, however.”

Bennett decided this was not an exploitable direction, so he cut the thread short. “Well, John — if I may call you that — that is quite interesting, and I hope you will keep us updated on that matter.” It was time to lighten things up a bit, he thought, and was ready with some tension-breakers. After a short pause, he continued.

“Since It seems we are at an impasse in the direction of missions and origins, let me ask you a few questions about what you have learned of humanity in the brief time you have been here. If what you are telling us is true, then your family must have had quite a challenging time in dealing with all the details of human society.”

DéZar was relieved that the interview had turned toward less threatening subjects. Very much concerned that the general population appeared suspicious of him

and his family, he felt that he needed an opportunity to communicate at a more intimate level.

Bennett continued on. “Before getting into that, however, perhaps you can give us some idea of what a typical day is for you — that is, what your daily routine is at this point.”

John was not sure why anyone would be interested in that, but if that’s what Bennett wanted...

“Well, I require only four hours of sleep, so rise in the morning at 4 a.m. I then exercise and shower, and at 4:30 take a cup of tea, prepared by my wife Joan. I then begin my paid work as a mathematician.”

Bennett broke in. “You have a regular job?”

“Yes. Among the few suggestions I received originally was that I should arrange for employment, perhaps for the mere experience of having some here. I do some mathematical consulting work for a non-profit environmental organization. I’m afraid I can’t tell you which one, for the moment.”

Bennett nodded. “Yes, of course. Please continue.”

“At about 7:30 I have a full breakfast with my wife. At 8 o’clock I meet with Kerry Phillips and two or three of the government’s people to go over the day’s schedule of meetings and activities involving visitors.”

Bennett broke in again. “Visitors?”

“Yes. So far there have been, as I just mentioned, a sizable number of medical teams who have come to investigate us; naturally we feel obliged to accommodate them. Most have come in the morning,

and are done with me by noon. I then have a light dinner. After this, I continue my program of acquainting myself with human culture, history, and philosophy.”

Bennett pursued this point.

“So, you are taking a ‘crash course’ in human nature and society? To what end?”

“I am trying to, as you say, cover all the bases. If I am supposed to figure out my mission on my own, I can hardly expect to accomplish this without a better understanding of the human condition; that is, its history, strengths, weaknesses, and aspirations. And, even if those who sent me eventually inform me directly of what they want me to do here, I would likely not be able to do so effectively without having the same information at my disposal.”

Bennett smiled. “Yes, I see what you mean by ‘covering all the bases.’ A prudent course. How are you approaching the problem?”

“Given that time is of the essence, I am using your various available medias to aid me. In the afternoon, I spend a few to several hours listening to your music, watching movies from different eras, and examining television programming. The family has its main dinner around 6 o’clock. After dinner I carry out a meditation exercise and sometime after 7 begin my structured look at human history, politics, and other subjects with the aid of your Internet. We have been granted access to many services that are not free sites, so I can research particular points in detail as necessary.”

“It sounds like you are ‘trying to get an education,’ in our terms.”

John nodded in assent. “Yes, I suppose that is apt, but to the best of my abilities I am attempting to go beyond just that. For example, I have been looking at how movie and television content changes over time, and what that might mean in the larger sense. It is very challenging, and I am fortunate to have Miss Phillips and the government people there to help clarify things when I come to impasses in my understanding.”

And so it went for another half hour or more. In the end, Bennett was pleased with how the interview had gone. But he still wasn’t entirely convinced the whole thing was on the level.

* * * * *

After the group returned to Hopkinsville that evening, Kerry decided she would get John to supply a clarification on his ‘methodology.’ What kind of information did he want to lean on to achieve his mission, and why? He had just settled into his study when she knocked on the doorframe.

“John, may I have a word?” She sounded a bit tentative.

He turned away from his computer. “Of course, Kerry. What is it?”

She came in and sat down in the only other chair in the room.

“Well... I heard what you told Bennett regarding your plan of attack, and wondered about the matter of quality control. That is, there is information, and there is information... A lot of what you — or anyone, for that matter — will see in the media is of varying quality, or even truth. I’m sure you must be aware of that, but when you suggested you will be ‘studying’ television, which is plagued with such problems, I wondered what you mean...”

DéZar nodded. “Well of course I understand what you’re saying, and am well aware of that complication. One can look at the so-called ‘information’ in various ways. Even bad information can be good information if one takes into account that that’s what it is.”

Kerry twitched. “Okay... explain.”

John smiled. “Yes, that does sound contradictory. But I will be looking at, among other things, the frameworks into which what one might call ‘the local information’ fits. In short, I would like to investigate what the real purpose of ‘bad information’ is.”

Kerry smiled. “Ahh, I see — you want to take into account how society achieves its goals — and to what extent its ‘advances’ may be based on dubious motives.”

John had already made frequent use of the people around the house when it came to interpreting the many ‘inside jokes’ present in advertisements. Oftentimes these initially just passed over his head. But now the concern was about something deeper.

He nodded. "Yes. Even a cursory examination of your television shows and movies makes it apparent there are a lot of ulterior motives and plans underlying them. These, combined with more 'factual' sources like news programs and financial market reporters, provide insight on how society is playing out. Along those lines, you could be quite helpful to me if you can give me some hints on what tricks advertisers use to get viewers to use their products."

Kerry smiled. "Ooooo... 'One of my favorite peeves! I'll tell you what... I have a terrific production team at the station, and they've been told that for the time being, at least, anything I want done should be given highest priority. I'll give them a list of ads I find particularly obnoxious for the depths they descend to sell their wares, and have them edit together a tape of these for us to go over. This would give you a jump-start on the subject."

John nodded. "That would be great. I look forward to seeing the results."

Kerry got up and moved toward the door.

"This should be fun! Otherwise, are you now set up satisfactorily?"

"Yes, I think so. But of course if some problem turns up I will let you know immediately."

She smiled. "Good, I'll let you get to it, then."

She closed the door behind her. It seemed all was well, at least for the time being.

Chapter Ten

Two days later the group at 423 had a surprise visitor during the morning meeting. Special Agent Towner took a phone call about ten minutes in.

“Yes... I see. Yes, we’re all here, so it should be okay. ‘See you in about five.” He put his phone away, somewhat evasively.

Kerry perked up. “Are you going to have to leave early, Greg? — Actually, that’s no problem; we don’t have that much more to discuss today.”

Towner smiled. “No, I’m not going anywhere. ‘A surprise visit, that’s all.”

He stopped and said no more. Kerry waited, but he just sat there. Towner was not being completely candid, and Kerry sensed it. In fact he and Col. Raisz had been contacted the night before about the planned visit, and decided not to let on.

Kerry raised her eyebrows. “Alright then, I guess we’ll just have to wait and see...”

They didn’t have that long to wait. A few minutes later the doorbell rang.

Col. Raisz jumped up. “I’ll get it!” he called out.

Kerry thought he seemed just a bit too animated.

Raisz opened the door. He saluted.

“Good to see you again, sir! We’re all inside, ready!” He motioned toward the group.

It was President Coady, up from New York on an off-the-schedule visit!

Kerry immediately rose from the couch.

“Mr. President! What a surprise! It’s a great pleasure to meet you, sir.”

Coady nodded, then looked around the room. He soon recognized another familiar face.

“Greg! It’s good to see you! I hope this assignment is proving suitably taxing...?”

Towner had been on the Presidential detail for several years before his shift to 423. They had gotten along famously.

“Yes sir, it’s been really interesting!”

Coady nodded affirmatively. “Good, I’m glad to hear that. If anyone deserves a perk, it’s you.”

Towner came close to blushing; he was not used to receiving direct praise, especially from POTUS.

He managed, a bit weakly: “Thank you, sir.”

Coady quickly shifted his attention to John. He took a couple of steps toward him, raising his hand as he went. John rose in turn.

“So, here’s the cause of all this trouble...!”

John was taken aback and paused just as the two were about to shake hands.

Coady laughed and grabbed them. “Not to worry, sir; ‘just giving you a hard time.”

John exhaled. Even if the President *was* trying to be funny, he still wasn’t quite sure what to say. He defaulted to safe terrain. “Thank you Mr. President. I am so thankful you could accommodate us.”

Coady's expression stiffened to a more serious configuration.

"Well... I figured I should come up here and check things out for myself. Luckily, I had to be in the City today for a meeting at ten. That seemed just enough time to sneak up here and bark out a few orders." He paused, hoping for a few smiles around the room. There were none. He went on.

"First, let me say that I believe what my advisors have been telling me about you and your situation. I am not entirely surprised by you and your family's appearance among us at this time — uh, by the way, could you have your wife and children summoned: I'd very much like to meet them..."

Kerry bowed and went off to retrieve the other three DéZars.

Coady continued with his train of thought. "Actually, I'm a bit curious that something like this hasn't happened before. Still, the lack of a stated mission has everyone very confused."

John dipped his head slightly. "Yes sir, I'm sorry about that. But it is what it is."

Coady nodded in agreement. "Have you made any progress yet? — I heard what you said on Bennett's show."

"No sir, regrettably not. But I have only just begun my efforts."

Coady nodded again. "Fair enough. But, on that score, I must sprinkle a dose of reality."

They were all listening.

“You are here, origins notwithstanding, on my say-so.” He stopped and raised his hands. “Don’t misinterpret that remark: I fully support this whole adventure, but there are many who do not, and this is likely to create an escalating pressure to come up with results. We are diverting millions of dollars a week here — I don’t even know how *many* millions, exactly — and eventually we will be called upon to justify such spending if some useful discoveries are not made, and pretty quickly. Surely you must realize this?”

John gulped. “Yes sir, of course I do. I can only say that I will try my best to make progress.”

Coady was apparently satisfied with this straightforward answer.

“Well then, I will also try my best to deflect the complaints of detractors, for as long as I can. It should be an interesting time.” He stopped. Mrs. DéZar and the children had just been led into the room by Kerry. They all looked nervous, as might well be expected.

“Thank you, Kerry — and by the way, thank you for all you have done: you’ve been splendid! Joan — is it? — please come closer, with your children.”

They did so. This time, at least, Valla did not break into sobs.

Coady looked back and forth at all three, without speaking. For once, he had trouble finding words. Their eyes were so riveting...

He held back a tear, and finally spoke.

“Well... It seems that the Creator has an even greater wealth of ideas than we imagined... Mrs. DéZar: please continue to help your husband, under these very trying circumstances.”

She nodded, unable to say much, except the obligatory “Yes sir, thank you.”

Coady broke the solemn mood. He turned back toward the group as a whole.

“And now, I must return to the more routine elements of running the country.” He looked at his watch, then motioned to Colonel Raisz. “Hmmm... Perhaps I could impose on you and Kerry for a fifteen minute compound tour? I’d like to see firsthand how you’ve set things up. That should still give me time to get back to the City for my meeting.”

They of course were happy to provide the walk-around, which went swimmingly. Coady said goodbye to Towner, who headed off to attend to something else. The remaining three, accompanied by the President’s regular detail, moved off toward 428. When they got there — a walk of only a few hundred feet — Kerry described this as their temporary living quarters, and how the McCanns had been removed to make room for them.

“Did they put up a squawk?” he asked.

“Not really, as I understand” Kerry answered. “We’ll have to see how soon they get antsy at the motel, though.”

Coady nodded. “Well, let’s try to keep them happy — two votes at stake next November!” He hoped the remark came across humorously...

Kerry and the colonel laughed. What else do you do when you’re giving the President a tour...?

They turned around and headed toward the west side of the compound. Colonel Raisz provided the requisite summary of the facilities, dwelling on its super-tech capabilities. Coady was impressed, and in conclusion went with a ‘in good hands’ encomium.

By nine o’clock the Presidential detail was on its way back to New York.

* * * * *

The main reason John had jumped at the invitation to appear on “Adam Bennett Asks” harkened back to his basic marching orders: to make himself better known to the general population. This, it seemed, should be one result of such a high-profile television exposure. But a few days later, the day after President Coady stopped by, there came a surprise. Shortly after noon, the latest poll on the DéZars was released.

There had hardly been any change in popular opinion. Only forty percent of those polled now believed the DéZars were in fact real alien visitors, and even half of these were inclined to think that they weren’t being entirely truthful about their amnesia. The remaining sixty percent still thought the whole thing was some kind of hoax, or pleaded no opinion.

Obviously, a single personal appearance was not going to be enough to significantly change the public's mind.

He weighed the situation for a while, then formulated a strategy. The forty-five minute shows on WMVZ were being well-watched, but obviously something more was needed. He would see whether he could venture out to make some personal public appearances, perhaps at nearby towns.

When he advanced this plan to Kerry, she was not sure it could be accommodated. But she assured him she would take up the matter with Colonel Raisz immediately, and she was good to her word.

A phone call might have been in order, but she decided a personal visit would be more fun. She was right.

It was a nice day, and the Colonel's tent was only a few hundred feet away, so she marched right over to see him. This was a good opportunity to find out just how much he was going to be 'at her service.'

"Kerry!" He greeted her with a big smile. "What can I do for you?"

Kerry did her best to play damsel-in-distress — though this was not one of her best faces, and clearly it was not the place to overdo it...

"Colonel... I have a bit of a problem..."

"Oh? Do tell." He deftly feigned concern and unconcern simultaneously. She got it, and beamed.

"Well, John DéZar has decided he needs to get out more among the population. He'd like to make

personal appearances in the towns around here, fairly regularly. Is there any way to make this happen?"

Raisz was silent for a few moments. "Hmmm... That would obviously be a security nightmare, and probably very costly to boot. Yup."

Kerry flashed another glance at his gold ring, then followed up, a bit wistfully.

"So — does that mean I should tell John to forget about it?"

Raisz smiled. "No, no no no no no... I'll run it up the flag to see what the brass says, and get back to you, probably in a day or two. 'That okay?"

Kerry was impressed. Maybe she had some say about things after all. She blustered.

"That would be great! I really appreciate your help." She stood awkwardly for a moment, then turned to go. "Thanks... 'See you later!" She walked out.

Raisz watched her as she disappeared around a corner. "Nice lady!" he thought.

* * * * *

As part of their crash-education program, the DéZars had asked for help in exposing themselves to representative books, musical works, and movies. They quickly gave up on books; these took too long to fully digest, and there just weren't enough hours in the day. Still, they tried to sit through a movie or some serial television programming each day, and to listen to an hour or so of various kinds of music. A local arts

professor, Gerald Gaston, had been hired to provide running commentary as they watched/listened.

Sometimes Kerry would join the group.

After her meeting with Raisz she returned to 423. As she walked into the living room a classical music recording was playing. She thought she recognized it.

“Say, isn’t that ‘Knoxville, Summer of 1915’ by Samuel Barber? I’ve always really liked that piece.” Joan DéZar answered her.

“Yes, as Professor Gaston tells us. It is a lovely work. Professor Gaston has provided us with the words to the music as well.” She hesitated a moment, then went on.

“Tell us, Kerry, are there real places and families like this in this place and time? Is there an actual Knoxville?” Gaston paused the music to allow Kerry a chance to respond.

Kerry wondered where this was going. “Well, yes, there is a real place called Knoxville. It’s a town in the state of Tennessee.” Kerry had lived in New York long enough to adopt the local custom of referring to everything that was not New York-sized a ‘town,’ as opposed to a ‘city.’

Joan smiled. “And what about the family? The song is very warm-sounding, and the people described in it seem to be so nice. Are there many families like that in this place and time?”

Kerry stood in silence for a moment. A sore spot had been exposed. Images of her own parents’ early

divorce, her grouchy alcoholic stepfather, and a favorite uncle who had committed suicide just a room away from her when she was in her teens flashed through her mind. Her reply was just a tad studied.

“Well, remember, the scene described is from over a hundred years ago. In some ways families were less stressed then.” That was kind of awkwardly put. She felt a need to retreat. “But I guess most people from back then had their troubles, just as we do.”

Kerry was doing a poor job of concealing her mixed emotions. Joan DéZar’s facial expression changed. She recognized instantly that her question had led Kerry to a bad place.

“Kerry... — I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be intrusive...”

Kerry looked straight into her deep-set, scale-lined, *concerned*, lizard eyes. “Gee, she’s a lot more perceptive than the average female alien you read about” she thought... Actually, a lot more perceptive than any of her own friends... She motioned with her hands, palms up.

“Ah, ’not to worry... It’s true that my life was not always ideal growing up; sometimes I can’t help but remember that. But in the end I got through it okay. Maybe some of the bad things even made me a better person. And I know a lot of people who had it worse than I did; not all of them even survived. *Still*,” she said with some emphasis, “yes, I’m sure there *are* families out there that are like the one described in the music.

I've known a lot of them, too — the kind that share a real love, and will do anything for one another. Unfortunately, your being here, you don't really get a chance to see that."

Joan nodded. "Yes, it is difficult having to stay in this house all the time. Our first few days were very tense. Our only real source of information about families here was the television, and its serialized programs and movies. But these were very confusing to us. Most of them, we quickly realized, were fictional constructions, and we could not always tell how accurate they were in presenting their versions of 'real life.' Most of the serious programs had little about family life, and the comedic ones avoided subjects of a serious nature. We didn't know what to think."

Kerry had a thought.

"You know, what you describe is quite a bit like something an older friend of mine told me about a year he spent in the country of Australia. You might have seen that Australians are mostly descendants of people from England, and they still speak English and share a lot of characteristics with the Brits. My friend was there for over a year in the early 1980s, on business. At that point many Australians actually knew rather little about people from the United States — that is, beyond what they got from news stories and, interestingly, any number of television programs imported from here. He spoke of one person in particular, his flatmate there for a while, who had a rather negative impression of

Americans, though she'd never been here. We had a rather conservative President at the time, and she and many other Australians perceived us as being arrogant bullies. I guess she thought most Americans were selfish and stuck up, and just not very nice."

The DéZars sat patiently, waiting for Kerry to get to the point of her story. She continued.

"Then she was sent over to the United States for about a month by her company, to check on something or other in several different places. By the time she got back to Australia, her opinion had completely changed: just about everyone she dealt with had been so friendly, enthusiastic, and helpful that she couldn't keep feeling the way she had earlier. So, don't worry: you're not the only ones who have been confused by poor information sources!"

Everyone laughed. But it was a useful point.

Joan spoke up again.

"Anyway, I am glad to hear that many people here feel the same way we do about our own children. I guess this must be a universal feeling, wherever we might be from."

Everyone agreed. There seemed to be no further thoughts on that thread, so Dr. Gaston put the music back on. Kerry stayed to enjoy the rest of the piece, but then had to get back to attending to details of the daily 'reality' programming.

Late the next day Kerry got her return call from Colonel Raisz. He was pleased to inform her that despite the potential problems involved, his superiors had decided to go along with what John wanted. But there was to be a rather strictly-observed protocol.

There were perhaps thirty small towns twenty minutes or less from Hopkinsville by helicopter. The plan was to appear at some or most of these more or less randomly over the coming weeks, giving less than a half-hour's warning for any particular visit. Set-up would be organized by truck support originating either from the 423 compound itself or the nearby military base, and timed to arrive at the day's destination just as the visit announcement was being made. Crowds were therefore expected to be small, in the hundreds, and security was to be provided by military, national guard, and state police personnel. Appearances would last only half an hour, beginning with a short statement by John, and followed by the organization of a receiving line of persons who might want to ask questions of John, or snap a photo of him.

It seemed a simple enough plan, so arrangements were quickly begun to set up a team to make it happen.

* * * * *

Two days later Kerry heard from her production team about her request for a compilation of advertisement excerpts. As no specific events had been scheduled for John that afternoon, this seemed to be an

opportunity for her ‘training session.’ She knocked at his door.

He whirled around in his chair, a bit playfully, she thought. “Kerry! Hello! What can I do for you?”

She smiled. “My folks have come through. The sample of commercials has been compiled as I wished, and I thought we might go through it. Do you have some time right now? It should be pretty entertaining, in a shake-your-head kind of way, that is...”

John nodded. “Yes, that sounds good. I am not doing anything that cannot be dropped for a while.”

She came in and sat down.

“Here, it’s on this flash drive.”

He plugged in the drive and prepared to play the file. She stopped him.

“Before we get going, I need to say a few things. First off, for all I’m going to complain about, most commercials are actually pretty bland affairs. They merely say what they need to, which basically is to make the viewer aware that such-and-such a product exists. I don’t object to this basic purpose; if no one knows about a product, it won’t get bought and the whole effort behind its creation would be for naught. Right?”

John understood. “So what you’re saying is that this is ‘good’ information, making it possible for the consumer to make an objective decision.”

