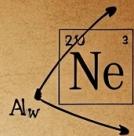


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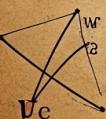


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THE LAST AXIOM

DEREK DEVON



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The Constants

Book 4 of "The Last Axiom" Series
By Derek Devon

A 30 (plus) - Minute Cosmic Experience
Reality Modification Level: Integrated

First Section - "Physics, Friendship, and Other Failing Systems"

Patrick "Rod" Alpaugh had measured the thirteenth green at Riverside Golf Club with the obsessive attention to detail of a man whose world depended on predictable mathematics. Forty-seven measurements over six months—each slope calculation verified, every grain pattern mapped, wind conditions catalogued like weather data. Two-degree slope running northwest to southeast, grass grain flowing perpendicular like microscopic rivers beneath the surface. Optimal green speed holding steady at 10.2 on the stimpmeter, a number he trusted more than his own pulse.

From his current position, the six-foot putt should break exactly 1.3 inches to the left before finding the cup with calculated certainty.

Instead, for seven consecutive days, the ball had rolled straight as a surveyor's line and stopped seventeen inches past the hole with what could only be described as willful mockery.

Seventeen inches. Ideal Pelz speed—optimal roll past the cup if the ball had actually gone in the cup.

"Son of a—" Rod caught himself mid-curse, scanning the empty golf course that stretched around him like a green ocean under Colorado's afternoon sun. At sixty, with fifty-one years of golf carved into his muscle memory, he'd never encountered a putt that violated physics with such cheerful persistence. More troubling still—he'd never desperately needed a simple six-footer to cooperate this badly.

The divorce papers rustled in his golf bag like autumn leaves, their legal finality a constant reminder of yesterday's signatures. Twenty-six years of marriage reduced to asset division and custody schedules, all because Sue couldn't tolerate what she'd called his "obsessive need to quantify everything."

"You treat our marriage like an engineering project, Rod," her words echoed in his memory with painful clarity. "Some problems can't be solved with spreadsheets and formulas."

Well, apparently some putts couldn't be solved with physics either.

Under pressure... pushing down on me, pressing down on you...

Rod froze mid-backswing, his putter suspended like a conductor's baton. Where the hell had that Queen lyric materialized from? He was strictly a Rick Astley devotee—had been since college, much to his friends' endless amusement and occasional horror.

"Focus," he commanded himself, realigning the putt with engineering care for the forty-eighth time. "Ball follows gravity. Gravity follows mathematical principles. Numbers don't lie."

He struck with mechanical precision. The ball rolled in a laser-straight line, stopped exactly seventeen inches past the hole, and somehow projected an aura of satisfaction that made Rod consider having a stern conversation with Isaac Newton's ghost.

"This is impossible," Rod informed his golf ball, which remained supremely unbothered by accusations of physical impossibility.

Rod's phone buzzed against his hip, the vibration cutting through his contemplation of physics-defying golf equipment. Duke's text message appeared with typical urgency: Emergency meeting. Brewhouse. Something weird is happening.

Rod glanced at his golf ball, still sitting seventeen inches past the hole in blatant defiance of Newton's fundamental laws. "You have no idea, my friend."

Twenty minutes earlier, across town, Jeff "Duke" Lukas had experienced what he was already thinking of as The Great Coffee Shop Catastrophe of his otherwise charming life. Duke had always prided himself on reading people like sheet music—every subtle note, every meaningful pause, every delicate harmony that revealed whether someone was leaning in with interest or pulling away in polite retreat.

At sixty-two, his silver-haired distinction and natural charisma had carried him through thirty years at Domino's, rising to Head of Regional Franchise Development, a surprisingly enjoyable decade of post-divorce bachelor adventures, and countless business situations where knowing exactly what to say could mean the difference between signing a franchise agreement or watching a deal walk out the door.

Which made this morning's linguistic disaster all the more devastating to his professional pride.

"I like your... hammer time... coffee choice," he'd announced to the attractive barista, his signature confident head-tilt somehow triggering a catastrophic malfunction in his usually reliable brain. "Very... can't touch this... sophisticated blend selection."

The poor woman had stared at him with the expression typically reserved for people suffering minor strokes or major personality disorders.

Duke had tried to recover, his corporate instincts screaming damage control protocols. "What I meant to say was—" His mouth betrayed him again. "Stop, collaborate and listen—your espresso looks excellent today."

The barista's professional smile had frozen into something closer to concern. She'd made his latte in pointed silence and slid it across the counter like evidence in a criminal trial, her eyes darting toward what was probably a panic button behind the register.

Duke had fled with whatever dignity he could salvage, which wasn't much.

Now, twenty minutes later, sitting in his Mercedes in the parking lot, Duke replayed the disaster with the kind of mortification usually reserved for teenage boys after their first catastrophically failed romantic gesture. He was Head of Regional Franchise Development for Domino's Pizza. Words were his currency, his craft, his art form. He'd spent three decades convincing entrepreneurs to invest hundreds of thousands of dollars based on his ability to communicate value, vision, and opportunity. And he'd just paid for coffee by involuntarily quoting MC Hammer and Vanilla Ice like some kind of linguistic slot machine permanently stuck on 1990 hip-hop.

"Stress," Duke told his reflection in the rearview mirror. "Just stress from the Henderson franchise negotiations. Nothing to worry about."

He rehearsed normal conversation, the way he might practice a pitch before meeting with potential franchisees. "Hello, how are you today?"

What emerged from his mouth: "Ice ice baby, too cold, too cold."

Duke's hands tightened on the steering wheel until his knuckles went white.

This wasn't stress. This wasn't fatigue. This was something fundamentally wrong with reality itself.

His phone's urgent ring provided blessed interruption from his spiral of mortification. Rod's name glowed on the caller ID like a lighthouse beacon cutting through dense fog.

"Duke, where are you?" Rod's voice carried the strained patience of someone whose universe had recently abandoned all pretense of logical behavior. "I'm heading to the Brewhouse now, and Scrott's already there documenting whatever cosmic practical joke is being systematically played on us."

"I'm in the parking lot practicing normal human conversation," Duke replied with the hollow dignity of someone whose legendary social skills had been repeatedly sabotaged by forces beyond mortal comprehension. "Apparently I can't even ask someone about dinner plans without unconsciously channeling Vanilla Ice. Rod, this is getting genuinely terrifying."

"Duke, we need to compare notes," Rod said, his engineering mind recognizing patterns that suggested their individual impossibilities might be connected. "Something's happening to all of us, and I think it's bigger than malfunctioning putts and involuntary MC Hammer references."

"You're experiencing weird stuff too?" Duke asked, relief evident in his voice as he realized he might not be suffering a total psychological breakdown in isolation.

"My golf ball has been defying basic physics for a week," Rod confirmed. "Today it rolled straight past a hole it should have curved into. Forty-seven times. The calculations don't lie, but apparently gravity has started taking creative liberties with Newton's fundamental laws."

"At least golf balls can't embarrass you in front of attractive women," Duke replied. "I'm afraid to speak to anyone under fifty for fear of accidentally proposing marriage in rap lyrics."

"Come inside," Rod said. "Scrott's got theories, and I suspect you're going to want to hear them. Plus, maybe if we pool our impossibilities, we can figure out what's systematically rewriting the rules of reality."

Inside the Brewhouse, Scott "Scrott" MacDonald had covered seventeen notebook pages with observations that would've seemed like elaborate conspiracy theories to casual observers. But Rod and Duke had learned years ago that Scrott's artistic mind detected patterns in chaos the way other people recognized familiar faces—an intuitive gift that had made him a sought-after session musician before life convinced him that predictable paychecks were more sensible than creative uncertainty.

"What's he documenting?" Duke called out as he spotted Scrott's concentrated form through the window.

"Everything," Scrott's voice came from inside the establishment. "Charts, Duke. Color-coded charts with cross-references and what appears to be a comprehensive timeline of impossible events."

Rod pushed through the Brewhouse's heavy wooden door, the familiar scent of craft beer and friendly conversation providing welcome normalcy after his morning of physics-defying golf equipment. "Scrott, please tell me you've discovered a logical explanation for why reality seems to be malfunctioning on multiple fronts."

"Define logical," Scrott replied without looking up from his meticulous documentation. "But I've definitely discovered patterns. Sit down, both of you, and prepare to have your remaining faith in causality systematically challenged."

Scrott spread his seventeen notebooks across the scarred wooden table with the meticulous care of an archaeologist unveiling artifacts. Each page bristled with color-coded tabs, cross-references, and handwriting so meticulous it could've passed for printed text. "Okay, gentlemen, prepare to have your remaining faith in random chance systematically dismantled."

Rod and Duke exchanged the kind of glance that only decades of friendship could convey—equal parts concern and curiosity, with just a hint of *here we go again*.

"Rod, your golf ball stops exactly seventeen inches past the hole. Every. Single. Time." Scrott tapped a chart where he'd plotted forty-eight attempts in different colors based on wind conditions, temperature, and time of day. "Seventeen. Prime number. Mathematically significant in ways that should make an engineer very uncomfortable."

"I'm already uncomfortable," Rod muttered, studying the chart with growing unease. The pattern was undeniable—flawless consistency where chaos should reign.