“Yes, basically, but... business is often a cutthroat affair, with people’s jobs frequently on the line. Mere

‘informing’ is not always the goal of advertisers. That takes too much for granted: that consumers can be trusted with making rational judgments according to what’s presented to them — and that assumes the product really *is* a good or relevant one to begin with. So, the point of any ad has more to do with getting people interested in the product than it does rational assessment. The going theory on how to accomplish this, it seems, is, when possible, to somehow *capture* the viewer’s attention.”

After putting a good deal of emphasis on the word “capture,” she stopped. John signaled he wanted a clarification.

“Okay... Go on...”

“Well... When it comes to advertising products, the key is being remembered. Merely being informative is often not enough, since many products and services are not that necessary, or are boring or unappealing, or even actually harmful when misused or overused. The advertiser’s object is often to be entertaining in some way, because this captures the attention better than merely being ‘informative.’” Kerry paused, to make sure John was following. He was with her.

“Okay, so far so good. Continue.”

She did. “Advertisers accomplish their goal in a number of ways; there’s lots of opportunities for creative solutions to this matter of getting the consumer to pay attention. One common one is humor: often the funniest commercials are for products like

insurance or detergent, which are usually regarded as little more than necessary evils. A good laugh will put a consumer more at ease; at the least they will be more likely to remember the ad, and in turn, hopefully, the product.”

“An impression can also be made through various clever approaches to production. Multimedia productions featuring mini-stories and music often make a positive impression — back in the 1960s there was a famous ad showing a series of photos of a little girl growing up, which, when combined with a cute song, sold an awful lot of cameras. Such ads are suggestive of good things, which of course produce a positive effect.”

John was starting to lose interest. “Alright, alright, so where is this going?”

Kerry sighed. “The unfortunate thing is, sometimes, in an effort to capture attention, the ad-makers cross the line when it comes to truthfulness or emotional deception. What I object to is the common use of these more devious approaches. Too often the viewer is manipulated into thinking thoughts that are not much better than fantasies, or are even disturbing.”

John nodded. “I see. I assume, then, there is an entire spectrum of efforts of this type, ranging from the merely irritating to the perpetration of fraud?”

“Yes. And it’s this you, in your efforts now, always need to assess. And, of course, it’s not only commercials that are afflicted. I remembered that

Spinoza had some words on this — I wrote them down: ‘When men see or hear anything new, indeed, unless especially on their guard against preconceived opinions, they mostly even perceive things quite otherwise than as they are in fact, especially if the matter in question is beyond the capacity of the listener or narrator, and still more if it interferes in any way with his interests or affections.’ Otherwise put, we are easily led.”

John smiled. “Yes. A universal truth, I suppose.”

“Unfortunately so. That said, let’s look at the file now. I had my folks put up the milder ads first.”

John opened the file. Excerpts from various ads had been grouped into sets of twos and threes. The first set now played. Kerry waited until all three excerpts had played, then offered some commentary.

“One common device is to describe some kind of treatment in ‘before and after’ terms while changing the background environment in the ad — for example, by changing from black and white scenes to color ones, or similarly changing the accompanying music from something somber to something more upbeat. Ads for facial treatments usually display the before-treatment-face as non-smiling, and the after-treatment one as smiling. The level of manipulation in these is small, but still, I find it annoying. Go on to the next set.”

John obeyed, and they watched again.

“Okay, then... Another not very subtle ploy is targeting particular markets. Like this ad with the growly sounding ‘man’s man’ voice plugging a pickup

truck, and the squeaky teen dolly pushing an acne treatment. In the second ad the narrator has a fairly obvious Southern accent: guess where that ad would be broadcast...”

John nodded.

“Next group... As you can see, all the actors in these ads are ‘beautiful people.’ Usually the product involved is something that is actually bad for you, in a long-term health sense. Like alcoholic beverages, and soft drinks that rot your teeth and lead to diabetes. But the ads connect consumption of these to good times with beautiful people — in other words, to silly fantasies. Similarly, many ads feature celebrities as spokespeople — what do they know? The advertisers are simply hoping that large numbers of viewers will also be their fans, and make an association with the product on this basis.”

John was taking all this in, but so far didn’t seem that impressed. “Kerry... None of this seems so bad — it just says that there a lot of cloying ways to catch one’s attention.”

“Perhaps. But let’s move on to some more devious examples.” She motioned for him to continue.

“So, in the first one we have a pizza ad in which a company that makes frozen pizzas is trying to convince the viewer to buy their product instead of ordering out for a fresh one. The people making and delivering the fresh pizza are physically very unattractive, and have sloppy habits. The second ad goes one step further:

the people responsible for the competing product are slyly represented by members of a nationality that Americans sometimes connect with having had a hand in past atrocities — in short, scapegoats are being invoked. To my mind, that's going over the line."

John nodded, thoughtfully.

"Next, that sandwich ad. The sandwich looks well-stuffed, doesn't it...? But if you actually go to the store and order it, its size never even approaches the images of it presented on tv — in short, the tv ad is an outright lie. Go on to next group."

John clicked 'play' again. Kerry pointed.

"So, what you see here are a couple of examples of ads designed to *scare* people into buying their product. I fail to see why this kind of pressure is necessary, and it seems pretty unethical. But the most revealing group of ads is the last one, which possibly says more about American society than anything else."

John reviewed them. Kerry was pretty obviously eager to talk it through, but refrained from doing so until he gave her a signal he was ready.

"Here, we have a big automobile manufacturer trying to get 'homesy' with the audience. The people in the ad are billed as 'real people,' to distinguish them from the professional actors that usually appear on commercials. This is supposed to make us feel more at ease with their statements of approval of the product — despite the fact that, like regular actors, they are being paid for their appearance, and undoubtedly have

been told exactly what to say and how to say it. In this particular ad, the host points out that the car company won a 'coveted' award for satisfying its customers. As it turns out, however, the reality is that not everyone agrees that this is a very weighty award, and in any case another probably more prestigious review organization rated the same car in the bottom quarter of car makes insofar as reliability is concerned. The point: that a 'lawyerly approach' to the matter of quality is often, or usually, taken by advertisers: as in the courtroom, only evidence favorable to the subject is being revealed."

John sat passively. "Why does this upset you so much?"

Kerry exhaled. "Well, because the agendas are always so eagerly self-serving. And because the delivery of such so-called 'information' is so widespread. And because there are plenty of other practices that lean in the same direction. For example, ads are frequently broadcast at a higher audio volume than the regular programming is. And in movies broadcast on television, ad spots often become more and more frequent as the end of the movie approaches: ostensibly, because somebody figures that viewers will be less likely to abandon the channel as the story's resolution is neared. Recently, a new and very annoying practice has invaded sports broadcasting: six-second ads are now frequently being inserted into the play-by-play when minor pauses in the action take place — like between pitches in

baseball games. The level of greediness by both the stations and advertisers just keeps growing.”

John sat back.

“I see your point. But if things become annoying enough, won’t people just stop watching?”

Kerry shook her head. “I don’t think so. People seem to be giving in to the urge for more and more external stimulation. They either overlook the impositions, or fail to comprehend the level of duping that is going on, or both.”

They sat for a moment, just looking at one another. Kerry broke the silence.

“It’s not a problem with advertising alone, of course. You should be on the alert for rampant, self-serving bias in human communication of all kinds. We have a right to protect our own interests, naturally, but at some point concern about genuine group issues should balance out ‘all for me’ thinking.”

John nodded. “Thank you Kerry. I think I understand the kind of tradeoff you allude to. I believe it is critical to understanding how progress proceeds at the social level. Basically, choices need to be made all the time, and the more those choices do not restrict later and later options, the better off we are. So, I will keep your words in mind. I think I can identify other kinds of social interactions that, as your philosopher Spinoza says, ‘interfere with interests or affections,’ and if so, perhaps begin to understand what kind of role is expected of me.”

Kerry was impressed. Perhaps she should worry less about John's strategy, and more about letting him get back to work...

“Sounds good — I guess I'll let you get on with it.”
John smiled. He was on it.

Chapter Eleven

The first on-location town visit went rather well. As originally planned, notice of the upcoming event went out on the media less than a half hour before it began. It was to be staged right in the middle of town, and when the time arrived it all came together with clocklike precision, despite the range of preparations involved.

Onsite, a podium was set up from which John could deliver a short greeting. He would then step down to sit at a desk in front of it that was positioned at the end of a roped-off receiving corridor. Visitors would proceed in line to reach John, and perhaps make a short comment or ask a question as they passed by. Cameras were provided to anyone wishing to take a quick shot of John, though signs along the way warned that 'selfies' would not be allowed. Visitors would then walk off a few feet, where the photos were downloaded by Guardsmen onto stick drives which were given out as souvenirs. The cameras were then quickly sanitized and brought back to visitors positioned further back in the line.

Only twenty minutes or so was to be allowed for the passing of the receiving line, a fact expressed on another sign. Those who did not make the cut in time were given signed (actually stamped) photos of John, and told of another available feature.

That was, an online question and answer service. The planning for such was a bit tricky. It was quickly

realized that any such service set up for an indefinite period, and with no password access, would likely be overrun in no time with countless millions of messages. So a town visit-specific password code was handed out, with the additional restriction that the service would only stay active for two hours after the onsite event ended.

Still, and considering the speed of electronic sharing available to twenty-first century citizens, this meant a likelihood of many thousands of queries. Obviously, John was not going to be able to answer all of these individually, whether they were good questions or not. So a plan was devised.

Several hundred National Guardsmen from around the nation were recruited to sift through the initial pile of emails, focusing in on a few hundred that were nontrivial and neither frivolous nor obscene. A final panel of five would then go through these, narrowing the list down to what they considered the fifty best questions that could be answered reasonably quickly. John was to provide responses to twenty-five of these, with these notes appearing online a day or two later. A small prize — a gift certificate — was also relayed to the ‘winners.’ The remaining twenty-five were also answered, though not by John himself.

This meant absorbing another hour or more of John’s precious time following each visit, but he was happy to do so, as it seemed a number of potentially

informative questions might be entertained without having to wade through the chaff.

The posers of questions were of course warned that an individual, personal, answer could not be guaranteed, and that restraint should be shown as to content, considering the limited review resources available. It was also required that all questions be presented in English. Various volunteers from around the world chipped in, however, to provide instant translations in more than twenty languages of the “fifty best” responses that appeared online in English.

Security for the visit itself was provided by several dozen local and state policemen, army soldiers, National Guardsmen, and two of the Secret Service guys.

The event began right on schedule. Three small helicopters descended to the center of town, carrying John, Kerry, Tim, a couple of technicians and their equipment, two of the Secret Servicemen, and four military escorts. John was ushered to the podium and after his introduction gave a short speech explaining his reasons for coming to the town. At its conclusion there was polite applause from perhaps three or four hundred onlookers. The receiving line, containing quite a few children and senior citizens, was then organized, and began to move forward.

The very first person in the line to reach him had been allowed to go first as a courtesy: she was a wizened old lady of perhaps eighty-five years of age.

John was immediately struck by what appeared to be an overabundance of pain and fear in her expression, a judgment confirmed when she uttered:

“Hello, dear sir. Have you been sent by the Lord to save us from our sins??”

The sincerity in her eyes, and words, startled him. This was the first time he had met an elderly person, and he found the experience somewhat unnerving. He took a moment before responding.

“I, I can only say that I am here to try to help make a better life for us all.”

She smiled, replying “Well good, God bless you my son!” then slowly tottered off, leaning heavily on her cane as she went.

John watched her go. He wondered whether her state bespoke simply of advancing years, or a few too many bad decisions made over a long life.

There was not much of interest out of the next twenty-five or so passers-by; most just gawked and said hello, or took a photo, or both. Then a slender red-haired lad of about fourteen stepped up.

“Sir...” he said confidently, “What evidence can you give me, here and now, that you are not just some actor dressed up in a lizard suit?”

John pondered the question for a few moments, then gave the boy an answer he hoped would satisfy.

“Well, as it turns out, I have an ability to change the color of part of my complexion.”

The teen was intrigued. “Really? Show me!”

John motioned to wait, then sat still, concentrating. After a few moments several flushes of blue, then red, color overwrote sections of the usual light brownish-orange color of his face. It remained for a few seconds, then faded out.

The young man went wide-eyed, obviously impressed. “Wow! Thanks!” was all he could say before moving on.

Another ten minutes of more mostly innocuous gawking followed, bringing the event nearly to its close.

But then another boy stepped up. He was younger than the red-haired one, perhaps about nine. He looked a bit grumpy.

“Hi!” he ventured, somewhat vacantly.

Then suddenly, without another word, he lunged forward and struck John a glancing blow in the face with his fist.

John blinked, but before he could do anything security guards were dragging the poor kid away — as in vain he repeated the words “But I was just trying to find out if he was *real*...”

Kerry rushed to John’s side. “John, are you okay!?” she sputtered.

John, trying to restore some dignity to the proceedings, merely sat quietly. He finally answered: “I’m fine, really, thank you — ’no problem.”

The receiving line was cut off a couple of minutes later. There were some complaints from the peanut

gallery, but they had been warned beforehand what the rules were going to be.

The airborne folks quickly packed it up and moved back toward their rides.

Just before getting onto their helicopter, however, Kerry took John aside. She was feeling a bit mischievous. She flashed a sly smile and fluttered her eyelashes.

“Why John... Those beautiful blue and red colors... You never let on you could do that...!”

He rolled his eyes, the first time she had seen him do that as well, then both stepped back up into the chopper.

* * * * *

There was, as had been anticipated, a huge flood of e-contacts after the visit, even given the restrictions imposed. The task force was set into action immediately. The sorting proceeded as planned, and fifty queries were quickly compiled and sent to John for his selections. Among the ‘winners’ were:

“Sir: Let’s suppose for the sake of argument that you really are an alien ‘visitor.’ Why should I take notice of your efforts here any more than I do the plenty of nutjobs from my own planet who are forecasting a coming Apocalypse, or Second Coming, or whatever?” —Jon, from Bend, Oregon.

John's reply: "Because I *am* really here, *now*. The apparent powers who sent me must have an important reason for doing so — otherwise, what's the point?"

Equally intriguing was a question from Alonzo, Houston, Texas:

"Mr. DéZar: I find it suspicious that you are supposed to be from somewhere far away, yet seem to be able to breathe in the air of our planet as if you were born here. 'Care to comment?"

He did: "Sir, actually all four of us have had some difficulty in that regard. A few or several times a day we experience some uncomfortable pressure in our chests, making it more difficult to take in full breaths. We have been given devices similar to your asthma inhalers to help us out when this problem becomes annoying."

A third question came from a twelve-year-old who identified himself as 'Squirrel,' from Colebrook, Connecticut:

"Did you come from an egg, like birds and reptiles, or were you born like humans are?"

Given the circumstances of his arrival, this was going to be hard to answer, but John gave it a shot:

"Dear Squirrel: We honestly do not know for sure, as this is not a matter that relates to our present situation. However, I suspect my kind is born 'live' (as your people put it), as you are. This would not be that strange; recall that although most of the snakes and lizards of your world go through a hard-shelled egg

stage, there are some species of each that, like mammals, bear their young 'live'."

John was generally happy with how things had gone with the first town visit, and its follow-up question-and-answer session online. Parts of the visit itself would later be televised, and the online questions and answers device had made an appeal to deeper thinkers on the matter.

He looked forward to doing it all a second time.

Chapter Twelve

By the end of June, John had been working rather steadily for three weeks. It was already starting to become a bit of a grind. But he found there were a number of things that could give him a lift when he needed one — his wife and children, of course, but he even took comfort in some earthly temptations.

The week after his coming out he was offered his first glass of lemonade. He was highly impressed. Lemonade immediately became his favorite drink, and he started taking to ‘lemonade pauses’ the way a human might enjoy a quiet moment with a cup of coffee.

He especially enjoyed taking evening lemonade breaks, a couple of hours after dinner and just before the sun had set. This was reported in some detail on one of the regular television episodes: everyone figured this would make him and the family seem more, uh, ‘normal.’ This warm summer evening he and Joan were sitting outside in the backyard with a pitcher of I. as the children played a game nearby with a ball. It was dusk and everything was peaceful and bucolic: crickets were releasing their first happy chirps of the day, and fireflies just starting to flicker. And then, suddenly:

“B-Y-Y-Y-A-A-A-T ! B-Y-Y-Y-A-A-A-T ! B-Y-Y-Y-A-A-A-T ! On and on the alarm blared. None of the 423 crowd had heard it before — perhaps it had

only been tested at lower volumes, or at a time they were away. Anyway, it gave them quite a start.

Within seconds the screen door behind them flew open. It was Special Agent Towner.

“Okay, everybody, inside — fast!”

John gathered the tribe together and in a flash they were indoors. He looked at Towner.

“What’s going on, Agent Towner — why the alarm?”

“Come in here!” He motioned to John to join him in the small communications room, where a couple of soldiers were excitedly working several pieces of electronic equipment at once. He went over to take a look, as one of the men pointed:

“Sir! ’Looks like we got it already!”

As if in response to the comment the warning alarm abruptly ceased. Towner stood quietly, listening intently through his headphones.

John persisted. “What’s happening...?”

Agent Towner turned back toward John and grinned. “It appears our perimeter has been compromised. But we have taken care of the problem.”

John cocked his head slightly in response, as if to say: “How so?”

Towner was now completely calm. “It was a drone. Some idiot apparently tried to fly a quadcopter over the fence and into the protected area. We were able to shoot it down before it reached the backyard.”

John put his hand to his mouth. “You did — WHAT !?”

Towner raised his palms. “Not to worry. It turns out that the fleet of drones housed next door is equipped with some secret new kind of laser armament. It was apparently decided early on that this campaign might be a good opportunity to test the equipment out. The system seems to have worked perfectly: just to the north of the road there’s now a smoking wreck that was once an invading quadrotor machine.”

John tried to absorb it all. “Were we in danger?”

Towner grinned. “Probably not. Most likely, some lunatic thought he’d just shoot a couple of minutes of video he could sell to the highest bidder online. Instead, he’ll probably have to pay a big fine or be put away for six months or a year, or both.”

John shook his head, and turned away to go join his family again. “What a place and time...” he thought to himself.

* * * * *

John finished his lemonade — inside, at the table in the kitchen — then headed back to his study. He stroked a few keys and got back into the math problem he’d been working on. The door was open, and Towner meandered in. He spoke.

“You know, ’not to worry, John. We’re looking out for you.”

John turned toward him and forced a not-very-convincing-looking smile. “Yes, I know — thank you. I appreciate your efforts.”

Towner nodded, then noticed the mathematics on John’s computer screen. He whistled.

“Wow, that looks pretty tough! I’m envious — I was always lousy at math. I don’t even know enough to help my own teenage daughter. Sam had real trouble plowing through her algebra class last semester. She ended up with a ‘D,’ and that’s not going to help her any with her college applications. She can take the class over, but there’s no guarantee she’ll do much better a second time around.”

John cogitated on the remark for a moment, then had a thought. He followed up.

“Agent Towner... Would you consider letting me try to help her out? Actually, that would be very useful to me, since I have had no protracted contact whatsoever with human adolescents, and this would give me some real insight into their nature.”

Towner brightened. “Well, say, that’s really nice of you to offer...! She could certainly use the help. Are you sure it wouldn’t be an imposition? I mean — I know your time is valuable.”

John smiled, this time more genuinely. “It would be a pleasure to help. And I meant it when I said the experience would be useful to me as well. Let’s see — I suppose it would be easy enough to set up Zoom

sessions or the like on the computer. Does that sound like a reasonable plan?”

“I don’t see why not — but of course we’ll have to get an official okay. And — ” he smiled, “the hard part might be trying to get Sam to buy in.”

John was puzzled.

“Why is that?”

“Well, if you knew more about teenagers, you’d understand. I’ll twist her arm a little; I think I can get her to come around. Thanks again!”

He smiled and waved goodbye, moving off to take a gander at the just-reduced-to-junk drone, now resting peacefully in a smoldering heap only a few hundred feet away.

* * * * *

The same day Kerry and Tim spent much of their afternoon in New York, tending to various errands. Early the next morning they set off for Hopkinsville together, refreshed and in a good mood. Towner had called her about the drone fiasco, and John’s offer to help tutor his daughter. Kerry was enthusiastic about the latter move, emphasizing how it would be helpful to John to interact with some younger people in a way extending beyond mere greetings and confrontations.

Now they were approaching the outer gate to the compound. Nothing seemed very unusual until they got inside.

There was a new flavor to the demonstrations being posed by the 'con-alien' folks on the right. Whereas these usually featured a ragtag assortment of protesters with a multiplicity of agendas, somehow a group of nearly thirty representatives of the same conservative Christian fellowship had gained entrance to the squatters' field all at once, and they were voicing a loud, organized protest, complete with harmonized chant ("Lock them up! Lock them up!..."), synchronized demonstration choreography, and large, professionally-fashioned placards. These relayed such salient viewpoints as "Don't believe the devil lizards!", "Aliens want your souls!", and of course, "Lock them up!"

Kerry grimaced, put her hand across her mouth, and looked over at Tim.

"God, it's like some kind of demonic marching guard!" she guffawed as she drove by.

Tim laughed. "Yeah... Say, I used to be one of the drummers in my school's marching band. Do you suppose they might invite me in if I offered to help them out with their noise-making?"

Kerry laughed. "I don't know, Tim — you might have to cut your hair short, first!"

That sent the two of them into a fit of giggles, just as they reached the inside gate. The soldier on duty took one look at the pair and hid a smile.

"Good morning folks — 'must have been a happy ride up from New York, eh?"

Kerry got herself together as the gate began to open.

“Well, we were just being kinda mean to those protesters back there.”

The soldier smiled. “Oh, yeah. They’re pretty amusing. I guess they’re just having their own kind of fun...”

“Copy that!” she waved, as they proceeded forward, past 420, 423, and up to the front of 428, where they now usually parked. After a quick pit stop inside, they started to walk over to 423. About two-thirds of the way there, her phone buzzed. She stopped and answered.

“Yes...?” Tim watched as her expression turned more serious.

“Really?? Okay, we’re just about to 423 anyway. Thanks!” Down went the phone. “Let’s hurry!”

Tim’s eyes widened. “What’s up?”

“You’ll see!”

Just a few seconds later they were running up the walk. Practically bursting through the door, Kerry ran into the living room, where Joan DéZar was watching television with her children.

“Quick, switch it to CNN!”

Joan obliged her, just as the news story broke.

“...And at the United Nations a few minutes ago, an interesting turn of events. A resolution has been introduced by Ambassador Pavchenko of the Russian Federation condemning the way the United States has

sequestered the alleged alien visitors known as the DéZars. The resolution argues that the United States has no right to assume complete control of the family's activities, as their agenda appears not to be restricted to the interests of that country alone. Jane Desmond has more."

Switch to a split screen.

"Thanks Ray. It appears that this action has been under consideration for a couple of weeks, as a number of countries, including ones that are close allies of America, have expressed disappointment at the way the DéZars' visit has been handled. They argue that this introduction of an alien lifeform, if ultimately legitimized, is such an important event that it should not be under the auspices of a single sovereign power on earth, and that some other, global, entity — perhaps the United Nations itself — should be in control. When asked about this, Jim Whittaker, manager of WMVZ, the independent television station that originally was contacted by the DéZars, stated the obvious: that the DéZars had willingly and deliberately sought them out in particular, and that until the visitors were able to reveal some agenda that *did* specifically concern all the countries of the world, they should be allowed to stay where they wanted to stay."

"Do you think this line of argument will hold up, Jane?"

"That remains to be seen, Ray. The whole affair is of course unprecedented, so most likely it will be

referred to the UN's Security Council for debate. Seemingly at least one or two of the members of the Council will go along with Whittaker's reasoning and side with President Coady's Executive Order, and that will be enough to shelve the matter for the time being."

"Thank you, Jane. We now turn to the terrible flooding in Montreal that..."

Kerry reached over and switched the original programming back on.

"Well... I guess we should have expected that."

Tim prodded her. "Do you agree with Jane's analysis?"

"Yes, I think so. At least to the point John figures out his mission. Then, all bets are off."

On those words Mrs. DÉZar looked a bit uncomfortable.

"What do you mean by that?"

Kerry tried to be discrete, but there wasn't any way to sugarcoat it.

"I'm afraid it's like President Coady said. If we don't eventually come up with something, the natives are going to get restless — probably sooner, rather than later."

It took a moment, but Joan grasped the nature of the 'natives' colloquialism. "Yes, I guess I see. I guess I've seen that all along."

Chapter Thirteen

Special Agent Towner had been prescient when he told John he expected to have a more difficult time convincing his daughter to take part in algebra lessons than getting permission for the instruction to take place to begin with. Indeed, Towner had been effective in getting his superiors to buy in, as long as, they said, the contact was kept properly secured, and not made known to persons outside the family for the time being. By now the immediate family did in fact know of Towner's assignment, but had been warned they should not freely share that knowledge with additional parties.

But Sam, Towner's fourteen-year-old, was a harder sell. To begin with, she was 'totally ashamed' (as she had put it to one of her best friends) of having 'D'd' the algebra class; having never received a grade of less than 'B' in any class she had ever taken to that point, her inability to penetrate the subject had been a severe blow to her self-confidence. And, the matter was not just going to go away: it was clear she was going to have to re-take the class — that is, if she expected to get scholarship aid for college later.

Now, her father was suggesting that she agree to take on an *alien* being as a private instructor! And then not tell anyone about it!... I can't even... Well, on the other hand, maybe that part of it was not such a bad thing after all... But would she even be able to

concentrate on the subject, with a lizard-man in her face for the whole session??

Ultimately her father convinced her, first, that John actually was a very nice 'person' and would not be hard to get along with, and second, that his help not only would be useful to her in an immediate sense, but help him out as well, and provide her with a matchless story she could entertain others with for the rest of her life. Still, she was not exactly looking forward to the adventure.

Today, rather late in the afternoon, John was sitting at his computer, waiting for the secure connection to the Towner house to come up onscreen. He was not quite sure what to expect.

Finally the link was made. There, sitting in her suspiciously neat bedroom (it had probably been subjected to an exhaustive 'mom patrol' before the connection was initiated) was a pretty, petite brunette dressed in sweat pants and an 'ARMY' tee-shirt. John knew her father had been a Navy SEAL, so maybe this particular signature had been an attempt to get under his skin a little...?

John immediately took stock. Yes, a biological resemblance to Special Agent Towner was more than evident: the same clear, dark brown eyes, firm mouth, and straight, thin nose. But beyond these, he saw something he had never seen in her father: vulnerability.

Strangely, she reminded him of the old lady in the first town visit receiving line. She was nervous, and it was not only because of him. The sin of having failed had etched a new expression into her face; failure is not in fact a sin, but a fourteen-year-old does not understand that yet. Would she still not understand it seventy years from now?

What could he do to help her get past this tipping point? He chose his first words carefully.

“Hello there. Uhh... I was expecting a boy...” He wasn’t really, but the ploy worked. Sam bit.

“No, no, no... Sam, as in ‘*Samantha*’!”

“Oh — my apologies. Sometimes I just... miss things.”

She was staring. Of *course* she was! John smiled.

“Well, now that we are face to face, do you find me difficult to look at?”

“No...” But still, her eyes were pretty wide open...

He said nothing, more or less forcing her to go on.

“It’s just that, you know, it’s different when you’re actually talking to somebody than when you only see them as part of a television show...”

John nodded. “I can understand that. Really.”

Her focus was improving. She tilted her head a smidgeon.

“You know, you don’t really sound like...”

He cut in, wiggling his fingers above his head: “Like someone from Outer Space...?”

She giggled. A good sign.

“Yeah...!”

He smiled. “Good, I was afraid I might need to work on that.”

She wasn’t ready for that remark. “Why??”

“Well, I’ve seen some of your science fiction movies. None of the alien characters in them ever have voices sounding like those of ‘Earthlings’.” John positioned his hands like quotation marks when he uttered that last word.

“I guess... But you do *look* different.”

He nodded. “Can’t help that. We are what we are.”

She understood, or at least thought she did.

“Yeah... Isn’t that what Shakespeare — you know about Shakespeare, right? — means when he says ‘the fault is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings’? We were just studying *Julius Caesar* in school.”

Slightly wide of the mark, John thought, but he felt he could make the observation work to purpose.

“Not far off, I would say. Certain hands are dealt in life, but it’s not the hand that counts in the end, just how we play it. Take yourself. It appears you were not dealt a hand that contains a natural feeling for the subject of algebra. But you can compensate, in this case simply by making a new kind of effort.”

She nodded again. Small smile.

“Okay. I guess I’m up for that.”

“So let’s get started then.”

“Okay.”

John folded his hands and closed his eyes.

“I want you to close your eyes, and imagine a square. ‘Got it?’”

She did. “Yup.”

“Now, imagine a rectangle: one looking just a little bit different from the square.”

“Okay.”

“Now, imagine a different rectangle, one with sides much longer than it is wide.”

“Okay.”

“Now imagine a thousand more rectangles, each one looking different from the last.”

She giggled. “I can’t do that!”

“Alright then, open your eyes.”

She did.

He tilted his head just a little. “I know. But you would agree with me that there are lots and lots of different-dimensional rectangles out there, just lurking around?”

“I would!” She smiled. “Are they really ‘lurking’?...”

John shrugged. “Don’t know. ‘Could be... But tell me: what do all those rectangles have in common?”

She cocked her head to one side. “Well, they all have four sides.”

“True, but so do some other geometric forms. What else?”

She sat and scratched her head. “I don’t know...”

“Well, more to the point, they also all represent two-dimensional surfaces whose areas can be calculated by multiplying their lengths by their widths, right?”

She nodded. Okay, and...?

“So... No matter what the length or width is, an area can be determined simply by multiplying them together, true?”

“Yes, I guess.”

John was enjoying himself. At the very least, he was learning how to use contractions more productively...

“Now wouldn’t it be inconvenient if this weren’t true: that every time one wanted to determine the area of a rectangle, a different kind of calculation had to be made?”

“Yeah, it would...”

“Instead, we can say that ‘any given length’ can be multiplied by ‘any given width’ to obtain a ‘particular area,’ in units of area. In algebra, we substitute letters for these qualities to specify a relationship that holds among these variable quantities, no matter what value they may have. So, we might say, in this case, that $c = a \times b$, where ‘ c ’ is the area, in square units, and ‘ a ’ and ‘ b ’ are the lengths, in linear units, of the two sides involved. Clear enough?”

“Uh-huh.”

“In general, wherever one quantity can be related to some number of other quantities in a mathematically regular way, we can set up equations accordingly, using

letters to represent the qualities — actually, the quantities measuring those qualities — to describe the particular relationship, exclusive of whatever actual values might be involved. In the case of squares, we can set up the equation $c = a^2$, where ‘c’ is the area, and ‘a’ the length of each side of the square. Got it?”

She did, and nodded. “Uh-huh.”

“So, then, I leave you with the following to contemplate, for your ‘homework.’ The initial examples I just gave you are geometric ones, and you can imagine other ones: such as $d = a \times b \times c$, in which ‘d’ is the *volume* of a rectangular solid — a box, for example — and ‘a’, ‘b’, and ‘c’ are the lengths of its sides. But there are many other equations that do not specify *geometric* relationships, yet still represent regularly quantifiable relationships among some set of qualities. One of these is gravitational attraction. I want you to go look for a few of these, and next time we will discuss their formulation in terms of algebra. Okay?”

She nodded ‘yes,’ then had a thought. “So — what should I call you, by the way?”

“‘John’ will do nicely, I think. ‘Short for ‘John’.” He winked.

She got the low-key inside joke, and grinned.

“Goodbye, John! — and thank you!” She was smiling as the screen went blank.

So far so good, he thought.

Fifteen minutes later there was a knock at his door. Special Agent Towner walked in.

“John... I just got a phone call from my daughter. She seemed pleased with your initial session. Do you think you made any progress?”

John didn't want to get Greg's hopes up too much, at least not yet. “Well, I just wanted to get started. She seemed to be listening.” He paused. “She's a lovely child.”

Towner smiled; there was a faint glow of pride on his face.

“Yes, she is. 'Growing up so fast, though. I guess that's inevitable...”

John nodded. “Of course. But she can always use help along the way.”

Towner nodded back. “Sure... Are you guys on for the day after tomorrow, like we planned?”

John considered. “Actually, I only assigned her some 'homework.' Perhaps you can remind her about the time...?”

“Of course. And John — thanks again so much for doing this!”

John smiled. “My pleasure — really.”

The door closed, and John got back to work.

* * * * *

“Hello...” The voice at the other end of the phone sounded — busy, or maybe even irritated.

“Hello, sir. It's Jon Amaro. How are you, Mr. Speaker?”

“Well I’m feeling just fine, I’m pleased to report. And to what do I owe this reminder...?”

What?, thought Amaro: What reminder...? Oh, of course — that he’s ‘just fine’... The Speaker of the House was known for his finely-hewn sense of humor...

“Well, sir, I thought you might be interested in something...”

“Alright then: shoot.”

Amaro was ready.

“You are familiar, I imagine, with this business of the supposed alien family that’s turned up in New York.”

Speaker Hansen was. “Yes. I’m not sure I think the whole thing is legitimate, but it’s pretty interesting, at least.”

“Uh-huh. Have you been following the polls that have been published on the public’s reaction to the situation?”

“Not really. Should I?”

“Maybe. They seem to say some things we might be able to take advantage of.”

“Really? Go on, you have my attention...”

“Well... The most recent opinion survey by StatsPoll.com has broken the responses down by Party membership, plus Independents. They found that 42% of those polled styled themselves Independents; of these people, 52% believe the whole DéZar affair is a total hoax, and another 24% feel that although the DéZars are real, something suspicious is nevertheless

going on. These last two figures are as high or considerably higher than those for people from our own party, and on the whole much higher than for those of the President's."

Hansen was a bit slow on the uptake. "So?"

"Well, it means that Coady is behind the eight ball on this one. He's vulnerable."

The light bulb switched on.

"I see... Perhaps we can press him on this... 'Got any ideas?"

Again Congressman Amaro was ready with a response.

"Yeah, I think so. For one, we can criticize him on all the money he's spent on this, with absolutely no return as yet. Plus, where's the money coming from for an expenditure like this?: I think he said he had diverted military funds for this purpose, but even if it's an Executive Order, where's the precedent? 'Not to mention whether there may be some kind of corruption going on in the connection with WMVZ — and even if there isn't, the mere suggestion there might be could be enough to swing some of those Independent voters over to our side in the elections next year."

The Speaker was impressed.

"I like it...! I'll tell you what... Why don't you do a bit of behind-the-scenes poking around on this, and get back to me in a couple of weeks. At that point perhaps we can bring the matter up in the House, and maybe even get one of our committees — I'm not sure which

one, the subject being so unusual — to start an investigation. Even if it comes to nothing, it might get some voters who are on the fence to come over to us.”

“Yessir. ’Just my thought. I’ll get right on it. Thank you sir!”

“Good luck, Jon. Goodbye now.” The line went dead before Amaro even had a chance to return the goodbye. But he didn’t really mind.

Chapter Fourteen

Screeching brakes disturbed the quiet outside of 423. Two soldiers in a jeep had just come to an abrupt halt, though luckily they hadn't been going very fast. They jumped out. At the side of the street two small figures were standing, and the jeep's driver, named Aaron, shouted at them.

"Hey guys! Be more careful! Check the road before you come running out!"

Tal and Valla stared back. The two had just been playing tag, and, unmindful of the situation, strayed out onto the road. They didn't need to know English to realize that somebody was upset with them. After a couple of moments they decided what to do next, and did it: run around the side of the house to the backyard, where they more usually hung out.

The soldiers jumped back into their jeep. Aaron turned toward his buddy before starting up again.

"Geeesh... Can you imagine what would happen if we actually hit one of those little sprites?"

"Yeah!... I wonder what they could charge us with..."

Aaron did a double-take. "Whattayamean?"

"I mean, do you get arrested for hitting a squirrel?"

Aaron was shocked. "A *squirrel*? They seem just like any other kids to me. They were playing tag, I think."

His buddy wasn't convinced. "Well... Squirrels play tag, don't they...?"

Aaron shifted into gear, then shook his head before punching the accelerator. "Bob, that's just plain racist."

Bob grinned. "Well, Mr. Holier-Than-Thou, if I hadn't yelled out, you were gonna roll right over them."

Aaron was shocked.

"Not so! I just didn't see them at first. My own kid is just about their age, I think. Don't they seem pretty human to you?"

Bob started fiddling with the radio as the vehicle took off again. "Yeah, maybe..."

* * * * *

Kerry and Tim had had very little time off these past several weeks, but at last things lightened up enough to allow them a special day to themselves. They could have fled to the City, but neither was in the mood for the four-hour roundtrip commute, and use of the helicopter was off-limits, except for work or emergencies. Tim suggested an alternate plan, one attractive for its being just about as different from their recent routine as could be imagined.

A picnic.

Not far away there was a large state park that featured a number of walking trails. A couple of these zigzagged to the top of one of the several mountains that dominated the area. From the bottom, it was a rise of a couple of thousand feet over a three or four mile

trace. Tim challenged Kerry to a hike and picnic at the top, if she thought she was 'up to it.'

She bristled. Was this an implication he thought she might not be physically fit enough to do the hike? *Well!...* She quickly agreed to the plan. Then she realized she'd been taken in. She wagged her finger at him.

"Tim Van Meter, you shouldn't tease a girl like that!"

He grinned and waved a paw at her. "Ahh, it's for your own good. You need to get away for a day."

She nodded. "True enough. Let's do it!"

But then she had a thought.

"Clare's not going to be annoyed, I hope...?"

He shook his head. "Nah, she's not like that. You know her."

Kerry did. She'd been a guest for dinner at the Van Meter house numerous times, and she didn't think Tim's wife to be the jealous type. "Still, make sure you give her a call to fill her in." He nodded. She shifted into organizing gear.

"So then... I'll call in a favor at the canteen and get them to put together some good picnic fare. We can leave from here right after breakfast tomorrow."

They did. It was a short ride to the state park — less than twenty minutes — and they had themselves a beautiful early July day to enjoy. They had rustled up a couple of backpacks, each now filled with the necessities of the day. On arriving at the park around

nine o'clock they locked up the car and without delay headed toward where the trails began.

When they reached the spot Tim pointed: "That's the one: the McGinnis Trail, 3.7 miles to the top. I've been up a couple of times, most recently just last year."

They began their hike. Conversation was light at first, but inevitably turned to their recent focus. Tim spoke first.

"So... How do you think John is holding up? He seems unflappable at times, but is that just a brave face?"

Kerry wasn't certain.

"I don't know... He seems okay, but then again it hasn't actually been that long. In any case, they're monitoring his and Joan's vitals every day. There's not much of a baseline, but so far, at least, they both seem to be holding pretty steady."

Soon after the compound was established, Colonel Raisz realized that they needed to bring in a full-time medical officer: both to keep track of the DéZars and their respiratory ills, and to serve the ever-swelling number of compound workers. They settled on a pair of nurse practitioners who were also dieticians. These two and a couple of assistants were on duty from the early morning through to late at night, performing the odd medical test, operating a small canteen, and making sure the DéZars were getting healthy foodstuffs.

Tim agreed with her assessment. “Yeah, they both seem okay to me as well. But I’ve not always been right about such things. And they are, after all — “

“Aliens.” Kerry finished his sentence for him.

“Yeah.” He stopped short for a moment.

“You know, sometimes I can’t believe we’re really involved in all this.”

She nodded. “Uh-huh. I’m pinching myself all the time...”

The conversation switched suddenly to bluebirds, one of which had just appeared trailside. They stopped short, but after a few moments it noticed them, and flittered off into the brush in a panic. Too bad, Kerry thought. She liked bluebirds. They reminded her of the birdfeeders she made when she was little. The squirrels kept knocking them down, but she just kept putting them back up...

By eleven thirty they were getting close to the top. The forest cover was thinning, and spectacular views extending all the way to the Hudson River were peeking through the branches every few feet.

Just below the summit Tim stopped and motioned toward his left.

“See over there... that big rock... Just beyond it there’s a sharp drop-off. The outcrop is almost like a podium. I was just thinking...”

Kerry’s eyebrows arched. If you were smart, you needed to be on guard when Tim ‘started thinking’...

He proved her right, once again.

“You know... Have you ever wanted to scream out, at the top of your lungs, letting it all go, just to blow off a little steam?”

Kerry was skeptical. “Well, no, actually; I’m usually pretty good at a regular volume.”

Tim was not convinced. “You sure?”

She nodded. But where was this going? She was not left in the dark for long.

“I’ll tell ya: What I’m going to do right now is run over to the top of that rock and let out the loudest blood-curdling scream you’ve ever heard. What do think of that!? Do you want to join me?”

Kerry crossed her eyes and shook her head ‘no.’

He looked disappointed. “Okay then. You’ve had your chance!”

Dropping his backpack, he raced toward the top of the rock, about fifty feet away. Waving his hands wildly as he ran, he was obviously building himself up for the final bellow. And then — just as he reached the launch zone and positioned himself — he stopped short.