"Duke, your involuntary musical quotations." Scrott flipped to another section, this one decorated with what appeared to be a comprehensive discography timeline. "Started Tuesday morning, nine days ago. First incident at 7:23 AM when you ordered breakfast."

"With a little help from my friends," Duke confirmed, the memory making him wince. "Beatles. I don't even like the Beatles. Too experimental in the later albums, not enough focus on melody."

"Here's what makes it fascinating." Scrott's finger traced connections between songs like a detective linking evidence. "The songs aren't random. They're all from specific decades—70s, 80s, 90s. And they all share thematic elements about communication, connection, or cosmic awareness. Queen's 'Under Pressure.' Bowie's 'Space Oddity.' Even the MC Hammer incident—'U Can't Touch This'—has implications about boundaries and untouchable forces."

Rod leaned forward, his engineering brain engaging with the pattern recognition. "You're suggesting intentional selection? But how does that connect to my golf ball defying physics?"

"Seventeen inches," Scrott repeated. "Prime number. You've documented forty-eight total measurements over six months, correct?"

"Correct."

"Four times eleven." Scrott wrote the equation in the margin of his notebook. "Eleven is prime. Four represents dimensional space in conventional physics. The number forty-seven keeps appearing in my research too—I've documented forty-seven separate anomalous events in online forums over the past three weeks."

Duke's social intelligence was catching up to where Scrott's artistic intuition had already arrived. "You're saying someone is embedding mathematical signatures into impossible events? Like leaving calling cards?"

"I'm saying," Scrott met both their eyes with uncommon seriousness, "that we're being contacted. And whoever or whatever is reaching out is using a language we can understand—music for you, Duke. Mathematics for you, Rod. And patterns for me because they somehow know that's how my brain processes information."

The three friends sat in weighted silence, the Brewhouse's ambient noise fading to background static as the implications settled over them like snow.

"Contacted by what?" Rod finally asked, though part of him already suspected the answer would redefine everything he understood about the universe.

Scrott flipped to his final page, where he'd written in careful block letters: **NOT ALONE.**

The word hung in the air between them like morning fog refusing to burn off under Colorado sun. **NOT ALONE.**

"You're talking about aliens," Duke said, his legendary social intelligence struggling to frame this conversation in any remotely normal context.

"Extraterrestrial intelligence using golf balls and song lyrics to make first contact with three sixty-year-old guys in Colorado who are collectively having the world's strangest midlife crisis."

"I'm talking about intelligence," Scrott corrected, his musician's care demanding accurate terminology. "The origin matters less than the intention. And the intention seems unmistakable—they want us to notice the patterns. They want us to compare notes. They want us to understand we're experiencing coordinated impossibilities, not random malfunctions."

Rod's lighter appeared in his hand—a nervous habit he'd picked up from watching Derek Devon's viral interview three months ago, the one where the astrophysicist had calmly explained that reality modification was not only possible but actively occurring. Rod didn't smoke, never had, but something about the mechanical click-click-click helped his engineering brain process impossible information.

"The probability of three friends experiencing separate reality anomalies simultaneously—" Rod started.

"Approaches zero," Scrott finished. "Which means either we've collectively won the universe's worst lottery, or someone with access to physics we can't comprehend is deliberately orchestrating these events to capture our specific attention."

"But why us?" Duke spread his hands in genuine bewilderment, his Domino's-honed persuasion skills finding no purchase in this situation. "We're not scientists. We're not government officials with security clearances. I spend my days convincing entrepreneurs that pizza delivery is a sound investment. Rod obsesses over grass grain patterns. Scrott plays 'Brown Eyed Girl' at wedding receptions for drunk uncles. What could we possibly offer to beings capable of rewriting fundamental physics?"

The question hung unanswered.

Then, with flawless comedic timing that would've gotten laughs in any comedy club, every television screen in the Brewhouse flickered simultaneously.

The Broncos game vanished. The news anchor disappeared mid-sentence about municipal parking regulations. Even the muted music video station playing in the corner cut to black for precisely two seconds.

When the screens lit again, they all displayed the same image.

A music video. Familiar synthesizers. Distinctive vocals.

Rick Astley. "Never Gonna Give You Up."

The full, unedited, gloriously cheesy 1987 music video in all its trench-coat-and-warehouse splendor.

Duke started laughing—the kind of laughter that carries equal parts disbelief and dawning comprehension, with just a touch of hysteria seasoning the edges. "Are we being Rickrolled by aliens?"

"Not aliens," Rod said quietly, his eyes fixed on the screen where Rick Astley danced with immortal earnestness. "Intelligence. Just like Scott said. And apparently intelligence with a sense of humor and detailed knowledge of human internet culture."

The bartender reached for the remote, clearly intending to switch back to the game that had sixteen invested patrons and several hundred dollars in active bets depending on the outcome.

The remote didn't respond.

She pressed buttons with increasing urgency, then confusion, then the dawning realization that something was genuinely wrong with equipment that had worked flawlessly thirty seconds ago.

On every screen, Rick Astley promised never to give them up, never to let them down, never to run around and desert them.

Scrott was already documenting in his notebook, his hand moving across the page with practiced efficiency. "Time: 2:47 PM. Duration of anomaly: ongoing. Number of affected screens: eleven. Public witnesses: approximately twenty-three. This is different from our previous isolated incidents."

"This is a demonstration," Rod breathed, understanding crystallizing. "They're not just contacting us anymore. They're showing us they can affect technology publicly, predictably, and apparently with deliberate reference to cultural phenomena we'd recognize."

Duke had stopped laughing. His face carried the expression of someone whose worldview was undergoing rapid and involuntary renovation. "The song choice isn't random either. 'Never gonna give you up.' 'Never gonna let you down.' That's not just a Rickroll. That's a message."

"A promise," Scrott added softly, still writing. "Whoever or whatever is doing this wants us to know they're committed. Reliable. That they won't abandon us once contact is established."

On every screen in the Brewhouse, Rick Astley continued his eternal dance, his digital form now carrying implications that extended far beyond 1980's pop music nostalgia.

Someone at the bar muttered, "What the hell is wrong with the cable?"

Everything, Rod thought. And also nothing.

Reality was working exactly as intended.

Just not in ways anyone had prepared for.

As if responding directly to his unspoken question with flawless comedic timing, the Brewhouse's audio system crackled to life with Journey's "Don't Stop Believin"—Steve Perry's distinctive voice filling the bar with promises about small-town girls and city boys living in lonely worlds.

The bartender, Michelle, frowned at the suddenly functional sound system and reached for her equipment log.

"That's weird," she muttered to no one in particular. "I unplugged that for maintenance two hours ago."

Rod, Duke, and Scrott exchanged knowing glances across their table. Another impossibility to add to the collection.

"Well," Scrott said, making a final notation in his comprehensive journal with the careful penmanship of someone creating a historical document, "at least our mysterious cosmic DJ demonstrates genuinely excellent taste in classic rock selections. Could be worse. Could be polka."

"Tomorrow," Rod announced, his voice carrying the decisive tone he'd once reserved for critical engineering project deadlines and important construction milestones, "we start documenting this properly with actual scientific methodology. If something's systematically rewriting the fundamental laws of physics, we're going to figure out exactly what it is and how it operates."

"And more importantly," Duke added with the characteristic pragmatism that had made him successful in franchise development, "we're going to figure out how to make it stop before I accidentally propose marriage in Klingon or inadvertently declare my undying love using Backstreet Boys lyrics at a board meeting."

The Journey song faded, replaced by Simple Minds without any visible input from the still-unplugged audio system.

Don't you forget about me...

This time the shared musical intrusion felt distinctly different—less like unwanted mental invasion and more like a gentle promise, or perhaps a cosmic reminder whispered across impossible distances. Whatever was happening to them, they weren't facing these impossible challenges alone.

Rod's lighter clicked three times. Duke checked his phone one more time, half-expecting another unauthorized music video. Scrott closed his notebook with careful reverence, already planning where he'd acquire the additional documentation supplies they'd need.

As they prepared to leave their familiar sanctuary—this booth where they'd solved the world's problems over craft beer and wings for fifteen years—none of them noticed how their natural laughter seemed to harmonize perfectly with the mysterious music still emanating from the unplugged radio system. None of them perceived how their fifteen-year friendship had somehow begun resonating with frequencies that existed far beyond the normal range of human experience, stretching into realms that connected consciousness across vast distances.

But something vast and patient and genuinely fascinated by human potential was definitely noticing them. Cataloging their responses with cosmic attention to detail. Recording how they reacted to impossibility with humor rather than fear, with curiosity rather than denial, with friendship rather than isolation.

And that something was preparing to make contact in ways that would fundamentally transform their understanding of what friendship could become when enhanced by universal perspective.

Outside the Brewhouse, autumn evening settled over Colorado with predictable beauty—stars emerging in familiar constellations, traffic flowing in normal patterns, reality continuing its ordinary progression.

But for three friends walking to their cars with notebooks full of impossible documentation, the constants were changing.

The question was whether the best parts of being human—loyalty, humor, the willingness to face impossible things together—would remain beautifully constant even as everything else transformed.

Section 2: "Scientific Method Meets Cosmic Comedy"

Dawn transformed Riverside Golf Club into Rod's personal physics laboratory, morning mist rising from immaculately manicured fairways like steam from some cosmic experiment awaiting results. The October sunrise painted everything in shades of amber and rose, creating the kind of beauty that should have provided peace but instead served as backdrop to systematic reality failure.