After standing in place for a few seconds, looking down, he slowly lowered his hands and turned around, walking dejectedly back toward Kerry.

She smiled. “What’s the matter, did you lose your nerve?”

He shook his head, sheepishly. “Nope. I was just at the point of opening my mouth to give a good yell when I looked down. About fifteen feet below, sitting on a ledge, was a couple holding hands. If I had carried out

the program it would have scared the hell out of them — 'might have even caused them to lose their balance and fall off..."

Kerry guffawed. "Well... the best laid plans...! Sometimes God is just not on our side... I guess you'll have to find some other venue for your yell!"

He nodded. "I guess... So be it... Let's get on to the top and have some lunch, whattayasay?"

"Copy that" was all she felt the need to add. Off they went.

* * * * *

"Hey Max, it's Tom. How's it goin'?"

Max had been eating breakfast in his tee-shirt and shorts. His mouth was full of Cheerios as he answered the phone. Before he replied he swallowed, then belched.

"Uh, good I guess... What's up?"

"Well, I thought you might like to know, if you don't know already, that that lizard-alien guy is going to make an appearance downtown in about twenty minutes. Right in front of the town hall, they said."

Max straightened up. "Really..."

"Yeah. 'Just thought you'd like to know. 'Like we talked about last week..."

"Yeah... I guess I could get there in time."

"I thought so... Well, take it easy."

"Sure, you too..." But he was talking to himself; Tom had already hung up.

Chapter Fifteen

DéZar waited behind the podium as the town's mayor uttered a few words of introduction. He had been told to keep it short.

“So, ladies and gentlemen, we have been honored with a guest visit by the celebrity you have been hearing so much about lately. It's his wish to get out and meet ordinary folks, and this is now his fourth such appearance. I give you, John DéZar.”

Amidst some rather weak clapping by the two hundred or so persons who had gathered on the short notice, the mayor stepped back and John came forward, accompanied to either side, a few feet away, by Agents Towner and Gannett. He waited for the clapping to stop — not a very long wait — and began to speak.

“Thank you. I very much appreciate your coming here today — ”

He started to take a breath before moving on, but felt a keen pain in his chest. Reacting, he turned his head sharply to the left to cough. But as he did the air was filled with the distinctive crack of gunfire. DéZar was the unlucky target! A rifle slug struck him in the shoulder, spinning him sharply down to the floor at the side and rear of the podium, closest to Gannett. As he hit the ground a second shot followed. It missed John by only a couple of inches, splintering an ugly hole through a board at the back of the stage.

Pandemonium broke out immediately: screams, people running in every direction, etc. etc. Agent Gannett was already springing into action, however; as a four-year veteran of Presidential bodyguard service he knew exactly what to do, and instantly. It was his duty to become a human shield!

But as soon as he selflessly placed himself over DéZar, a third shot sounded. Gannett screamed loudly as the bullet struck him midway up his left thigh, passing right through it, and again narrowly missing DéZar.

Meanwhile, Agent Towner was rushing toward DéZar, and just after the third bullet struck he added his own body to the protective blanket.

Sadly, luck was not to be on Special Agent Greg Towner's side this summer morning. Less than a second after he assumed his position over DéZar, a fourth shot rang out. The slug sped directly through the top of Towner's skull, killing him instantly at the age of thirty-six years, two months, fourteen days, six hours, and eleven minutes.

DéZar, now pinned cheek-down against the ground by two motionless bodies, stared out in shock as twin rivulets of blood surged out of them. They soon merged, feeding a pool whose shoreline inched ever closer to his face.

There were no further shots. Officials, soldiers, civilians and police rushed to the assistance of the injured. Towner was obviously gone, but Agent

Gannett, who mercifully had fainted, looked treatable. John's wound was minor by comparison, but clearly he too was in immediate need of hospital care. There were already helicopters at hand, so transport was accomplished quickly, within minutes.

Like everything else, it was all caught on camera. But only a highly edited version would make it onto the news that night.

Kerry borrowed a car and drove to the receiving hospital. DéZar was not in any danger, so she was able to talk to him soon after arriving. While there her phone rang; it was her boss. She was asked to take the call outside.

"Kerry, hi... Is John okay?? How is Agent Gannett?"

Kerry gathered herself. "John is pretty good — the doctors say it looks like a fairly innocent flesh wound. Agent Gannett is still in the operating room. The shot clipped a major artery, but the last I heard they think he'll probably pull through."

"Good, good. You know, they've already caught the shooter. Not much is known yet, though he might be ex-military. He was close to a thousand feet away, using his van as cover. I'll keep you posted."

"Thanks Boss. 'Ciou for now."

Kerry put her phone away, and went back to comfort John.

* * * * *

Over the next twenty-four hours a lot more was found out about the shooter. He *was* ex-military, a misfit sharpshooter who eventually had crossed over the line in Afghanistan and earned himself a dishonorable discharge.

More to the point, he had some radical ideas about the threats to society. On being pressed, he admitted to having joined a small extremist group called 'Stop the Aliens.' The few people outside their membership who had even heard of them figured they were an anti-immigrants fringe group, but in actuality they were convinced aliens 'from outer space' had infiltrated the world's leadership and were scheming to lead us toward ruination.

The doctors were correct: DéZar's wounds, though nontrivial, were neither life-threatening nor demanding of intense long-term attention. He was released after a day of observation.

His helicopter trip back to 423 was a subdued one, however. One man was dead, another severely injured, and John was not taking the situation lightly. As they touched down he asked to be helped to his bedroom. He was not heavily drugged up to combat the pain; indeed attending physicians were unsure as to what effects most such medications might have on him. He wanted to lie down, sleep if possible, and not have to worry about what might be coming next.

He finally did fall asleep. But it was a fitful sleep. He woke up several times as throbbings of pain welled

up inside him over and over again. But then something new, and unexpected, happened.

A *dream!* He had never experienced one before, or at least remembered any he might have had. But he could tell it was a dream, alright: he had read about them online.

It was an average, ordinary, dream in some respects — not the kind that later leads one to observe, “Well, it was so REAL!” Nor did it just meander on, filled with vague references to overdue high school term papers or the like. Instead, it came out of nowhere, and went straight to the point, lasting less than a minute before abruptly terminating. It was almost like the preview of a movie, or some kind of visual literary *précis*:

A kitchen in a nondescript house came into focus. Someone was standing in the kitchen, though who it might be, was not readily apparent. On one side of the kitchen an old-style, multi-paned window faced outward toward a grassy expanse, perhaps farmland somewhere on the Great Plains. The sky above was grey and troubled; it looked like a storm was brewing. And in fact a few moments later a funnel cloud could be seen in the far distance. It was slowly winding its way forward toward the house, just like the famous scene in ‘The Wizard of Oz.’

But abruptly the setting cut to a location *outside* the house, and some little distance away from it. There, standing in complete isolation, and some fifty feet from the still unidentifiable observer, was a great big old

tree. Beyond the tree, as the observer could plainly see, the twister was now closing in — clearly it was less than a minute away from reaching it. But there was more.

Right at the bottom of the tree, directly facing the observer, lay a naked, wildly gesturing infant, crying pathetically!

Shocked, the observer sprang into action. In the blink of an eye, just as the tornado bore down, he/she bolted toward the child, kneeling down over it at the last moment in a selfless attempt to intervene. The words “We protect our own” flashed lightly across his inner screen. And then —

“John! Wake up, John! It’s time to take to take your anti-infection pills.” He was startled into wakefulness. Mrs. DéZar was at his side. She administered the medicine quickly, then said nothing more than “I’ll let you rest again, dear,” and left the room.

John lay silently in the dark, the dream still fresh in his mind.

“Well, that *was* interesting...” he thought to himself. Inevitably, as it always was, questions came to him: “Hmmm... So what about all this? Am I supposed to be the observer, the baby, or the tree — or even the tornado!? Or all at once? What is it that’s being protected?”

But the darkness surrendered no answers to his queries. After a minute or two, drowsiness overtook him, and he fell asleep again.

* * * * *

The next evening Kerry passed by the open door to the study where John did most of his research. He was back at it, as if nothing had happened over the past few days. But on this occasion, his head was down, in his hands. She stopped, and paused. His back was to her. He wasn't moving. She decided not to ignore the situation.

"John... John, are you okay?"

He straightened up, turning toward her. "Yes, yes, fine..." Kerry wasn't convinced. She persisted.

"Yeah, right... Tell me, what's the matter?"

"Well, nothing I guess..."

"But what...?"

He knew he needed to say something.

"Well, it's just that I'm starting to feel so inadequate to the situation."

This was unexpected. She pressed the issue.

"How so?"

He sighed. "Here I — we — are, more than two months after our 'appearance,' and I don't feel I have made any progress whatsoever in figuring out what my mission is. Your people are spending millions of dollars each week to keep us here, and safe, and now a very good man has even lost his life trying to protect me. I have nothing to give back at this point. It is rather — depressing."

Kerry was sympathetic. She nodded. "You shouldn't be hard on yourself. The situation's just what

it is, no more, no less. Perhaps — or even probably — you’re doing exactly what you should be doing.”

He shrugged and let out a deep breath. “Yes, I know. But thinking that doesn’t help a lot. Eventually your people are going to start turning against us, even many of those who gave us the benefit of the doubt at the beginning. Then there are all those who never trusted us from the start. Take a look at this...”

He pointed at the screen of his computer. Kerry slipped around to the back of the desk to have a look.

Onscreen was a ghoulish, graphic novel kind of image underscored by the caption “Should We Trust the Lizard Man?” Kerry grimaced as John hurriedly advanced the screen one page, to the story that followed:

“So what is our lizard-man, the alleged alien, actually doing with his time? There are reports of several abductions of girls over the past few weeks in the general vicinity of Hopkinsville, and along with these reports there are rumors of horrible molestations by grotesque alien-like beings. Could these involve the creature our government has invited into our midst? Are we to do nothing in protest? Despite the best efforts of his protectors...”

Kerry reached over and blackened the screen. She looked back at John.

“Surely you don’t think this is more than a mischievous mind deliberately creating havoc?”

John looked vacant. “Well, no — but...”

Kerry cut him off. "There is no 'but.' You must realize by now that among the several billions of people on this planet there are a too goodly number of discontents who are only happy when they're stirring up trouble, for whatever reason. You shouldn't take this seriously..."

John acknowledged, but he looked rather drained.

Kerry bit her lip. But she really didn't have much more to add at the moment.

"I say, just keep on doing. Whoever it was who put you here, must have known there were might be difficult times like this. Surely they'll intervene at some point if things are going too dreadfully wrong?"

DéZar moved his head back and forth a bit. "Yes, I suppose that is so. But that is what really frightens me."

His comment didn't have a chance to sink in: Kerry's cell phone buzzed. She was glad it did at just that moment. She motioned quickly to John, then took a few more steps down the hall. The call was unimportant; she answered it with a quick "yes."

She moved on out to the living room. Tim was filming Joan, who was watching television. Actually, she was more studying it. A televangelist was on, hawking his wares:

"Yes, my friends. You should be ready; you should be ready as the Second Coming is at our doorsteps! Do not believe in the words of false prophets such as that lizard-person, clearly sent here to deceive us!"

Kerry fidgeted for a moment, then had a thought:
“Right, the Second Coming. He wouldn’t recognize a
real Second Coming if it bit him in the ass.”

Chapter Sixteen

Special Agent Towner's funeral took place the next day. It was a somber affair, even as funerals go. Security for it was very tight. The Towner family lived in a D.C. suburb, and the service was carried out in a small church there. All outsiders, especially the Press, were firmly denied entrance to any of the church's grounds during it; the burial ceremony was just as heavily protected from unwanted scrutiny.

Although it wasn't clear John was well enough to attend anyway, or even whether the government would let him do so, the family had specifically requested he not be present. No one, including John, could really object to this, as his attendance would have caused hurt in so many different ways.

Kerry, Jim, and Colonel Raisz, however, were present; there was no reason not to allow them to pay their respects. Nevertheless they made themselves as inconspicuous as possible, and in fact it was not until the end of the burial ceremony that Mrs. Towner finally approached them.

Kerry spoke first.

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Towner. None of us ever imagined something like this happening."

Mrs. Towner shrugged.

"I thought I was ready for this. Greg was in harm's way dozens of times during our marriage. He was really quite a brave man..."

She couldn't go on.

No one knew how to respond to such a personal remark. After a few moments she recovered, and continued.

“Greg asked us not to tell any of our friends about this assignment, but it was clear he considered it an honor that he was chosen to head up the detail. He didn't say all that much, but I could tell he was excited about it and was enjoying himself, perhaps more than with anything else he had ever done. Now that I understand a bit about what's at stake, I guess I can see why.”

Kerry refrained from uttering what would have been empty words, like: “Yes, he gave his life for what he felt was a good cause.” That would have sounded much too self-serving. She stood still, saying nothing. Mrs. Towner again filled the gap.

“Bad as it is, what's done is done, I guess. I hold no ill will against any of you. Just — please — keep doing your best to make something good come out of Greg's sacrifice.” She nodded goodbye and moved away — thankfully, before any of them was able to respond.

Most of the news services carried a story that night about the funeral. But there was not much internet chatter about it afterward. Towner had been replaced by another agent the day before, and in that respect the adventure continued on unaffected.

But there was at least one additional change in the life at 423, something that only a few knew about, and one that left John deeply saddened.

The algebra lessons, which he had so enjoyed, ended abruptly. He never heard from Sam again.

There was a final insult the next day, when a national poll revealed that only sixty-one percent of the American population believed that an agent named Greg Towner really had been killed several days earlier at an event centered on the ‘lizard-man.’

* * * * *

Despite the troubling events, three short days later the town-touring crew was back in the saddle. John’s injury was healing well — astonishingly well, actually — and he decided it was imperative he should continue to reach out to the public. There would, of course, be some refinements to the security arrangements.

First, satellite coverage of the appearances was increased. Second, two additional free-ranging drones were assigned to patrol the nearby surroundings during each visit. Further, landscape analysis was implemented beforehand to identify topographic line-of-sight conditions out to a distance of fifteen hundred feet from the speaker’s podium. And, two additional police vehicles would now patrol the most potentially troublesome areas thus identified.

Last, and most obvious, a bulletproof but see-through barrier was placed between the speaker and

his audience, and a tall opaque barrier placed behind him. They were already using electronic screening devices at the entrance to the receiving line to guard against possible direct assaults, so that aspect of the speaker's protection was not much changed.

The attack of the past week had taken everyone by surprise. Clearly there had been mis-estimations of the physical danger potential to John's person. His circle had failed him in this; they should have been more aware of the seriousness of some of the public's reactions to his continuing presence.

Indeed, many additional parties were joining the 'E. T. go home' brigade. And they were finding ever more inspired ways to take the DéZars and their government protectors to task for having the audacity to join up. The main medium of their attack was the Internet; immense creativity was in evidence as every imaginable angle on a supposed coming disaster was explored in gaudy detail. The initial trigger seemed to be the United Nations resolution, but even before that the blogosphere had begun to pulse with conspiracy theories directed at the 'alien invasion.'

Several main threads of concern seemed evident. There were, of course, the alarmists: those who viewed anything having to do with extraterrestrial life in terms of 1950s invasion movies. More numerous, however, were the 'deniers,' representing the vast army of those who simply could not conceive of intelligent life beyond earth, or deal with its range of possible implications.

And then there were the conservative religious sects, for whom the very idea of aliens seemed to conflict with conventional notions of God, and the conspiracy theorists, who suspected they were being handed a line by the government, or the military, or both.

It didn't end there, either. Specialized sub-communities combining two or more of these nations soon coalesced, offering everyone under the Sun an opportunity to speak their minds.

Nor were the objectors restricted to the ignorant, ill-informed, or merely malevolent. A good percentage of the professional ranks — people with MDs, PhDs, and other badges of authority — had been voicing their objections to the President's policy regarding the DéZars since the beginning, and many elements of the news media had taken up their cause. Words like 'naïve' and 'irresponsible' were frequently heard, to the point that aliens could not be trusted, no matter what.

Today, the town visit followed the same general protocol originally established. An invitation was sent out some twenty minutes before the event was to start, at which point the ground setup crew arrived in town and began to get things ready. When the three helicopters arrived, John was escorted over to the podium, and within seconds the town selectman began his introduction. This lasted a bit longer than the first four such introductions had, but now, of course, there was some additional history to deal with.

The more than five hundred attendees listened attentively. As the man finished and John stepped up to the microphone, something new happened.

Some applause started up — sporadically at first, but then escalating to sustained clapping. He took a look around. It was his first perception that some people, at least, seemed to be appreciating his efforts. After about twenty seconds, he raised his hand in an attempt to shut down the response. The applause slowly subsided. He cleared his throat, then spoke up.

“Thank you. Really, thank you. The two people injured during my last appearance were very brave men, and it is only due to their actions that I am fortunate enough to be here today. I could not in all conscience discontinue this series of visits merely because of possible dangers, even as they now seem more apparent. In fact, this gives an even more pressing reason to continue these appearances...”

After a few further paragraphs of explanation, John stopped, shook the town manager’s hand, and stepped down off the podium to take his seat at the end of the receiving line — amidst further applause.

The time period for the receiving line and questions was lengthened a bit, but there were no incidents or exchanges of much import during it. Still, the speaker party left the town square with a feeling that progress had been made.

* * * * *

Tim Van Meter had had three days off since the shooting, and a few hours after John's fifth town visit had stopped in at the office in New York to make some equipment substitutions. He was now on his way home, the first leg of which was the walk out to his car in the station's parking garage.

Just as he reached it and was about to get in, he was stopped by a voice from nearby.

"Tim Van Meter, I presume?"

He turned around. About fifteen feet away a nondescript man was standing. He was dressed in a trench coat, looking like a character in any number of scenes from a century of grade-B movies.

"Yes. And...?"

The man smiled — a bit of a sleazy smile, Tim thought.

"Well, Mr. Van Meter, it has come to our attention that one of your children is very ill, and that your family is having quite some difficulty meeting expenses."

Tim stood silently, not sure what to say. Yes, in fact, his second child was, unfortunately, afflicted with a chronic blood disorder that was costing them a fortune to treat. He had managed to keep this from everybody at the station — with the exception of Jim, Kerry, and HOP, three of his dearest friends: he didn't like the idea of people feeling sorry for him.

"And if that's so, what's it to you?"

The man smiled the same sleazy smile.

“We think we may be able to help you out on that score.”

Tim was no fool. “Yeah? In exchange for what? And who did you say you represented?”

Possible candidates raced through his head. The CIA? Organized crime? A foreign government?? The man replied to his questions.

“I didn’t say who I represent, and actually that’s not important for the moment. There are two kinds of information we might be willing to provide considerable compensation for.”

“Do tell.” Tim’s terse reply was laden with sarcasm.

“Well, one thing would be any significant amount of footage of the day-to-day events at 423 Stuart Drive. We would also find very useful any advance information on where John DéZar’s upcoming town visits are to be.”

Tim frowned. “I don’t know what your game is, but I’m not interested. Security is intense, and any footage I take is immediately grabbed by the feds before it gets processed. Concerning the town visits, no one beyond a couple of the military men knows about that, and they don’t tell us until the actual public notices go out. I couldn’t help you if I wanted to.”

The man stood quietly for a moment, without expression, then spoke up.

“Very well, then. But if you change your mind — or if we should discover you are not telling us the truth on this or mention our meeting to anyone — just remember that we are aware of how to reach you

again, perhaps with less pleasant results next time.” He turned away and walked off.

Great, thought Tim. He hadn’t lied to the man, but should he discuss the episode with anyone or just keep quiet about it?

* * * * *

Many hours later, as the clock struck twelve at 423, John turned in for the night. It had been an interesting day, one that had given him a bit of hope that things were not going downhill entirely.

Shortly after falling asleep, John experienced a second dream. It had a lot of the ambience of the tornado one, though the naked drama was absent.

As it started, John was out by himself in a rolling field on a sunny summer day. Curiously, he was carrying a small-caliber rifle — perhaps a .22 — and seemed to be engaged in an activity largely abhorrent to him: hunting. Suddenly a small bird of prey, maybe a falcon, went whizzing by him, several hundred feet above his head. Despite the tiny, fast-moving target and the inappropriate tool, he took a shot at the bird, and then another. Bad misses. The bird circled around and came back; he shot again, with similar results.

Frustrated, he walked over toward the edge of the field and sat down in the shade of a tree, dejected at his failure to secure his quarry. Within moments a beautiful large butterfly was fluttering toward him; after a few seconds it settled gently on his arm.

That was it. Dream over.

He awoke, and sat up.

“I guess there must be some kind of message there — again...”, he thought, then turned over and fell back asleep.

* * * * *

“Hello, Kerry here...” Kerry was at 428, working on the next DéZars broadcast, when her phone rang. There was a slight delay at the other end before a somewhat tentative voice came on.

“Miss Phillips... Hello. I’m calling from Washington with some information...”

“Yes...? Who is this?”

“Let’s just call me a tipster, one who is interested in your current assignment.”

Kerry was immediately on full alert. “Okay then... What’s up?”

“Well, I am a sympathizer with your project, and in a position to know of a possible threat to it. You can investigate as you see fit.”

“Okay. Shoot.”

“Fine. This is just to let you know that there is a below-the-table investigation underway, apparently with political motives, to undermine your efforts. It originates in the U.S. House of Representatives.” The voice stopped, apparently expecting a return comment. Kerry provided one.

“Supposing that’s true, that doesn’t give me much to go on, especially from an anonymous source, don’t you think?”

“No, I suppose not. Nevertheless the threat is real, and I can give you two pieces of information to go further on. First, I have a burner phone which I will keep active for exactly two days. Write this number down.”

“Hold on a sec while I get a pen and paper...
Okay...”

He gave her the number.

“Second, I would advise your starting your investigation with the Office of Congressman Jon Amaro. He’s spearheading the effort. That’s enough for now, I think.”

Kerry was still suspicious. “That’s still not a lot to go on.”

“You’ll make do, I’m sure.”

Kerry gritted her teeth. “Why are you telling me this?”

The voice grew stronger.

“Well — Let’s just say I respect your work, and I feel that what you’re doing at present should not be torpedoed by selfish motives. Goodbye, Miss Phillips.”

The line went dead before Kerry could even react. She sat back, thinking the matter over, deciding what to do.

Within thirty minutes she had a plan. She got on the phone again to put it into action. A female voice came on, at the other end.

“Hello!”

“Hey Dani, it’s Kerry! Whatyasay, sister?”

“Kerry! — ’good to hear from you; ’long time, no chat! I guess you must be pretty busy on this DéZars project, right? — it’s making you a celebrity, girl! So, what’s up?”

Kerry sighed. Yes, Dani definitely was the right person to contact.

“Well, I’ll tell you. How’d you like to work an interesting lead...?”

Chapter Seventeen

If I could talk to you
Just a few words,
If I could reach your heart
With those simple words,
Maybe we could learn to trust
See the best in us.

—Cirque du Soleil

Days passed. Despite his intense study of — just about everything — John continued to make little progress on divining the nature of his ‘mission.’ Surely it had something to do with humankind’s future, but what, exactly? He was still assuming there must be some kind of test involved, but what was being tested? His own limitations? Humankind’s tolerance of his presence? Who was the baby under the tree? He could not imagine that anything sinister was involved; there was no ‘secret information’ he had access to that could be of use to a prospective invader, and it seemed just as pointless for such a power to use his person as a vehicle for invasion: for example, as a living biological weapon. It would be just so much easier to go ahead and directly annihilate the human population through some other means.

It eventually leaked out that Stephen Tansley had been instrumental in convincing the President to deal with the DéZars’ ‘visit’ as he did, and John heard of this.

This Tansley guy was obviously a relatively enlightened person, John thought, so perhaps he can help me in my efforts. He asked Kerry to go through channels to arrange a phone, or even in-person, conversation with the man, if possible.

It was possible. Tansley worked at a university near Washington D.C., but when asked said he would be perfectly happy to take a day off from his regular duties to make the 300-mile trek to upstate New York. Military transport was arranged immediately, and Tansley was not even forced to cancel a morning class to make an afternoon appointment time. At 3:30 his ride reached the impromptu heliport that had been set up inside the security zone around 423 Stuart Drive.

As the chopper began to settle, Tansley looked down at the media and pro- and con-aliens circus-camps outside the inner gate, and shook his head sadly. "Welcome to Earth, Mr. DéZar..." he thought.

A couple of minutes later he and his escort were approaching the front door of 423. He was greeted there by Kerry and Greg Towner's replacement, Special Agent Jason Gliessner, who accompanied him back to DéZar's study. A quick introduction followed, after which Tansley and John were left alone. John motioned to Tansley to be seated, but Stephen remained standing. He gestured and spoke.

"Mr. DéZar, I hope you don't mind, but I would very much like to take a few seconds to examine you, up close. Please. 'Just a bit of scientific curiosity...'"

John nodded. "I quite understand. And as you may imagine, I am quite used to this by now."

Tansley stepped forward, right up to John's face, saying "May I?" as he extended his fingers up to touch the scales on his face. He then reached down to hold and examine John's fingers.

"Extraordinary! Most extraordinary!" was all he could say.

He stepped back and sat down, exhaling as he did.

"Well... You must forgive me. It's not every day that a biologist gets to touch a living creature from another world."

DéZar smiled. "I understand. Really. But about that..."

Tansley did not respond. John continued.

"You know the story, Prof. Tansley. I still don't know what to think about what we are, where we came from, and why we are here. It is as much a mystery now as before."

Tansley sat back a bit and clasped his hands together. "Yes. And that is why you have asked me to come here?" John nodded.

"Alright then. Let's review what we do know, and think likely. Agreed?"

John nodded. "I was hoping we might do just that."

"Fine. I think I should first let you know that there is a classified panel in Washington that has also been looking into this matter. I am a member of that group. I of course can't tell you in detail what kinds of things

are being discussed, but it is perhaps enough to say that they have made no more real progress than you apparently have. And if they do, I have to admit that I am not at all sure they would let you know.”

John was not surprised either by the existence of such a group, or its secretive agendas. But he was a little surprised by Tansley’s mention of it.

“Well, in any case I thank you for letting me know this much. Do you have a more personal perspective you can share with me?”

Tansley took a long breath, constructing a chain of thought, then started in.

“We humans are a pretty smart lot, at least as compared to other animals here. We not only perceive actual events and have a nervous system that can both identify *and* react to these, but process the facts in ways that allow us to conceive of the forces behind chains of causation. Further, we can break down these forces on the basis of principles that can be applied to other like situations. Take, uh, eclipses. Now I suppose that any intelligent animal can perceive an eclipse event, but it has no idea of what’s actually going on, or how it is special. In the first place, it cannot understand the very concept ‘outside the earth’s atmosphere.’ But beyond that, the meaning of regular movements of objects within that space, and their interactions, represent a further impenetrable mental construction barrier for other animals.”

John broke in. “Yes, and in fact for humans too at first, if I understand my reading correctly. Didn’t the ancient earth civilizations at first accept that the stars and other heavenly bodies were in effect part of earth’s atmosphere?”

“Yes. But as we continued to delve into underlying principles we finally disabused ourselves of this notion. As a mathematician yourself you must be aware that much of this kind of progress has been due to the application of mathematical techniques, as when Newton invented calculus to deal with the measure of the gravitational effect of the earth.”

John sat still. “How does this help me, Dr. Tansley?”

“Well... I would have to think that you were most likely put here to take part in some critical step in human evolution. Evolution is the greatest, most complex process in the universe. All other processes are subservient to it — or maybe it is more accurate to say, it is subservient to all processes, at once.”

Tansley paused for a moment, then continued.

“So the question comes down to, I think, what it is about evolution in humans that’s messed up, and requires alien intervention to rectify, or possibly just to steer in some new direction?”

John replied. “So you are assuming I really am an ‘alien’?”

“I don’t see any other way to interpret the facts. Do you?”

John shook his head. “No. But we’re still missing something.”

Tansley agreed. “Apparently. I still like the theory we are being tested somehow. ‘Perhaps before we are offered any further help? But what kind of help do we need, and why has it not been offered before this point?’”

John nodded. “Yes, I have reached this impasse as well...”

“Okay then, let’s go with what your investigations have revealed. Surely you have been able to conduct just about the freshest overall look at human society as a whole that has ever been attempted — that is, as one individual’s concerted, intensive effort, and with minimum preconceptions.”

John smiled. “Uh, that may be overstating things just a bit.”

“Okay, maybe... But still, what have some of your conclusions been?”

John sat back. “Well, I have now met and interacted with a fair number of human individuals. Many of them have been quite extraordinary. Agent Towner’s dedication and bravery were most inspiring. Kerry and Colonel Raisz are models of professionalism. Mr. Whittaker is generous and seemingly wants to believe. Tim Van Meter is funny and as likable as can be. Your President has resisted an array of difficult pressures. Many others have demonstrated a whole

range of good qualities. I have liked them all. But maybe that is a problem.”

“How so?”

“I have not had to deal much with less inspiring types, though it is apparent from your books and media that many exist.”

“I see. What is this telling you?”

“In itself, not that much. Bad people are to be expected, one supposes, along with the good ones. But this is not what is most disturbing.”

“Really? Go on.”

“I am indebted to Kerry Phillips for alerting me to some of the subtleties of human communication in social context, for example as related to advertising and marketing. What I have learned from this is that deception in human interaction is more the rule than the exception. This has made me wonder whether the manner of alien contact — or rather, lack thereof — might be related to this unfortunate characteristic.”

Tansley was intrigued. “How so?”

John took a deep breath before continuing. “Well... I have seen from your media all kinds of evidence of violence in human society, and even in the plots of science fiction dealing with alien contacts: so many movies, it seems, portray alien beings as being fearful of humans’ potential for violence, and intervening in human affairs as a means of protecting themselves from you. I find such scenarios unconvincing, however.”

Tansley leaned forward and interlocked his fingers. “How so?”

John pointed toward Tansley. “I have read a couple of your own writings on this subject. You argue that any alien civilization advanced enough to have reached Earth at all must be at least many hundreds of years ahead of you in technological knowledge — that is, so far ahead that they could have no fear of you as a threat in that respect. That understanding is similar to mine, especially as an alien power would have to be very advanced indeed to have so selectively and perfectly eliminated all prior memories from the four of us.”

Tansley was following. “I see. So they’re not afraid of us. Neither do they — at least any one that has the final say — appear to have any hostile intentions, or they might have annihilated us through any number of means long ago. This means they probably want to help us, but are holding back for some reason, or reasons.”

John nodded. “Exactly!”

Tansley reflected on this for a moment.

“Perhaps there is some impending crisis we are not aware of, which is in a sense forcing their hand now... Are you suggesting that they are having a hard time deciding whether to help us, and that you and your family’s experience here is helping them make up their mind?”

John nodded, slowly. Tansley continued.

“So... You’re wondering whether humankind’s rampant greed, short-sightedness, and too-often lack of generosity of spirit is so repugnant to more advanced beings that they are not even sure they shouldn’t just let us go ahead and destroy ourselves?”

John grimaced. “I’m afraid I am strongly entertaining that explanation. And it is not only that many human beings are led by overtly selfish motives, either. There are so many examples of your species displaying what seem to be generous and well-intentioned motives, but in so doing turning a blind eye to the eventual evil effects of these.”

Tansley stopped him at that point. “That seems a bit judgmental, John. Would you care to give me a good example of what you’re saying?”

John paused briefly. “Okay. Let’s take the common human act of keeping animals as pets. I understand how the taking care of their pets can actually cultivate good tendencies within the human population. And, of course, domestication *per se* started out as a practical survival strategy. But there are also many troubling side-effects. Breeding sometimes creates monstrous varieties that though amusing to humans, are incapable of experiencing their own true natures. This is inherently a selfish act: perhaps instead of looking at animals as reflections of your own emotions, they should be given the full credit due them for their critical role in keeping your surface world together. Worse yet, the very act of supporting a large pet population puts

huge pressures on the rest of the living world. Pet dogs and cats alone have entirely killed off hundreds of native species worldwide, and are creating survival pressures on hundreds of others. The exotic pets trade is just as bad: for every exotic animal that finds its way to some well-meaning person's home, a dozen die being caught or transported. I have also noticed how humans sometimes confuse the notion of 'animal rights' with the more central matter of poor human behavior: more emphasis should be put on getting people to *respect* animals than arguing that they have 'rights,' an idea which is difficult to defend, and may deflect responsibility from where the blame really lies."

Tansley took a deep breath before responding.

"Okay, let's say, for the sake of argument, that there's some merit to that understanding. And I don't really disagree with you here, by the way: sometimes it seems like the thing we are best at is coming up with new and creative ways of killing ourselves off, even if only indirectly. But what would you have us do?"

John sat still, rather passively. "Has anyone ever suggested a means through which survival-oriented selfishness can ultimately lead to, and be balanced out by, a progressive enlightenment?"

Tansley reflected for a few seconds, then had a couple of answers for John.

"I can think of at least two responses to that question. First, a lot of people would say that organized religious belief is attuned to that goal. In theory — at

least in my opinion — religion should be about teaching values that extend beyond self-centeredness. The reality seems to fall pretty short, however: once something is elevated to the status of an institution, it pretty much automatically succumbs to the weight of its own self-interest, and this has almost always been the case historically with institutional religion.”

John nodded. His own reviews of the subject had led him to similar conclusions. “You said there were *two* responses...?”

“Yes. Some of the greatest philosophers — perhaps most notably Spinoza — took a view of improvement that dwelled on the individual’s efforts to understand dispassionately, and this has also been the position of some of the great spiritual leaders of the past. Moreover, at least one early evolutionist, Alfred Russel Wallace, one of Charles Darwin’s contemporaries, put a spin on this notion by suggesting that subliminal communication with ‘spirits’ through dreams and such helped us to evolve by massaging our emotions — conscience, for example — in various productive directions. Since hardly anyone believes in ‘spirits’ these days his thoughts have not been taken very seriously. But he also suggested that a more enlightened integration of women into society would have a similar effect, especially as a more independent woman would be more likely to choose mates simply on the basis of loving relationships, and not just for reasons of economic support. This undoubtedly has happened

to some extent, yet we still have most of the same old problems today as there were in his time.”

John found the ‘dreams’ connection particularly intriguing, but decided not to comment for the moment. Instead, he thought he would wrap things up.

“Well, I guess we are not getting very far on this on our own... What do you think I should do at this point?”

Tansley smiled. “Honestly, John, I think you should just continue on in the same vein. This has gotten you a lot of respect — at least among the people who think you really exist!” He laughed. “Seriously, whatever you may have accomplished, or not accomplished, it must be satisfying your people back in — wherever it is you’re actually from. If that weren’t the case, wouldn’t we all know by now?”

John sat quietly for a spell, but then nodded slowly and replied “So it would seem.”

* * * * *

HOP hurried down the hall toward Jim’s office. When he got there he planted a couple of knocks on his boss’s door.

Jim glanced up over the report he was reading and pulled down his glasses. “Yeah?”

“Hey boss — take a look at this...” HOP handed a printout to him, rather forcefully.

Jim had only looked for a few seconds before he shouted out.

“Shit! Is this accurate?”

"I'm afraid so. The figures are down by nearly twenty percent!"

Jim sat back in his chair and sighed. No words followed.

HOP filled in the dead air space.

"Well, we knew this was bound to happen eventually. The public is fickle, and easily bored."

Jim just sat, shaking his head. Finally he replied.

"You'd think there would be continuing interest in an alien visitation, wouldn't you...?"

HOP was less certain. "Maybe so. But after all, John hasn't come up with anything yet. And there's no guarantee he ever will."

Jim nodded. "Yeah. I guess that *is* a problem. So what do we do about it?"

HOP shook his head. "I'm not sure there *is* anything we can do about it. It is what it is. But look on the brighter side: it's gotten us some real attention; 'put us on the map. Probably we'll even pick up a few Emmys the next time around. Kerry seems like a shew-in, and maybe some others..."

Jim cut him off. "Yeah, yeah, yeah... Perhaps we should just be glad there's been some immediate rewards, and let it go at that... But I don't quite see it that way. Sure, I welcome all the money we've made, and the possible awards, but I've also come around to thinking we're in something that goes way beyond that. If you believe the DéZars are the real thing — and I now do — then there *has* to be something next. It's not like

the narrative is just going to die on its own lack of merits... One way or the other, the cards are still being dealt, and there will be implications. For that reason alone, people should be keeping up with the story.”

HOP didn't really have a response; what he said was on the mark, but not very hopeful-sounding.

“Well, maybe so, but just try to sell them on that. Even if what you're saying is true, there doesn't seem to be a way to let them know that doesn't sound like it's just us being self-serving.”

Jim nodded. “You're probably right on that, but still, let's not give up entirely just yet. I have a feeling we're about to be in for some surprises.”

“How so?”

“Don't know, for sure. I just have a hunch... What if DéZar is not *supposed* to find an answer?”...

* * * * *

The next morning Jim found out there was more to worry about than just a slip in ratings. Around eleven his phone rang.

“Yes, Whittaker here...”

An old friend was at the other end.

“Hi Jim, it's Ted Leonnig. ‘Hope things are going well?’”

“Pretty good, Ted... I guess... What's up?”

“Well, ‘another heads-up: we're about to air a story that I'm not sure you're going to like very much. ‘Thought you'd want to prepare yourself...”

Jim grimaced. Great...

“Okay. Thanks — I guess... I’ll put it onscreen.
'Bye.”

He dropped the phone abruptly and switched on news programming. A couple of minutes later the promised story was highlighted.

“And now — breaking news! We have just learned from an anonymous source that a preliminary investigation is being carried out by members of the House of Representatives into President Coady’s support of the alleged aliens, the DéZars. According to this source, and backed up by two others, questions are being raised by several congressmen as to the reasons Coady has championed their cause, the cost of the effort, and the possibility that independent New York television station WMVZ has found some way of pressuring Coady for his support. Dani Siwecki has more...”

“Dani, this report is something of a blindside. Where does it come from?”

“Well, Doug, this reporter was contacted a few days back by what can only be described as a whistle-blower who does not sympathize with the actions being taken. Of course, the matter has not yet actually reached the floor of the House for debate, and we don’t know when or whether it will.”

“Why then has the effort been leaked at this point?”

“That’s a good question. My source did not specify a reason, but it seems likely it is meant as a pre-emptive strike.

“How can we be certain that the whole allegation is true?”

“My source provided the names of two other individuals who supposedly could confirm the story, Doug, and when contacted they did so, under the condition their names not be revealed.”

“Okay, then, what details do we have at the moment?”

“As you mentioned, there seem to be three or four elements of the alleged investigation. First, there is the question of whether Coady’s divergence of funds can legally cover this kind of expenditure. Then there’s the nature of DéZar’s ‘service’ itself, which by anyone’s standard is rather openly-defined, and so far has produced no insights. The cost of the effort, perhaps reaching a million dollars a day, is also an issue. Lastly, and perhaps most seriously, it has been suggested that the whole thing is a hoax invented by WMVZ to make money, or even that President Coady is in some fashion indebted to that station and the arrangement represents something that’s not quite proper.”

“These are some pretty serious allegations, Dani. But of course they have not been formally levelled as yet. Still, it sounds like the taxpayer’s money is being spent investigating these suspicions. Could there be

some political blowback related to that very fact, now that it's known?"

"Perhaps, Doug, in which case the leak might have another insidious motivation: simple political embarrassment. We'll just have to see what comes next."

"Indeed, Dani. Thanks for your report."

Jim clicked the screen off and shook his head.

"What a crock!" he thought. "Leave it to Washington to screw things up! But then he considered... 'Good thing I have a really sharp reporter working for me...!'"

That thought pushed him in the right direction.

"Paula!" he yelled out through the open office door,

"Get Kerry on the phone for me!"

Chapter Eighteen

“Good evening everyone, and welcome again to ‘The DéZars,’ WMVZ’s continuing coverage of the first public visit by extraterrestrials! I’m Kerry Phillips, reporting from the 423 compound in Hopkinsville, New York.”

A momentary pause for a few screen credits, and a change in camera angle.

“Tonight we will get to know the DéZars’ lovely twin five-year olds, Tal and Valla, as previously announced. But before getting to that we need to spend a few minutes on a more general subject.”

Another camera angle change.

“As many of you undoubtedly know, a considerable portion of the public seems to believe that ‘the DéZars’ are in one sense or another ‘fake news,’ and as such easily dismissible.”

Another short pause as the camera panned to close-up Kerry’s face.

“I can only say that I am *fully* invested in this story. I believe that the DéZars are the real thing, and that what we are witnessing at this point is an important event, one that everyone should be taking seriously. To that end I have asked a few experts — individuals who have had a chance to review claims of the DéZars’ authenticity — to speak on their behalf tonight.”

Switch away from the close-up, and to a four-panel screen showing Kerry and her three guests. Kerry continued talking.

“We are now live, at least for our initial broadcast. I have with me Dr. Paul Matthias, President of the National Academy of Sciences, Dr. Olivia Moreno, Director of the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota, and Dr. Navin Datta, President of the Royal Society of London. Welcome all.”