Rod had arrived before sunrise with enough precision measuring equipment to survey a small asteroid—professional-grade inclinometer borrowed from a surveying colleague who'd asked no questions about why it was needed, laser rangefinder accurate to microscopic tolerances, and a digital level that had cost more than most people's monthly mortgage payments. The equipment cases spread across the thirteenth green like a physicist's toolkit prepared for war against malfunctioning natural laws.

If the fundamental laws of physics were systematically malfunctioning, he intended to document exactly how they were failing—and possibly compose a strongly worded letter to Isaac Newton's ghost.

"This feels like massive overkill," Duke observed, watching Rod calibrate instruments with the methodical intensity of someone preparing to launch a space mission rather than analyze problematic six-foot putts.

"Science demands absolute accuracy," Rod replied, adjusting his tripod-mounted laser with surgical care that would've impressed any research laboratory. "If gravity is rewriting its own operational manual, we need bulletproof measurements to document the rebellion. Besides, after yesterday's Brewhouse revelations about widespread reality dysfunction, I desperately need something that operates according to predictable laws."

His hands moved with practiced efficiency, but Duke noticed the slight tremor—not from age or nerves, but from someone whose fundamental understanding of how the universe worked had been thoroughly undermined in the past seventy-two hours.

"Speaking of unpredictable phenomena," Scrott said, settling onto a nearby bench with his ever-present observation journal and a fresh coffee that steamed in the cool morning air, "I documented twelve additional incidents during my drive here this morning. Including a Starbucks customer who unconsciously ordered her 'smooth criminal' latte with 'billie jean' foam art—entirely without awareness of the musical integration."

Duke's eyebrows climbed toward his hairline with familiar alarm. "Please tell me you're fabricating that example for dramatic effect."

"She tipped the barista and cheerfully declared 'just beat it,'" Scrott confirmed with the matter-of-fact tone of someone recording daily miracles that everyone else ignored. "The barista didn't even register the strangeness. I think he assumed she was having an intentional Michael Jackson tribute morning. Nobody questions anything anymore if it sounds vaguely familiar."

"Or everyone's experiencing it but not talking about it," Duke suggested quietly. "Maybe we're not special. Maybe we're just the only ones willing to admit something's wrong."

Rod completed his elaborate scientific setup and positioned a fresh Titleist at the now-infamous testing location—site of forty-seven previous attempts that had consistently challenged his faith in universal constants. "Baseline

measurements confirmed and locked. Green speed holding steady at 10.2 on the stimpmeter. Slope calculating at 2.4 degrees downhill with 1.8-degree break toward the target. Wind conditions negligible at point-three miles per hour. If I execute this putt with precisely 4.2 feet per second velocity..."

He paused, took a breath, and executed the stroke with textbook Pelz form.

His putter followed a flawless mechanical arc that would have impressed Ben Hogan. The ball rolled in a perfectly straight line—totally ignoring the carefully measured slope—stopped exactly seventeen inches past the hole, and somehow managed to project an aura of smugness that made Rod want to have a stern conversation with several theoretical physicists.

"That's scientifically impossible," Duke stated with the flat certainty of someone watching the laws of nature file for divorce and divide the gravitational assets.

"Unless gravity has developed a wicked sense of humor," Scrott observed, scribbling furiously in his observation journal. "Rod, try putting to an entirely different hole."

"Maybe it's not the yips anymore," Duke added with growing fascination mixed with concern. "Maybe it's the quips—the universe making jokes at your expense, one impossible putt at a time."

"Hilarious," Rod replied dryly, gathering his ball and precision instruments with the careful movements of someone refusing to throw expensive equipment in frustration. He relocated to a section of green with no discernible slope, placed the ball on what his digital level confirmed was completely flat ground—zero degrees in all directions—and executed another textbook putt.

The ball rolled in a laser-straight line for a mind boggling umpteenth time, the same six feet before stopping abruptly, as if it had collided with an invisible wall that existed only in its own personal physics textbook.

"The distance remains predictably consistent," Rod noted, his engineering mind compulsively cataloging the impossibility even as it violated everything he'd learned in four decades of applied physics. "But it's totally ignoring the green's actual topography. It's behaving as if it's rolling across a completely flat surface regardless of reality's inconvenient hills and valleys."

Under pressure... pushing down on me, pressing down on you...

The Queen lyrics materialized in Rod's consciousness like someone had installed a jukebox directly into his brain's auditory processing center.

"There it is again," Rod muttered, his frustration mounting as his hands tightened on his putter. "Why Queen? I don't even like Queen. I'm more of a Rick Astley devotee, much to everyone's endless amusement."