Thanks and nods all around.

“I’ll start with you, Dr. Matthias, if I may...”

Another nod.

“Sir, I believe you were contacted within just a few days of the President’s initial announcement concerning the DéZars?”

“Yes, that’s right, Kerry. The NAS is the nation’s foremost science agency, and it wasn’t a difficult decision in this instance to investigate a claim as significant as this one was. We immediately sent a team of top people to New York. It did not take them long to verify that Mr. DéZar was in fact of a species quite distinct from *Homo sapiens*. This was possible to conclude on the basis of a simple examination of morphology and physiology, and shortly thereafter tests at the biochemical and genetic level produced a full confirmation.”

“So, it is your position that John DéZar is in fact an alien being?”

“This seems a logical conclusion, but as you are aware, there are other possibilities, remote as their likelihoods are. All we can say absolutely conclusively, I think, is that he — they — are not members of our own human species.”

“Dr. Moreno... Was this also the conclusion your team came to?”

“Yes. Our people visited a couple of days later, and independently came to the same verdict. The evidence is quite conclusive.”

“Dr. Datta... ?”

“As we so found, just after that. At the moment, a report on our findings is in its final stages of preparation, and will be released for general consumption shortly through one of our publication outlets.”

“Will this tell us anything new, beyond confirming what others are saying?”

“I’m not certain. But it will, at least, present a formal treatment of the subject, and undoubtedly confirm in some detail the ways in which Mr. DéZar is unique.”

Kerry did not want to extend the segment; this was enough for now.

“Well, I certainly want to thank all of you for appearing tonight.” Again, nods all around. The screen refocused on Kerry alone.

“Without going into this further just now, I should point out that my guests’ remarks by no means exhaust

the opinions we have received on the subject of the DéZars' identity. At our website at WMVZNY.com we have collected summary reports provided by more than twenty teams who have come to Hopkinsville to examine the DéZars. Among the findings recorded are the opinions of seven foreign government teams, as many again from various scientific organizations from around the world, and others based on exams performed by a diversity of private groups and individuals. Please take the time to look at these if you are still on the fence on this question, as it might change your mind."

"When we come back we will turn to the original focus of tonight's program, and some further responses by John DéZar himself to phoned-in questions."

Break to advertisement.

Both Jim and Kerry were pleased with this short 'intervention' on the DéZars' behalf. But the next national poll reflected but little shift in the public's opinion. An increase of four percent in the number of 'full believers' was recorded, but this still fell short of even a majority.

Apparently, expert opinion on the subject was not going to be enough to impress the masses. Perhaps, in fact, it was even part of the problem. Spinoza was right; nobody likes to be told what to think, especially when the truth crosses their predispositions.

* * * * *

Right after Kerry's plea John was monitoring recent internet comments on the DéZars when he noticed something new on one of the blogs:

“So, what's this with the new disease outbreak at Camp Drummond in upstate New York? It seems that a previously unidentified virus has reared its ugly head there, and sent sixteen of the base's personnel to the infirmary. Several have been said to be in 'serious condition,' though so far no deaths have been reported. Say, now isn't that the base that supports the DéZar enclosure in Hopkinsville, only about ten miles away? Suspicious, eh? But maybe it's just a coincidence, right? Isn't that just the kind of thing that scientists are always warning about with our own attempts to explore other planets: that we inadvertently might take some devastating microbe along with us, and contaminate a whole new ecosystem? Could it be that the word 'inadvertent' is also apt here? Does anybody else think this is just a bit too odd to ignore...?”

Great, he thought to himself. Wouldn't you think that a sponsoring agency hundreds or thousands of years in advance of humankind might have thought of that difficulty, and compensated accordingly? Or if it was deliberate, that a more subtle means would have been found to introduce the disease? He shook his head in disbelief, then moved on.

The next morning, moreover, he noted another story on the subject. It seemed the CDC had already been on the case, and determined that the bug

originated with some new recruits who had recently been transferred in from Nebraska. But of course this likely would not end the story: some future blogger would just now be sure to discuss the matter in “if you believe what the government tells us” terms.

Chapter Nineteen

Two days later the eighth of John's visits to the towns of the area took place. It was largely uneventful, and John learned little new from his dialogs with the town's residents. The party returned to 423 in the mid-afternoon, and John resumed his online studies of human history, psychology, and politics.

As usual, he turned in around midnight. Four hours later, at about four a.m., he was up again, beginning his usual cycle of activities.

Joan DéZar's daily schedule was attuned to the family's overall needs, and as such different from her husband's. She usually rose around 4:30 to share a cup of tea with John, then, as he began work, showered and performed her own exercises and meditation activities. Around 6 a.m. she got the children out of bed.

Today she entered their room at about that time, moving first to Valla's bed, where she shook her gently to wake her up. Valla stretched and smiled.

Speaking in DéZarian, she responded:

"Good morning, mommy."

"Good morning, dear. 'Wakeup time!'"

Joan kissed her, left her side, and walked over to the other side of the room, to Tal's bed. Bending over, she applied the same wakeup formula to him.

No response.

She spoke his name, and nudged him again.

Still no response.

She turned on his bedside lamp and looked down at him.

No movement. 'Not even any evidence of breathing!

She recoiled in horror. She shook him again, harder this time, but still there was no response.

Panic! 'Out of the room in a shot, down the stairs, and over to John's study. She burst in without knocking.

"John! It's Tal! Something is wrong! Come quick!"

Agent-on-duty Gabbard followed them back upstairs, and on seeing Tal's condition got on the phone for help.

It arrived within minutes. But it was no use. Tal was gone. It seemed probable he had been dead for some hours.

Kerry got the call less than a minute after Tal was pronounced dead at the scene. After hurrying to 423 and seeing for herself, she called Jim, waking him.

"Boss, 'sorry to get you up, but it's one of John's children... His mother was unable to wake him this morning — he's, he's... *dead!* What do we do?"

Jim woke up in a hurry. "Jesus...! Uh, call Colonel Raisz and let him handle things. Meanwhile, stay with John and Joan and help them get through the situation. Does anyone have any sense of what happened?"

"Not yet. He was unresponsive this morning when Joan tried to wake him up. It's horrible!"

“Alright... Well, I guess this is a real news story, too — start thinking about how you’re going to handle it as such. Please give John and Joan my condolences.”

“Okay boss. Ciao for now.” She turned around and went back into the bedroom, where the DéZars were still at Tal’s bedside, holding his hand.

“I’m so sorry, folks... Was he okay when you put him to bed last night?”

“Yes... I think. I didn’t notice anything odd. Maybe I missed something...” Joan looked down.

Kerry was quick to react. “Now don’t jump to conclusions, Joan. People in this, uh, time and place often pass suddenly, with no warning to those around them. There’s no need to feel guilty about this. Let us look into it.”

Joan nodded, sadly. “Thank you Kerry.” She paused.

“Will you please leave us alone with Tal now...”

Kerry understood. “Of course.”

She turned around and left them to mourn in private.

* * * * *

A short while later the local coroner arrived. He wasn’t quite sure what to do, given who was involved, but he did, at least, verify the death before asking to have a word with the DéZars, Kerry, and Colonel Raisz, who had also been summoned to the spot. He addressed John and Joan first.

"I'm very sorry for your loss, folks. Normally there is a sequence of things to be done at this point, but in this instance there obviously are jurisdictional and other questions that will need to be sorted out first. Colonel Raisz, I trust you will take care of these, immediately?"

Raisz replied in the affirmative.

"Alright then, I'll be on my way. Again, my condolences." He bowed and left, accompanied by a guard.

No one said anything for a few moments. Then Joan spoke.

"I don't understand it. He seemed happy enough, and there appeared to be no health problems, apart from the respiration issue..."

No one responded. John spoke next.

"What happens now? I assume the authorities are going to want to examine him to see what happened? Will they do that here, or will he be taken elsewhere?"

Raisz replied. "I don't know for sure, but I'll find out right away. I suspect the authorities will ask to remove him, probably to the base, for an autopsy. If so, I'll ask to have the process expedited. Since we don't know what we're dealing with here we'll need to have you, Joan, and Valla come across the street for a quick physical. You may be at risk yourselves."

The DéZars nodded. Raisz continued.

"Look, I'm going to go back across the street now to get things worked out. I anticipate there will be a call to transport Tal to the base in an hour or so, and we

should be able to get our medic here to take a look at you folks in less time than that. In the meantime, you can stay here with him, if you wish.”

John nodded. “Thank you, Colonel, we will do just that.”

Raisz saluted, turned, and left, leaving Kerry alone with the DéZars. She took their hands.

“I know it doesn’t help much to say it, but we’ll try to get to the bottom of this.”

“Thank you, Kerry. We know you will do all you can.”

John looked down at Tal’s lifeless form.

“He didn’t deserve this. He’s just a child...”

* * * * *

Colonel Raisz’s predictions turned out to be accurate. It didn’t take his superiors long to decide that the body should be removed immediately by helicopter for an autopsy at Camp Drummond. Kerry accompanied the body over, waiting in the next room as the procedure was initiated.

A couple of hours later three doctors emerged from the autopsy room. One spoke up right away.

“Hi, I’m Dr. Cross. Are you Miss Phillips?” She nodded in assent.

“Well, I’ll assume you have been authorized to hear our preliminary results, which will be issued in print later today, we hope.”

She nodded again. “What did you find?”

The same man spoke.

"It was a difficult autopsy. This was an alien being, so it was decided to have the three of us perform the procedure. You know: a little additional perspective..."

He paused briefly, as if troubled. Kerry caught the inflection.

"And... ?"

"The thing is, we could find nothing that looked suspicious. There seemed to be no signs of any kind of trauma or physiological failure. It's almost as though he had simply been 'switched off.'"

Kerry was incredulous.

"Really?"

The chief examiner nodded. "Under the circumstances we will advise that a more thorough examination be performed, and a battery of additional lab tests applied. We have asked that a special team be brought in; given the urgency they should be in place by tomorrow morning. In the meantime, pending further instructions, we will keep the body here, and put the room under surveillance and armed guard. We'll be sure to keep you posted."

Kerry thanked the group, then turned away to follow her escort back to the chopper, which had already been alerted she was ready to return to Hopkinsville. By early afternoon, after a short ride, she was landing at the heliport next door to 423.

Kerry had missed the painful scene in which John and Joan tried to explain to Valla that her brother was

gone, and would not be coming back. By the time she got back to 423, the three were sitting quietly in the living room, nursing cups of tea. Kerry managed to catch John's eye, giving him the high sign that she needed to talk to him alone in his office. He excused himself, and followed her down the hall.

After they entered, she closed the door behind them and the two sat down. She wasn't happy about it, but it was obvious she needed to fill him in on the autopsy.

"You know, John, anytime there's a death in this country that occurs under unusual circumstances, there has to be an autopsy. I'm sorry I ran out on you like that, but I figured someone close to the situation should be there."

He replied, wearily.

"Yes, of course, I know... And these certainly are 'unusual' circumstances..."

She nodded.

"Well, usually autopsies are not performed quite so quickly after a death, but again — 'unusual.'"

She was putting off the inevitable. John got to the question of the hour.

"What did they find out? Was Tal sick in some way we didn't notice?"

Thankfully, Kerry thought, at least that was not the case.

"No, actually. In fact, even after more than two hours of examination they were unable to find a single

thing that might explain what happened. One of the team actually said it was almost as though he had just suddenly 'been turned off'."

John didn't fully absorb the comment.

"You mean — they could find nothing to explain all this?"

Head up and down, slowly.

He was still unbelieving. "How can that be?"

"They don't know. It is a surprising enough result that another, more detailed, autopsy has been ordered for tomorrow morning. Hopefully they'll be able to figure out what happened then."

John sighed. "Thank you Kerry. I know this hasn't been easy for you either."

She dipped her eyes.

"No, it hasn't... And John, there's one thing more. Tal's death has been kept under wraps to this point; there's apparently been some politics and other things going on. But I have now been cleared to tape an announcement that will be released to the media. Is there anything you'd like me to say?"

John looked at her wearily.

"Only that he was our beloved son, and that we will miss him terribly."

She nodded. "You know, eventually there will be more to deal with. I'll try to shield you and Joan from as much as I can, but now that you are so well known, I cannot make the fuss disappear altogether."

He understood. “Do what you must. We will follow your lead.”

She now had matters to attend to.

“I have to go now, but I’ll be back in a couple of hours. Stay strong.” She stood up, but before leaving moved over to give him a long hug. His reply was simple and heartfelt.

“Thanks Kerry. I don’t know what we’d do without you.”

* * * * *

The next morning Kerry was having an early coffee break when her phone rang.

“Hello, Kerry here...”

“Hi Kerry, it’s Colonel Raisz. I have some strange news, and for the moment you must keep this to yourself — not even the DéZars should be told, at least until we know more.”

That woke her up. She put the coffee cup down. “More? About what?”

“Well, I don’t know how to say this exactly, but when the medical team over at the base got together to continue the autopsy this morning, they found that the body was missing.”

Kerry’s mouth dropped open. “What!? What do you mean, it was *missing*?”

“Just that. Somebody apparently stole it.”

Kerry sat quietly for a moment, stunned.

“How can that be? I thought they said he was going to be specially guarded.”

“He was, apparently. They stationed an armed guard outside the room all night. He said there were no attempts to enter during the whole period, and video surveillance in the hallway backs him up. Everyone is scratching their heads.”

“What do we do? We can’t keep this from the DéZars!”

“That will happen soon, I understand. Uh, actually, I think they are going to ask you to do it.”

Yes, of course... “Really... You mean, ‘good old Kerry?’”

She could almost see him wincing.

“Aw c’mon, it’s not like that... You are, after all, their *de facto* caretaker.”

A cheap appeal to her motherly instincts, perhaps, but it worked well enough.

“Alright... But why can’t I just tell them now?”

“I understand that can’t happen until the powers-that-be debrief you in person. You can expect a couple of FBI agents at your door within the hour.”

“I see. But what can I tell them that they don’t already know?”

“I don’t know. I’m just the messenger, Kerry.”

“Fine. I can meet them here in your office. Do you want to be present?”

“I think they want to speak with you alone — actually, I think they’ll be talking to me alone as well, right afterward.”

That seemed a little odd, but she went with it.

“Fine. I’ll be ready, just text me when they get here.”

“Will do. ‘Bye.”

* * * * *

The FBI agents were right on time. There were two of them, one a veteran, the other much younger. Once Kerry appeared and sat down, they got right to it. The older agent did all the talking.

“Miss Phillips... I understand you accompanied the body of the alien child over to the base yesterday. Did anyone else come with you?”

“No, just the pilot and two guards.”

“Did you recognize any of the three?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t remember seeing them around the compound before, but lots of people come and go, and I don’t always run into them.”

“I see. Who else knew that you and/or the body were flying over to the base?”

“Letssee... Just John and Joan, Colonel Raisz, and Special Agent Gabbard, I think.”

“And once there, you only spoke to base personnel?”

“That’s right. Oh — actually, I also called my boss at WMVZ to let him know where I was.”

“The DéZars: Did they express any reservations about the removal of their child’s body for the autopsy?”

“No. Colonel Raisz explained to them that this was what should be expected.”

A warning light suddenly flashed in Kerry’s head. Her expression changed immediately.

“You know, it almost sounds like you think we are suspects here — I hope that’s not the case...”

Her questioner was unperturbed; he’d heard that tone of voice before. When he replied, however, he softened his tone slightly.

“No, no... You understand, we are just trying to get as much information as we can about this. The whole situation is very puzzling.”

“Yes, it is. But Colonel Raisz and Special Agent Gabbard will back me up.”

“We’ve already spoken with Gabbard, and he does. We talk to Colonel Raisz next. We’ll get back to you if we need more; in the meantime, you can go now. But don’t talk to anyone about this — including the DéZars — just yet.”

The two rose and walked out without another word.

Kerry stood up, but didn’t move. She was trying to take stock of the situation.

On thinking it over, it didn’t look good, on three counts. First, she now realized, the FBI was bound to wonder, if it hadn’t already, whether the DéZars were

somehow responsible for their son's death, and a coverup was now underway. If so, perhaps they had had reason not to want a more detailed autopsy, and somehow had arranged to have their son's body removed. Lastly, any of several people, including herself, might be involved in the deception — involving either, or both, the death, and the disappearance of the body.

But wasn't all of this ridiculous? Why would the DéZars suddenly 'off' their son? And if it was some kind of accident, wouldn't that be evident? And why would anyone want to help them 'get away with it...' ?

?? She double-took.

Oops. Make that *four* counts. It would quickly be apparent to the FBI that the whole WMVZ crew had a lot to gain by protecting the DéZars, whatever the truth was.

In any case, the disappearance of the body was just too convenient to keep any self-respecting lawman from attempts at dot-connecting. This likely meant trouble was brewing.

On her way back to 428, further thoughts raced through her mind. She couldn't possibly believe that the DéZars had anything to do with the death of Tal, and it seemed even less likely they were in any way responsible for the disappearance of his remains. What could have happened?

She guessed that it would take the FBI a few days to fully investigate the situation. They had already started

to interview everyone who was physically or situationally connected to the disappearance, and it wouldn't be long before they had exhausted the crime scene. Undoubtedly the surveillance video would be scrutinized for any evidence of tampering, and surely they would check for any suggestion of additional possible ways to enter the room: through a ventilation duct, for example.

Then there was the question of who would want the body so badly that they would attempt a break-in at a military base to get it! Two immediate scenarios could be imagined, at least in theory. Someone might try to ransom it, but that seemed pretty unlikely. More likely, some person or persons were interested in it for reasons of its alien nature. In either case, the party involved could also have been involved in the death itself.

She tensed and rapidly shook her head, side to side. Too many 'ifs'...

Later that afternoon she received a phone call from the FBI.

"Miss Phillips, this is Special Agent Jacoby, from this morning. We are still investigating this bizarre body theft, but feel it would be permissible at this point to inform the DéZars of the... event. But I have been told they should not speak of it to anyone. This goes for yourself, as well. Understood?"

"Yes, okay, but what do you mean, 'I have been told'? Who's pulling the strings here?"

Jacoby decided not to answer the question, at least directly.

“I’m sorry Miss Phillips, but I can’t tell you that. However, I *can* tell you that you now need to inform the DéZars about the theft right away, as this evening they will receive a phone call from a person who will assume they *have* been told.”

Kerry wasn’t quite sure where this was going, but this was the FBI, after all...

“Fine. I understand. Is that all?”

“Just one other thing. We truly are at an impasse at the moment regarding the theft. Sometimes you get a case where you can’t tell the rabbit from the hat, and this is one of those. There is no other possible way into the room, and a further examination of the security tape seems to indicate it has not been tampered with. There are some further things that can be done to verify that absolutely, but that will take time and at the moment its validity appears extremely probable. This information can also be relayed to the DéZars.”

“Okay, I’ve got it. Thank you.”

Jacoby got off the line, and Kerry immediately began preparing for her unpleasant duty. A few minutes later she was on her way to 423.

When she got there she gathered John and Joan together in his office, and closed the door behind them. They looked up at her rather grimly serious facial expression. It was obvious something was coming.

“As awful as the last two days have been, I’m afraid I have some more news for you that isn’t at all good.”

Both John and Joan stared at her, fearing the worst. He spoke.

“Is it the extended autopsy? Have they found something further?”

She shrugged. “No, that isn’t it. I was told earlier today that when they got together to start a more extended examination this morning, the body was not there.” She stopped, not knowing what kind of a reaction might be coming.

John stood straight up. “You mean — they somehow misplaced it? How is that possible?”

“Uh, no... It appears that someone has actually *stolen* it.”

The DéZars looked at one another, aghast. John took the lead.

“Why... why would anyone want to do that?”

“No one seems to have any idea. Colonel Raisz and I have both spoken with the FBI, and they are completed puzzled. It seems that the room Tal’s body was in was under secure guard all night, and even a complete period of video surveillance shows nothing.”

The DéZars sat quietly, despondent. Kerry knew she had to continue.

“I’m afraid there’s more. An explanation is so difficult that the FBI is apparently considering us — all of us — as possibly being in some kind of collusion on this. That probably wouldn’t be the case had Tal died

for some obvious reason, or the body had not been taken, but the combination of things has the little wheels in their head turning.”

Joan now spoke up. “This is absurd... What do we do?”