"Maybe the universe is trying to communicate something profound," Duke suggested, his voice carrying the careful tone of someone offering philosophical consolation to an increasingly agitated engineer. "You know—pressure, stress, defiant putts that systematically defy the fundamental laws of physics. There might be thematic relevance we're missing."

"Or maybe the universe has absolutely terrible taste in music," Rod replied, already positioning another ball with the stubborn determination of someone who refused to let reality win without a proper scientific fight.

But as he lined up his next shot, all three friends noticed something that made their previous impossibilities seem almost mundane by comparison.

Rod's shadow on the green wasn't matching his actual position.

While Rod stood directly over the ball, his shadow appeared to be putting from three feet to the left, moving in perfect synchronization with his actions but from an entirely different location. The shadow-Rod bent when real-Rod bent. Took his putting stance when real-Rod did. Drew the putter back in flawless coordination.

But the shadow was doing it all from the wrong position entirely, as if light had decided Newton's laws about straight-line propagation were merely suggestions open to creative interpretation.

"Okay," Scrott said with admirable composure, carefully documenting what defied documentation. "I'm officially adding 'impossible shadow geometry' to my research findings. Anyone want to predict what's next? Maybe our reflections start having independent opinions? Perhaps Rod's golf ball develops sentience and files for emancipation?"

As if directly summoned by Scrott's words—because apparently the universe was now taking requests—the morning air around their golf course position began to ripple and fold with purposeful energy. The distortions created impossible geometric patterns that looked distinctly like Peter Gabriel's "Sledgehammer" video: all clay animation physics, surreal stop-motion transformations, and imagery that belonged in avant-garde art galleries rather than Colorado golf courses at dawn.

Rod's shadow continued its independent putting performance three feet to the left while these new impossibilities layered on top of the old ones like reality was being rewritten in real-time by a cosmic video editor with unlimited special effects budget.

"I take that back immediately," Scrott said with sudden urgency, his musician's instincts recognizing dangerous aesthetic territory. "Peter Gabriel is perfectly acceptable as a musical artist, but absolutely no Sledgehammer sequences. That video disturbed me on multiple psychological levels and I have no desire to see golf equipment transformed into dancing fruit."

The rippling stopped instantly—mid-distortion, as if someone had pressed pause on the universe's remote control.

Then it shifted.

The air around them transformed into something that resembled Duran Duran's "Rio"—all tropical colors, beautiful impossibility, and visual poetry that somehow made the golf course feel like an exotic vacation destination designed by cosmic artists who'd studied human aesthetics and decided to improve on them.

Palm trees that weren't actually there cast shadows that were. Water that existed only visually created reflections that moved independently. The whole scene carried the distinctive quality of an 80s music video filtered through technology that understood human culture but approached it from an entirely alien perspective.

"Much better," Scrott approved with genuine gratitude, his artistic sensibilities satisfied by the aesthetic upgrade. "Thank you, mysterious 80s-obsessed cosmic intelligence. I appreciate your responsiveness to constructive feedback."

Duke stared at the shifting patterns with the expression of someone whose reality had just been redecorated by a particularly sophisticated alien interior designer with impeccable taste and unlimited access to impossible visual effects. "Did... did it just respond directly to Scrott's specific aesthetic preferences? Like, immediately and precisely?"

"I believe it did," Rod said slowly, his analytical mind struggling to process phenomena that belonged more in music videos than physics textbooks. "Which raises some genuinely fascinating questions about the intelligence level and responsiveness of whatever's orchestrating these manifestations. It's not just broadcasting at us. It's listening. Adjusting. Responding to feedback in real-time."

The Rio-inspired patterns began to coalesce into more definite forms—figures made of light and color and mathematical elegance. They moved with the fluid grace of pencil sketches being drawn by invisible hands, their movements carrying the unmistakable quality of beings attempting to bridge communication gaps between entirely different dimensional realities.

One of them—a tall, impossibly elegant figure that somehow evoked David Bowie's "Let's Dance" era with flawless visual accuracy—extended a pencil-sketch finger and pointed directly at Rod's golf ball with deliberate significance.

The gesture was unmistakable: *This. Pay attention to this.*

Don't you forget about me...

This time the shared musical intrusion arrived with full cinematic accompaniment that made the previous manifestations seem like rough drafts. Vivid flashes of the Simple Minds video materialized around them like fragments of someone else's memory made visible and three-dimensional. Empty hallways stretched toward infinity, filled with running figures whose faces carried expressions of desperate urgency, as if they were racing against time itself to deliver a message of cosmic importance.

The figures reached toward them across impossible distances, their pencil-sketch hands extending through dimensions that shouldn't exist.