“Well, for now, anyway, nothing. Ultimately, I think we have nothing to worry about, but in the short term things could get difficult. I have been instructed to tell you two things: first, until some sort of explanation presents itself, you should say nothing about the disappearance. As far as you’re concerned, the military still has the body, and is holding it until decisions are made about its final release. The other thing is that you are going to receive a phone call tonight, in an hour or so, regarding the whole affair. Perhaps some further explanation will be given at that time.”

The DéZars said nothing. Obviously, this was not going over well. Kerry filled the gap.

“Look, we can get through this. Tal’s death has been reported worldwide, and there will lots of people pulling for you — just wait: you’ll see!”

John didn’t seem too hopeful. But he managed a response.

“Thank you Kerry. We will just have to see what happens, I guess.”

* * * * *

When the time came, the DéZars were summoned beforehand to Colonel Raisz’s office, across the street.

After a few minute wait there, the phone rang. It was on speaker setting so both John and Joan could respond.

“Yes, hello, this is John DéZar. My wife Joan is also here.”

“Good evening, folks, this is President Coady.”

The DéZars looked at one another. This was unexpected. Coady kept speaking.

“John and Joan — I am calling for several reasons. First, I wish to convey my sincere condolences for your son’s death. I can’t imagine the grief you are feeling. But I would also like to express my embarrassment — “

He stopped, suddenly, before going on.

“No, that is not the right word. The right word is ‘shame,’ that we have failed to protect you as we promised we would do. I don’t know if this tragedy could have been averted, but there seems to be a real possibility that we missed something. Please forgive us; I apologize from the bottom of my heart.”

Both DéZars could hear the emotion in his voice. He actually cared...

He went on.

“It’s bad enough we couldn’t protect your son from this premature end, but I cannot even begin to explain what is going on regarding the theft. I have been fully briefed, right up to the last few minutes, and so far the FBI is at a complete loss. I have decided the best thing to do for the moment is to keep the event secret; I therefore am in the awkward position of begging you to

let us keep the theft part of the matter to ourselves.
Can I get your help on this?"

John, not knowing what else to do, gave in.

"Thank you for your thoughts Mr. President; we appreciate your concern. Let me — us — say that we are not at all sure your people can be held responsible for this whole situation, so we hold no ill will. And we understand how public disclosure is probably not the best idea at the moment."

Coady breathed a sigh of relief. He wasn't sure what he was going to do had the DéZars given him a hard time.

"Thank you. This is a difficult thing, and I can only promise that we will do our best to figure out what is going on. If a ransom is demanded, this will likely happen in the next day or two." He paused, catching himself before mentioning anything about the other, more terrifying possibility: that this was *not* a hostage situation... "We will get back to you as soon as we know anything new. Goodnight now."

"Yes, goodnight Mr. President" chimed in the DéZars as one. The phone clicked off.

They stood looking at one another, shaking their heads, then embraced.

Chapter Twenty

When the story of Tal's death broke it was, of course, big news. Kerry provided the on-the-scene reporting, which was circulated worldwide. It might have been otherwise, but she was, after all, the liaison...

The day after the President's call, the flood began.
Of mail.

Several dozen letters, in a mail sack, were relayed to 423 by one of the guards. They had been delivered to the outside gate by the local post office.

The following day there were more than a thousand such letters, so many that a special run from the post office had to be arranged. This went on for a few days, then the surge tapered off.

They were all addressed to 'John and Joan DéZar, Hopkinstville, New York,' or the like. It was the world expressing its condolences for the loss of their son.

To be sure, there were still some detractors. Sometimes the DéZars would open an envelope, only to find words like: "Well, one down, three to go. Leave our planet alone!!" But most of the messages were genuine expressions of sympathy, for example the one from the Davidsons, of Moscow, Idaho:

"My Dear DéZars,

Our thoughts are with you at this difficult time. Admittedly, we were not at first convinced you were really beings from another world, but our opinions have slowly changed. It is a noble thing you are

doing. We write because we know the pain of losing a child: our only son, Jonah, was taken from us, now more than fifty years ago, through crib death. We were devastated at the time, and it still hurts to think of it, this senseless death of an innocent. But we pulled through, and eventually recovered, and you can too. God bless you in your efforts, and may you find peace in this your new home. — Emil and Sarah.”

Letters like this could not help but raise the DéZars’ spirits, even if just a little. And the ratio of good letters to bad was something like ten to one, so the few negative messages could easily be ignored.

* * * * *

A couple of days later there was another interruption to John’s routine. A voice took him by surprise as he sat at his computer.

“Mr. DéZar, come quick — something’s happening!”

It was one of the noncoms who worked the communications equipment in the room near John’s office. His eyes were opened wide. John didn’t react at first.

“Quick!” the man repeated, and motioned with his index finger.

John now jumped up, and followed him into the other room, where he pointed:

“Sir, I was just monitoring the surveillance cameras, when I noticed this altercation starting up inside the outside gate. It looks like one of the, uh, anti-alien

protesters got in the face of one of the friendlies and starting shouting obscenities, and got himself clocked. In seconds, everybody was in the road, slugging it out!”

Sure enough, it was a regular donnybrook. Close to a hundred people were engaged in hand-to-hand combat, with fists swinging and placards serving as make-do weapons. By the time John got to take a look, there were already several people down and lying motionless.

John asked the obvious.

“Is anybody doing anything to stop it?”

“I don’t know, sir. Probably, but it may be taking a few minutes to get a detail together.”

John had a thought.

“Can you patch me into the loudspeaker system, with the volume at maximum?”

“Why, yessir... Here...”

It took the technician only a few seconds to set things up. When it was ready, he stepped back and pointed to the microphone. John took a step forward and gathered himself. In a loud voice, he carefully enunciated:

“THIS IS JOHN DÉZAR: PLEASE STOPPPPP...!!”

Fighting ceased in an instant. Everyone looked this way and that, reacting as if God Himself had just shouted dictates from Heaven. John paused, not sure what to follow up with. It came to him.

“...Can’t you all just... get along?”

There really wasn't anything further to say. He switched off the mike and stepped back to watch the monitor.

The crowd started to disperse. Each contingent slowly drained back toward its respective side of the road, supporting the injured as they retreated. Most of the combatants stopped as they reached their destinations and sat down, looking a bit sheepish.

The noncom spoke to John excitedly.

"Well done, sir! You just saved a lot of people from injury!"

John nodded in acknowledgment, then turned around and headed back to work. He was pleased, but only a little.

Chapter Twenty-One

The bedside clock read 1:10 a.m. John was sleeping; he had been unusually tired, and turned in a bit early. Shortly after he fell asleep he felt a bit agitated... It was another dream coming on! Strangely, it seemed to be the same dream featuring the house kitchen out on the plains he had had some weeks earlier. Again the observer in the dream was not specified, and again a look out the window revealed a sea of menacing dark sky, and then an approaching funnel cloud. Again the scene switched to the yard, and once more a large tree was looming over the observer as the twister wound its way nearer and nearer.

But this time there was no struggling infant lying under it. In its place an open book volume was drawing the observer's attention. He or she felt a sudden urgency: what was written on that facing leaf!?? As the roaring funnel cloud sped closer he/she rushed forward, getting near enough to see a man's name at the top of the page, and most of the words of what appeared to be a chapter title. And then, just before the tornado struck...

As before, the dreamscape suddenly evaporated. He stirred a bit, then abruptly sat up straight, turned back the bedclothes, and jumped out of bed. Walking briskly to the bedroom door, he opened it and proceeded directly to his desk in the study. Taking a deep breath, he switched on his computer and pulled

up the online Google Scholar database. After entering a couple of search strings he exhaled and sat riveted to the screen for two hours straight, reading.

It was after 3 a.m. when he stood up, left the room, and approached Agent-on-duty Lopez, who was sitting in the hallway.

“Agent Lopez, please get Miss Phillips on the telephone for me.”

Lopez rose, showing some concern. “Is something wrong?”

DéZar shook his head. “No, but I need to speak to her right away. I suppose she will be asleep, so please apologize to her for the disturbance.”

Agent Lopez pulled out his cell phone and made the call. After apologizing for waking her up, he told her that John wished to speak with her, and handed him the phone. A sleepy Kerry came on the line.

“Hello... John?”

“Yes, Kerry. Please get dressed and come on over. Kerry — I think I’ve just figured out why I have been sent here!”

* * * * *

About twenty-four hours later another ringing phone was answered at 3:42 a.m. local time in Scranton, Iowa. Ronald Weston had turned in, as usual, a few hours before. The next day was Thursday, and he was looking forward to the weekend, and a visit from his grandchildren.

“Uh, hello... This is Ron.” Not surprisingly, Ron sounded rather disoriented.

The responding voice at the other end carried a bit of an ominous tone. “Hello. Is this Ronald Weston, Director of Libraries at Scranton College, Scranton, Iowa?”

Weston rubbed his eyes. “Why yes, that’s me. What’s this about?” He immediately feared the worst.

“Mr. Weston, this is Kerry Phillips from television station WMVZ in New York. ‘Sorry to disturb you at this late hour... I assume you are aware of the recent intrigue regarding the visit of an alleged alien, Mr. DéZar, to our world?’”

This was not exactly the kind of thing Weston was expecting to hear in the middle of the night. Still, he managed a reply: “Well... yes, of course. Go on.”

“Mr. Weston, could you please, if possible, move out to the hall so as not to disturb your wife?”

Weston considered the rather odd request for a moment, but then said “Okay... Hold on a second.”

A few steps later he was in position.

Kerry got right to it. “Mr. Weston, strange as it may sound, it has just been determined that there is an important connection between the DéZars’ visit and your institution. It is imperative — a matter of national security — that we meet to discuss the matter. I have been authorized to do this, in the company of a couple of government officials, by the President of the United States, and would appreciate your full cooperation.”

She quickly added: “Understand that this is to be kept strictly secret for now. Please also understand that you have not done anything wrong or are in any kind of trouble or danger over this; we just need some background information from someone we feel we can trust.”

Weston rubbed his eyes again. “Uh, okay... I really hope this is not some kind of prank... How soon are we talking about?”

“I assure you this is *not* a prank. Tomorrow you will receive a short visit at your office from representatives of the military to confirm this. Further, when we meet we will provide full identification and even authorization from the President himself — which, by the way, you will likely be able to keep and not, ultimately, need to stay silent about. For the time being, however, absolutely no one else can know about this. We can be at the main door of the library, in an unmarked sedan, at 12:30 a.m. tomorrow night, at which point we would like you to accompany us to your office to discuss the matter at hand. We expect the discussion to take less than half an hour. I assume this will be well after your Library closes on Thursday?”

“Yes. Closing time is ten p.m., and the cleaning crew doesn’t arrive until four a.m. So no one should be there.”

“Well then, good, please make it happen. You will need to come up with some kind of excuse regarding the meeting, just in case — perhaps that you were

contacted on very short notice about preparing an important document for use by someone higher up in the administration not much later the next day. And I'm sorry, but you will need to lie to your wife about this, or at least be very vague, for a few days."

"I understand. You can count on me."

"Good. 'See you then. Goodbye for now."

"Yes... Goodbye."

Weston shut off his phone, thinking: "Well I'll be damned — real cloak and dagger stuff, it seems... I hope I haven't gotten myself into something ugly..." Without further ado, he returned to bed.

* * * * *

The next day Weston did in fact meet with a couple of officers from a nearby military base; they assured him that everything he'd been told was on the level. He decided to use the excuse for staying late suggested to him, faking his actions right to the point of pulling out a few odd papers and spreading them around his desk over the evening hours preceding the time specified. Now it was approaching 12:30, and he got up to make his way toward the front door. He figured his visitors would be prompt, and this turned out to be an accurate assumption. Right on cue a car drew up, stopped, and shut down. A young woman and two middle-aged men in business suits emerged from it, then walked up toward him. Unlocking the door as discretely as possible he let them in. Kerry spoke first.

“Good evening Mr. Weston; I’m Kerry Phillips — I hope you recognize me?” Weston nodded. Motioning to her two companions she made introductions: “These gentlemen are Assistant Secretary of State Alves, and a representative of one of our national security agencies who has been asked to remain anonymous.” Weston shook hands with everyone, then responded with “I’m glad to meet you all — at least I hope I am...”

Kerry smiled. “No worries, Mr. Weston. This is just a fact-finding mission, albeit it an important one. If all goes as expected, within a few days you will be able to tell anyone you wish all about it. Can we proceed to your private office?”

Weston smiled, rather politely. “Sure. This way.” They moved off.

A few steps later he decided to inform them of something.

“Uh, you said nothing about this, so I have not taken the liberty of shutting off our security cameras for the time being.”

The unintroduced gentleman replied, without much emotion.

“No problem. There is nothing about this visit that should put anyone in an awkward position.”

Weston smiled, and kept walking. But he was still feeling a bit uneasy.

They reached his office and went in. He offered them seats, then sat back behind his desk.

“Okay, so what’s this about? Why all the secrecy?”

Apparently Kerry had been authorized to speak for the group. The other two gentlemen hardly said another word.

“Mr. Weston... A bit of research suggests that you’ve been the Library Director here for more than fifteen years. Is that correct?”

“Yes. A little over sixteen years, actually.”

Kerry met his eyes, and continued. “That would mean you were here during the entire tenure of the late Jonathan Plummer at this institution, correct?”

Weston nodded. “Well, yes. I/we hired Jonathan around, uh, ten years ago, and I got to know him fairly well before his untimely death about four years back.”

“Tell us a little about him, please. And please have my assurance that our interest in him is not related to anything remotely bad — in fact, quite the opposite.”

Weston was still not comfortable, but he guessed he could at least relay the obvious.

“Well, I liked Jonathan. He was the only Ph.D. on our staff, and we considered it a bit of a coup when we obtained his services as our Science Librarian. I think he had found it difficult to obtain a teaching position in his original fields, and had turned to library work as an alternative way of paying his bills. But he was quite a good librarian, actually; we were very pleased with his work.”

Kerry got to the point of the visit.

“I understand that this university grants faculty status to its librarians. Does this mean that they are expected to conduct research and publish the results?”

“Yes, to a point. Most librarians are unable to secure large grants supporting extensive research programs, but we expect them to try to keep active, as possible.”

“Did Dr. Plummer produce many publications?”

Weston leaned on his hand, considering for a few moments.

“Not so many, as I recall, but more than enough to meet our requirements for promotion.”

“Were these publications directly related to library studies, or did he fall back on his original scientific subjects?”

Again, Weston thought for a moment.

“Hmmm... I remember a few survey studies he did that were published in the library science literature, and there was at least one systems theory article that appeared in an open access science title. Yes... I remember he was particularly happy about the latter; I believe he remarked to me at one point how it ‘provided some justification for all that time he spent in graduate school.’ I think it came out just a few months before he died.”

“How did he die?”

Weston sighed. “Well, that was very sad, so senseless. He deserved better. One day during an ice storm he was walking down a set of stairs on campus

late at night when he slipped, went over a guardrail, hit his head against a stone wall, was knocked out, and froze to death overnight. A terrible, premature end to a very nice man. He was only forty-four at the time.”

Kerry looked down and away for a moment. “Did he have any family?”

Weston shook his head. “Not really. He wasn’t married, and I seem to recall him saying that his parents had both died some years before he came to work for us. He had a sister, but they didn’t appear to be close — if I remember correctly, she lives out on the West Coast. He was pretty quiet, and as far as I know didn’t socialize much.”

Kerry closed her notepad, apparently getting ready to go. She looked at her companions. “Do we need anything else?” The unnamed man replied, “Don’t forget the letter.”

“Oh yes, that’s right...” Kerry reached down into her briefcase, pulled out a letter of explanation signed by President Coady, and handed it to Weston. She then stood up.

Weston also stood up. So that’s it? She read his expression.

“Yes, that’s all we needed to verify, thanks. This will likely play out within a few days or at most weeks, and we will let you know when you no longer need to remain quiet on the matter. We much appreciate your candor on this, really: thanks again.”

“My pleasure.” Actually, Weston was still a bit concerned, but figured there wasn’t much he could do about it. If this came straight from the President it was obviously important, any other considerations aside. He showed his guests to a side door, shook hands again, and let them go.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Once again, President Coady addressed a national audience.

“My fellow Americans, citizens of the world — again I come before you to make an announcement of great import. As you know, over these past few months we have been supporting the efforts of our alien guest, John DéZar, to determine the reason for his presence among us. This has been a difficult period for us all, even to the point that there have been related physical injuries. At least two individuals have died: one, a government security agent, the other, the young son of the DéZars. We continue to grieve their loss.”

“In recent days, however, some light has been shone on this venture. Mr. DéZar has determined the reason for his family’s appearance, and tonight we have the privilege of learning the truth behind his great adventure. In fact, as I understand, we will have the great pleasure of meeting one of what Mr. DéZar has referred to as ‘his sponsors,’ and hearing a full explanation.”

“As before, it is now again my pleasure to introduce Miss Kerry Phillips of WMVZ. Miss Phillips...?”

A quick fade to Kerry, standing in the partially cleared living room at 423.

“Good evening, and thank you Mr. President. The extraordinary story that is the DéZars has reached a turning point. A few days ago John DéZar received what

might be termed a 'subliminal hint' that led to his figuring out the immediate reason for his being sent to us. It is a completely surprising reason, one that can only be revealed authoritatively by Mr. DéZar's sponsors themselves. Yesterday he received another subliminal communication asking that they be allowed to make an appearance on television to explain themselves. They gave no further indication of what that would mean, only that a stage be set for them to do so. So we are now here in the living room at 423 Stuart Drive, Hopkinsville, New York, with the expectation that they will arrive, as promised, momentarily. I will therefore now step aside, hoping that such will take place."

She stopped, and after standing still for a moment, exited out of view to the side.

For several seconds, nothing but a somewhat emptied living room filled everyone's television screens.

Then, the lights started to dim. A bright light source appeared, one bright enough to dominate the setting, but not so bright as to blind. In a manner suggestive of a narrator for a PBS special, a disembodied voice began to speak:

"Greetings, and thank you for taking part in this historic contact. What you are viewing on your television screen is an energy field; there is no reason at the moment for us to appear as we do naturally, or to project a particular image, as we can attain many physical forms. We realize that many of those watching

are still skeptical as to the real nature of the DéZars and their reason for being on your world, despite their attempts to keep you informed on their efforts — but, as one of your own kind once said, ‘every fresh truth is received unwillingly. To expect the world to receive a new truth, or even an old truth, without challenging it, is to look for one of those miracles which do not occur.’ So please suspend judgment for a moment; at the end of this short communication we will speak of unassailable evidence that we are who we say we are, and that what you are viewing onscreen is not just some kind of special visual effects trick that your motion picture industry is now so expert at producing.”

Kerry turned to look at Jim, who was also attending. Her eyes transmitted the message “Wow, I guess this is it...!” The voice continued.

“We are a race that has existed for a very long time. We originated on a planet much like yours, and progressed through a process of evolution similar to that which has taken place here, in your place and time. We attained a level of civilization not very different from your current one, and one day were visited by outside beings in the same way you are now being visited. Over the millennia that followed we came to understand that it would be part of our purpose to help other emerging civilizations follow productive paths, and this is what we have been doing now for many eons.”

“It is not our mission to distribute advanced thinking and technology directly, but instead to help ready emerging civilizations for what lies ahead. In this role we help monitor the evolutionary progress of those locations in this galaxy that are on the brink of civilized organization. We have been visiting your Earth regularly since before the beginning of your most recent Ice Ages, and at an ever-increasing rate. This has been to prepare you for the present contact; that is, to give you a chance to process the idea of the possibility of extra-terrestrial life.”

“Again, and to emphasize, we are not here to make presents of advanced thought and technology. The reason for this is that, more than you realize, your own evolution requires not only creative invention, but a social and mental environment prepared to deal with innovation in a productive manner. Thus, we may point the way, but it is not useful in the greater scheme of things for us to make simple donations of our knowledge.”

“Mr. DéZar has been entirely truthful with you. We can now describe to you who he and his family are, and why we chose to approach you through them as we have.”

Kerry’s heart was pounding. Why, this was even better than the final ‘Rosebud’ scene in “Citizen Kane”!

“The DéZars, as they are now aware, are *created* beings. That is to say, we have created them out of the genetic makeup of other species, most of which are

from your own planet. Even with our long experience and considerable knowledge, this was not easy to do. It is important that you understand why we did this.”

“It was our intent to remain unintroduced to you until a critical conceptual advance emerged from within your scientific discovery process. We felt, but were not entirely certain, that its emergence would help to lead you in a fruitful direction. But when it finally happened, it was totally ignored, and because the principle is subtle enough that it might not be rediscovered for another hundred years or more, we became concerned. Your planet may not be able to withstand your domination of it for another hundred years without this special knowledge.”