"Okay," Rod said with the careful deliberation of an engineer forced to acknowledge phenomena that existed far beyond the comfortable boundaries of technical specifications, "I think someone or something is definitely attempting to establish meaningful communication with us. This isn't random. This isn't malfunction. This is contact."

"The critical questions remain," Scrott replied, sketching frantically in his observation journal with the focused intensity of someone trying to document the impossible before it disappeared into wherever impossible things went when they finished their performances. His artistic training allowed him to capture details that his friends might miss—the way the sketch figures moved with mathematical elegance, how their hand-drawn world seemed to operate according to different physical laws entirely, the subtle symbols they traced in the air that looked almost like writing in a language humans hadn't learned yet.

"What exactly are they trying to communicate?" Scrott continued, his pen moving rapidly across the page. "Who or what are they? And why us specifically?"

"And why," Duke added, his voice carrying equal parts fascination and growing alarm, "are they using eighties music videos as their primary communication protocol? I mean, don't get me wrong, I appreciate the cultural references, but this feels like first contact being conducted by someone whose understanding of human civilization comes entirely from MTV's golden age."

The pencil-sketch Bowie figure gestured again, this time toward the morning sky, where faint geometric patterns had begun to appear—not drawn in the air exactly, but somehow existing in the space between air and vision, visible only when viewed from precisely the right angle with exactly the right mental state.

Rod's analytical mind engaged automatically, the way it always did when confronted with problems that demanded systematic analysis. "The patterns appear to be mathematical in nature. Possibly some form of coordinate system or navigational reference. Those angles... they're not random. They're precise. Deliberate."

His engineering training catalogued the geometry even as his worldview struggled to accommodate beings who communicated through impossible shadows and 80s music video aesthetics.

Before anyone could respond to his observation, Rod's phone rang with the distinctive tone he'd programmed for unknown but potentially important contacts—a sound that immediately shifted the atmosphere from cosmic wonder back to more familiar earthly concerns.

Three friends exchanged glances. The pencil-sketch figures paused in their movements, as if they too were curious about this mundane interruption.

Rod pulled out his phone. Unknown number. Colorado area code.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Alpaugh?" The voice was distinctly female, professionally warm, with just a hint of an accent he couldn't quite place—possibly Boston, possibly academic, definitely intelligent. "My name is Dr. Roberta Dorsey. I'm a quantum systems researcher with MIT, and I understand you've been experiencing some... unusual phenomena lately."

Rod glanced at his friends, both of whom were still watching pencil-sketch figures perform what looked like interpretive dance in the shimmering air around them. Duke had his phone out, recording everything. Scrott was sketching furiously.

"You could definitely say that," Rod replied, his voice carefully neutral. "How did you get this number?"

"That's a longer conversation," Dr. Dorsey said. "I'm currently in the area conducting field research on quantum anomalies. Would it be possible to meet in person? I believe what you're experiencing may be directly connected to some global phenomena we've been tracking for several weeks."

"Global anomalies?" Rod's engineering mind immediately shifted into problem-solving mode, though part of him was still watching impossible figures dance in impossible light.

"Mr. Alpaugh, you're absolutely not alone in experiencing these impossible events. Similar incidents are being reported simultaneously worldwide—forty-seven confirmed cases so far, all sharing common elements. Mathematical elegance. Cultural references. And all starting approximately two weeks ago." She paused. "I'd very much like to speak with you and your friends about what you've observed. Compare notes. Maybe help each other understand what's happening."

Forty-seven cases. The same number Scrott had documented independently.

Rod found himself agreeing to meet at the golf club's parking lot in twenty minutes, though he wasn't entirely certain why the agreement felt so natural. Something about Dr. Dorsey's voice suggested she might actually possess answers to questions they hadn't even learned how to ask yet.

"We'll be there," Rod said.

"Thank you, Mr. Alpaugh. I think this conversation is going to be very important for all of us."

The call ended.

The pencil-sketch figures faded like morning mist under rising sun, but not before the Bowie-figure offered what looked distinctly like an encouraging thumbs-up.

"Well," Duke said, still recording on his phone, "at least someone thinks we're doing the right thing. Even if that someone is apparently a cosmic being who communicates through David Bowie gestures."

Rod stared at the spot where the figures had been, then at his golf ball still sitting seventeen inches past the hole in defiance of every law he'd ever trusted.

"Gentlemen," he said quietly, "I think we're about to find out if we're crazy, or if the universe is."

"Or both," Scrott added helpfully, closing his notebook. "Both remains a viable option."

"Someone who apparently possesses detailed knowledge about our impossible situation," Rod replied, his engineering mind already cataloging the implications of mysterious phone calls arriving with suspiciously perfect timing. "Dr. Roberta Dorsey. Quantum systems researcher. She's driving here to meet us in twenty minutes."