“About five of your years ago a paper concerning the structure of space was published by a figure of no great reputation in a rather obscure scientific journal. Only a year after its publication the man died in an accident, and only a year after that the scientific journal was forced to cease publication for financial reasons. As near as we can determine no notice whatsoever has been taken of the ideas expressed in the article, ideas which we have every reason to believe are crucial to the future development of your civilization. Under these unusual circumstances, we felt we should act.”

“We were in disagreement among ourselves on how to proceed. Some of us thought your society was still in too undisciplined a state to receive even this particular set of ideas, so we decided to test you. We

reasoned that the appearance of a being in your midst who looked superficially different from yourselves, but who actually incorporated most of your better qualities, would stimulate a response, good or bad, that might help us to decide finally whether to expose the useful idea. We have observed in your response to the DéZars some negative reactions, as we anticipated, but we have also been very impressed with the many positive actions taken, and now appear before you accordingly. If you had been unable to recognize in the DéZars the same good qualities that are in yourselves, merely on the basis of appearance and circumstances, we might not be addressing you now.”

“Further details will be relayed to you by John DéZar, and for now there remains only one act for us to complete. Again, we realize, and accept, that there are still many among you who do not believe that what you are experiencing at this moment is more than technological trickery linked to devious motives. Nevertheless, we now feel obliged to impress upon you how important it is that you explore your new opportunities on your own. Therefore we will provide one further, final, proof that we really are who we say we are. This will take place tomorrow at exactly twelve o’clock noon, New York City time, and last for about three minutes only. To experience the demonstration, which will present no danger to anyone, the observer will merely need to be awake and acting normally. You should find it most instructive. I now leave you.”

The bright light vanished, leaving only an empty living room. No one had really planned for what should happen next.

After several seconds of stunned silence, Kerry figured she probably should do something. Grabbing a mike, she moved from her position directly off-view to the middle of the room. Looking directly into the cameras, she began to speak.

“We at the station had been told by Mr. DéZar that an important event was about to take place, and that we needed to schedule this special interruption, but what we have just witnessed is, is, so fantastic that none of us will ever be the same... As I stated earlier, all of us, including Mr. DéZar, were not informed beforehand exactly what was going to take place, but now that it has...” She stopped, not sure of what to say next. But it came to her quickly.

“...Now that it has, I can only say that I personally feel a great pride for being a member of the human race. Perhaps we are truly on the road to enlightenment...” She paused briefly, realizing it was time to let others take over.

“For an event as momentous as you have just witnessed, there will be discussions and appraisals lasting weeks, months, or possibly forever. For now, however, we will send you back to the studio, where a panel of commentators will offer some initial remarks. To you, Brandon...”

As soon as the transfer was made, Kerry quickly moved back next to DéZar, who not surprisingly was also present. She looked up into his peaceful, intelligent eyes.

“Did you know this was coming?”

“I did not. I merely heeded the telepathic suggestion to ask you to arrange an address.”

“Did you know about the, uh, ‘created being’ thing?”

“Yes. But not until after the investigation of Dr. Plummer was carried out. The reasons for my being, and ‘mission,’ were then explained to me — or perhaps I should say, verified. But I have not been informed about the nature of tomorrow’s demonstration. We will just have to wait and see.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

I'd love to change the world,
But I don't know what to do.
So I'll leave it up to you.

—Ten Years After

Morning the next day broke like any other morning, but word had quickly spread that something very extraordinary — probably even more extraordinary than the events of the preceding evening — was about to take place. Still, there were some questions... Should everyone be inside, or outside? Staring at the sky, or at the television? Should everyone have their phones, or cameras, or whatever, out to record the event? Where was this going to happen? — the voice seemed to imply location didn't matter. What about the half of the world that would be in darkness? Was there really no danger to fear? Some people immediately recalled the scene in the 50s sci-fi movie "The Day the Earth Stood Still" in which the alien visitor shut down the world's electrical grid; such a stunt would certainly not end up being harmless, instead leading to many precarious situations — thousands of airplane crashes, for example.

Unfortunately, the voice from within the light had given observers-to-be just a bit too much lead time before the actual event. Within a few hours, dozens of

entrepreneurial types had set up wagering sites on the Web. Most of these featured a list of projected event-types that one could choose from, and bet on: for example, 'electricity cut off,' 'aliens land everywhere,' 'end of the world,' etc. By mid-morning, billions of dollars of wagers had been placed worldwide. The option that produced the highest odds: 'nothing happens.'

As noon in New York approached, just about every kind of human endeavor ground to a halt. Most people just stopped working, or pulled over along the highway, or sat expectantly in a living room chair, sipping a coffee or munching on a sandwich. Tick-tick-tick... Just seconds away now...

Then, at exactly the time promised, it happened.

All adults — that is to say, every mature human being on Earth — simultaneously began to experience a warm but gentle tingling in their hands. As they all took the cue and looked at their palms, a change in their surrounding environment began to take shape.

Slowly appearing — everywhere on earth, as it developed — an all-surrounding cloud of pulsing puffs of light came into view. Resembling nothing less than a countless legion of large flashing fireflies, the host of many-colored pulses extended up from ground-level to a height of about fifty feet, both inside of structures, and outside. No one save the sightless was going to be able to ignore this! Even those high above, flying in airplanes, could see the effect, far down below them.

Everyone stared in wonder. Some of the more adventurous attempted to reach out and touch the pulses, but the few who were successful experienced no special sensations. And then, after about three minutes, the entire glowing envelope of light just — disappeared.

Billions of people across the planet took in the apparent miracle, and among these reactions ran the gamut. Most observers were simply stunned, thunderstruck. Others had epiphanies of one sort or another, fear- or spiritually-inspired. Yes, they were not alone, whether they liked it or not!

Most of the media had live coverage of the event, and this attention further spread the mass astonishment. ‘Experts’ of various kinds were immediately engaged and interviewed; some opined this must be a miracle of the most unexplainable sort, whereas others of a more logical bent were split on whether some kind of mass hypnosis or other perceptual capture was responsible, or maybe just some unimaginable bending of the laws of physics.

It didn’t take long to debunk the ‘mass illusion’ hypothesis: once video recordings were reviewed, it could be seen that the whole phenomenon was not a psychological illusion — unless, of course, the cameras were somehow also being fooled. No one could imagine how that could be. Those few people who managed to touch one of the pulses reported no ill-effects — in fact no effects whatsoever — leading some

observers to conclude that some kind of holography might be responsible for the whole event.

As with everywhere else, the 'demonstration' immediately monopolized the conversation around 423. But for most of the central characters involved, no further convincing had been needed. At least, regarding the identity of the DéZars. But Kerry still was a bit uneasy. Did she really have the whole picture?

A couple of hours after the 'demonstration,' her phone rang.

"Hello, Kerry here..."

The voice at the other end was friendly, but measured and professional.

"Yeah, hi, it's Yarik. I have that information you were asking for. I've put together a report that sums things up. It's pretty interesting. Would you like me to send it to you as an email attachment?"

"Sure, that will do fine. If I need anything else I'll let you know."

"Great... Say... Did you see that amazing display today? Wasn't it something!?"

Kerry nodded to herself. "Yes, indeed it was. I guess we're in a whole new world."

Yarik did not respond immediately, so she continued on.

"Uh, okay then. 'Talk to you later. Thanks again. Bye!"

She was eager to digest the report, so got on the computer right away.

Yarik turned out to be correct: what she read *was* pretty interesting!

* * * * *

That evening, armed with this new information, Kerry decided it was time to grill John on a few concerns she now had. He was in his study, the door open, looking over various media reports on the day's feature event. She knocked on the doorframe.

He turned around. "Kerry! Come in! What can I do for you? Actually, there are a couple of things I wanted to go over, okay?"

"Sure." She walked in, closing the door behind her.

He could see she was in a serious mood. "You first..." he said.

She pushed her hair back, lightly.

"Well... John. I don't know that you've ever been untruthful with me, but just to make myself feel better I need to ask you once more, directly, did you really not know about any of what has happened until the second 'baby dream'? Also, were you really not informed about the nature of the 'demonstration' beforehand? If there's any change in your story I promise to keep it to myself. I think we owe you that much."

John paused.

"Why are you asking me at this point?"

She swayed her head, just a bit.

"Well, you know me: I'm the suspicious type. It's what makes me a good reporter."

John smiled. "Yes, I know. But you may rest assure that I have told you the truth on these matters."

She nodded. "I'm sorry to have even asked."

John was not entirely sure she believed him. But he was not done.

"I did not entirely understand what has happened until the 'demonstration' either. Have you also put all the pieces together?"

"What do you mean?"

John paused before answering.

"Obviously, I am a messenger: the message is that there are challenges ahead for your civilization, and that for now you cannot expect any further outside help beyond what you have just gotten. Many of your people believe that the 'powers in the universe' fear you — perhaps your nuclear weapons — but this is nonsense. These 'powers' are so far ahead of your capabilities that they certainly are not worried about them. The only thing they worry about is your ability to overcome your own individual and societal tendencies toward selfishness and lack of trust. I was sent to provide a context, using my artificial celebrity to focus attention on a particular theoretical model, and to help publicly introduce themselves. It was a good plan, I think, but it still leaves your future largely up to you."

Kerry nodded. "Yes, I see; I get it. Can we get it together enough to take ourselves seriously..."

"That sums it up, I think."

She sat quietly, apparently trying to decide what to say next. But then it was out.

“There’s something else, though.”

John noted she wasn’t looking directly at him.

“Oh?”

“Yes. I just heard from some people who are working on background for a story I’m preparing. They sent some troubling findings.”

She had his attention. “Oh? Please go on...”

“Well, as soon as we learned about this Jonathan Plummer character and his research, we figured we should put together a story on him. That is, about him, personally.”

“That makes sense.”

“Yes, we all agreed it did. But we weren’t prepared for what we’ve found out.”

“What seems to be the problem?”

“The main thing is, we can find no convincing evidence that an individual named Jonathan Plummer existed before he began his college studies. That’s pretty strange. At first, we figured it might be because he was home-schooled, as a couple of his colleagues at Scranton College recalled when asked about it. And there is a birth certificate, apparently authentic. But then we found there are also no records of either his parents, or supposed sister. None at all, actually.”

John was speechless. Kerry went on.

“The name ‘Plummer’ is not a common name in the United States, but neither is it an especially rare one.

The first documents we have concerning Jonathan Plummer are all from around the same time: his first driver's license, his registration for a social security number, and his SAT scores. A few months later began his correspondence concerning his undergraduate education. The early documents, including a few from the period of his undergraduate education, give a 'home address' in Fresno, California, but our people found this, and the few mentions of his parents, to be deadends. None of the Plummers living in Fresno during that period appear to have any kind of relation to Jonathan and his supposed parents."

"What about electronic records? Any email?"

"No. But that was the late 80s, and people were generally not using email at that point."

"Receipts? Phone records? Utility bills?"

Kerry sighed. "John we had really top people looking into this for us. They could find nothing."

"So what do you think?"

"There don't seem to be that many options. One possibility is that they were in the witness protection program, the whole family. Another is that they deliberately dropped out of sight after committing some crime, or experiencing a major embarrassment."

John cut in with a thought.

"What happened when he died? Who was contacted?"

"Supposedly his parents were already dead. His will expressed a desire to have no ceremony, be cremated,

and have his ashes delivered to, or picked up by, his sister. A woman representing herself as his sister did come to receive his ashes, but after doing so disappeared entirely.”

John was slow to reply.

“Yes. This is very odd. But in the end does it matter much, considering events?”

Kerry puckered up and swayed her head, then replied.

“Maybe, maybe not. I have one more theory...”

“Really...”

“Yes. Are you perhaps John DéZar ‘the Second’...?”

John smiled.

“Interesting. I see your point. But if so, I don’t see that that changes much. It would only mean my sponsors were not going to be defeated in their efforts by an accidental setback.”

She nodded.

They both remained silent for a moment. John then spoke again.

“Now, I have a favor — perhaps the final favor — to ask of you. I have been told that our role in this place and time is about to come to an end. Basically, there is now no point to our remaining here any longer. Our mission has been accomplished, and we are being ‘reclaimed’.” John stopped briefly.

Kerry waited for more.

“So, I would like you to arrange a final television appearance, within the next day or so. I should like to

give my thanks to all of you, including the public. I will need only a very few minutes.”

Kerry wasn't sure what to say. She had not anticipated such an abrupt departure.

“Well, yes, I think we can do this. I'm sorry to hear that you need to go away so quickly. Of course we will set something up...”

John stopped her from going on.

“Thank you. There is one thing more, however...”

Kerry was not sure what to expect next.

“Although I remain truthful that none of the events of the past months have taken place with my prior knowledge, there is yet an additional one that I was only just told about, when I received word of my recall.”

“Yes...?”

“My ‘sponsors,’ as I call them, communicated the knowledge that, despite all appearances, my son Tal is not actually dead.”

“What!?” Kerry certainly had not seen that coming. She raised her hand to her mouth.

“I'm afraid there was, after all, a bit of trickery involved. Again, however, I assure you that Joan and I were not informed of this beforehand.”

“How could this be?”

“There were originally, it appears, five, not four, DéZars. The fifth was a non-consciously-aware clone of Tal, created for just this purpose. Tal's ‘death’ was a ploy to determine what level of sympathy would be generated; in reality, Tal was transported back to

'home,' wherever that is, and is awaiting us there, in a state of suspended animation, and will be awakened when we return. The clone, who never did have conscious awareness, was terminated at the point of transfer to earth."

Kerry was dumbstruck.

"That can just be — done?"

John tilted his head. "Apparently so. If one believes what the 'sponsors' said the other night, they must be many thousands of years ahead of the humans here in terms of their biological, social, and technological evolution. Who can say what kinds of abilities they might have developed over such an extensive period? Professor Tansley has suggested as much in his writings. It would explain the manner of our arrival, the removal of our memories, and the disappearance of the clone's remains."

Kerry was not done being shocked. She nearly shouted at John.

"Still, doesn't that level of manipulation make you furious? Does Joan now know? What about Valla?"

John looked sheepish. "I am not at all pleased by this subterfuge, but I understand why it was felt it should be done. So much was at stake. Joan took the news hard, but she is of course happy to find out that Tal is not actually dead. We have not said anything to Valla yet; there's no point."

Kerry shook her head, astonished. "I can understand that there was a lot at stake, but that level

of manipulation seems a bit too much to be complacent about.”

John nodded. “Perhaps so. But in the end we DéZars are nothing more than we are supposed to be.”

“Still...” She suddenly realized, why did he even tell her about this?

John cut in, anticipating her train of thought.

“I am telling you about this, as a matter of respect. But you must keep this to yourself. Forever. It is a secret you deserve to know, but there can be no useful purpose in letting it become public knowledge. You do understand this, right?”

She nodded. “Yes, of course.”

“Good. Because now there are two further things I need to tell you.”

Kerry blinked. What now?

“Namely...?”

John took a deep breath.

“Again, I have been truthful to you so far, and do not wish to ruin that record. Therefore I must alert you to two further things, one of which happened right at the time we first materialized at 423, and the other concerning information I received only last night.”

Kerry just sat and stared. John began.

“First, the message that awaited us that suggested we find a sponsor... Actually, it had two parts. The second, shorter, part we did not share with you. It suggested we contact you, specifically, first.”

Kerry’s eyes widened. “Really? Why?”

“It didn’t say. It only said not to let you know. I guess the powers must have done some preparatory research of their own.”

Kerry was stunned. She blushed and looked away. “Well, I don’t know what to say...”

There was a pause. Then John continued.

“The second thing... I’m sure you feel you see the whole picture now, and if people think it out they will as well. Clearly the only way to get that paper the recognition it required was to enlist my help. But the outcome was uncertain. It still is.”

“What do you mean?”

John sighed. “I have been informed that the powers anticipated three possible ends to this, uh, campaign. In the worst scenario, a complete rejection of my presence would have forced them to remove us before a spotlight was shone on Dr. Plummer’s paper. Earth would probably have then been left to its own devices.”

Kelly sat quietly. “I see. The cold shoulder.”

John did not respond, instead just continuing.

“The second scenario — including the death of Tal — has just played out. If a real attempt is made to move ahead, perhaps there will be more visitors in the future.”

Kelly broke in. “I’m supposing that accounts for the disappearance of the remains: the sponsors didn’t want to leave any loose ends?”

“Yes, I assume.”

Kelly nodded. "Okay, what of the third scenario?"

John tilted his head and shrugged. "Apparently some of the powers were holding out for a possible full-blown embrace of our presence. There most likely would have been more direct assistance in that eventuality."

"I see. So we're back to 'sink or swim,' after all."

"It looks that way. But with people such as yourself involved, there seems to be hope."

John stood up from his desk, and took a couple of steps toward her. She noticed he was the slightest bit teary-eyed.

"Kerry, in the end I am nothing more than I am supposed to be. You are, by contrast, superb..."

He kissed her lightly on the cheek.

"Are we alright?"

She nodded, and smiled.

"Yes, of course."

* * * * *

John's farewell message was set up for delivery the very next night. It was staged in Hopkinsville, with him sitting by himself on the living room couch at 423. Kerry came on screen first in what looked like a separate studio-shot sequence.

"Good evening. This is Kerry Phillips, WMVZ, New York. I have the great pleasure tonight to introduce for a final time our 'visitor,' John DéZar, from his living room in Hopkinsville, New York. John..."

The scene switched from her to John. He looked casual, but focused.

“Good evening. It is my great pleasure to address you once again, in this instance for the last time. It will be apparent to all of you at this point that my mission has been identified, and executed. I hope that my sponsors have made the correct impression on you; that is, that I have been sent from a remote location by a civilized society that has no intent other than to help you help yourselves. The message and ‘demonstration’ of a few days ago will hopefully have convinced you that you are not alone in the universe, and need not fear that fact.”

“Still, it should be evident that there is work to be done. We have only helped, we hope, to encourage a beginning in that direction.”

“It has been the pleasure and honor of my family and I to take part in this episode in the evolution of your world. Some of the events that our visit has produced have not been happy ones, alas, but as many from your place and time have stated, growing pains are always inevitably connected to progress. There will be further growing pains, I am sure, but this first contact is meant to demonstrate that at the very least you are not an insignificant speck floating through an unfeeling and unresponsive universe.”

“Our job done, my family and I have been recalled to our place of origin. We do not know where that is, but expect we will be welcomed home in good standing.

I have many of your citizens to thank for their hospitality and commitment to our success here, but I must single out Kerry Phillips and her WMVZ colleagues, various groups within the United States government and military, and especially your President Coady, for having the strength of spirit to go along with our wishes for support. In your own words, 'God bless you all.' I also sincerely apologize to those individuals who were adversely affected by our visit, especially the family of Special Agent Greg Towner, who died so heroically protecting my person."

"We thus bid adieu, expecting to leave this place and time tomorrow afternoon."

The living room scene slowly faded out, John still sitting on the sofa, with his hand loosely raised in a 'farewell' position.

Kerry appeared back on screen with a closing.

"We have just seen a farewell message from John DéZar, our first public visitor from another world. Tomorrow at this time WMVZ will host a special discussion, lasting all evening, on the DéZar visit, and what it means. Please join us at that time. Thank you, and thank *you*, John. Good evening."

The return to regular programming had not been very well thought out. After the fade out most stations cut to their news anchor, to begin commentary. On WMVZ, a short scenic video, accompanied by peaceful music, was aired until the next program began.

Kerry's 'studio' had been set up in one of the tents at the Hopkinsville compound. When she was done and able to leave, she walked back over to the house at 423 to spend one last evening there.

* * * * *

The DéZars' removal was scheduled for three p.m. As there was really nothing much left to do, a day-long farewell party, albeit a rather low-key one, was organized. Only the main players were in attendance: Kerry, Jim, HOP, Colonel Raisz and a few of his aides, and the Secret Service group. Tim was there too, but mostly he was engaged in filming the event.

It was strictly a denouement, and they all felt it.

When three o'clock arrived, the three DéZars simply went over to the sofa, sat down, and held hands. Joan looked around, and delivered their last words in their adopted 'place and time':

"Thank you, all of you. It has been our pleasure."

A few moments later a faint glow appeared around them, and they disappeared.

And so, just like that, they were gone.

By and by Tim dropped his camera and looked over at Kerry. "Well!... I wonder where they're actually off to... I guess we don't get to find that out, huh?"

Kerry, a tear in her eye, beamed. "I guess not," she replied, without looking at him. She stood quietly for a moment, but then realized her reply had not quite been equal to the scope of the question. Breaking into

another smile, she turned toward Tim and, looking straight into her dear friend's clear blue eyes, added:
"At least, not yet!"

THE END