"Excellent," Scrott said with genuine enthusiasm, continuing his meticulous documentation while pencil-sketch figures performed what could only be described as interpretive dance in the shimmering air around his head. "Maybe she can provide scientific explanations for why we're apparently living inside an elaborate 80s music video compilation directed by someone with unlimited special effects budget and questionable taste in metaphors."

Duke was staring at the spot where the Bowie-figure had given its cosmic thumbs-up. "Did anyone else notice that our interdimensional correspondents seem remarkably well-informed about our phone conversations? Like they knew Dr. Dorsey would call before she actually did?"

"Added to the list of disturbing observations," Scrott confirmed, making another note. "Along with 'responds to aesthetic criticism' and 'has strong opinions about Peter Gabriel videos.'"

The visual anomalies began to fade as they collected Rod's precision measuring equipment, the sketch figures dissolving back into ordinary morning air like dreams reluctantly surrendering to consciousness. Whatever cosmic intelligence was orchestrating their experiences seemed to understand that serious scientific consultation required fewer visual distractions.

Or perhaps it simply wanted them clear-headed and focused when Dr. Dorsey arrived with whatever explanations—or new impossibilities—she was bringing.

Rod carefully packed his laser rangefinder, digital level, and inclinometer back into their cases with the methodical care of someone using familiar tasks to process fundamentally unfamiliar reality. His golf ball—the seventeen-inch-defying little sphere of physics rebellion—sat on the green like evidence waiting to testify in the trial of Newton's Laws versus Cosmic Impossibility.

"Should we tell her everything?" Duke asked quietly as they walked toward the parking lot. "The shadow that didn't match position, the figures made of music video aesthetics, the fact that reality seems to be taking requests like a cosmic DJ?"

"She mentioned quantum field fluctuations and shared visual hallucinations," Rod pointed out. "I think she already knows more than we do. The question is whether she has any idea what to do about it."

Section 3: "Professional Consultation with Benefits"

Twenty minutes later, almost to the second—because apparently punctuality was universal even among quantum researchers tracking impossible phenomena—they watched a sleek black SUV with government plates pull into Riverside Golf Club's parking lot with the kind of purposeful elegance that suggested its driver was accustomed to arriving at unusual situations with professional equipment and ready explanations.

The woman who emerged looked exactly like someone who might have stepped directly from a sophisticated Duran Duran video—elegant and professionally mysterious, probably mid-forties, with dark hair pulled back in a practical ponytail that somehow managed to look both scientific and stylish. She carried herself with an air of controlled competence that suggested she dealt with impossible phenomena as part of her regular Tuesday morning routine. She carried what appeared to be some form of advanced scientific equipment, devices that hummed with barely contained energy and looked expensive enough to purchase small countries.

Rod found himself standing a bit straighter, unconsciously smoothing his golf shirt. Duke noticed and grinned. Scrott pretended not to notice but made a small note in his journal.

"Gentlemen," Dr. Dorsey said as she approached their small group, her voice carrying the warm authority of someone who had spent considerable time explaining impossible things to skeptical audiences while maintaining the patience of a teacher who genuinely enjoyed watching understanding dawn on confused faces. "I'm Dr. Roberta Dorsey. Thank you for agreeing to meet under these rather extraordinary circumstances."

"Dr. Dorsey," Rod replied, noting how her presence seemed to cause the residual atmospheric shimmering to organize itself into more stable patterns, as if her scientific training somehow encouraged better behavior from whatever cosmic forces were redecorating their reality. "You mentioned something about global anomalies during our phone conversation?"

"Indeed I did." She gestured toward the morning air, where faint geometric patterns still lingered like mathematical ghosts refusing to fade entirely. "What you're experiencing here—the gravitational inconsistencies, the linguistic anomalies, the shared consciousness events—they're all components of a coordinated worldwide phenomenon that's been systematically manifesting for several weeks."

"You can actually observe the visual manifestations too?" Duke asked, his voice carrying equal measures of relief and growing alarm. "The music video sequences and pencil-sketch figures that apparently respond to art criticism?"

"I can detect quantum field fluctuations that are manifesting as shared visual hallucinations based on familiar cultural reference points," Dr. Dorsey confirmed with scientific care that somehow made the impossible sound almost reasonable. "Your minds are interpreting cosmic modifications through the lens of 1980's popular culture. It's actually quite sophisticated—using recognizable imagery to prevent psychological

rejection of fundamentally impossible phenomena. Think of it as reality modification with training wheels. Or perhaps cosmic communication designed by beings who studied human psychology and determined that music videos were our most accessible universal language."

She gestured toward what appeared to be an ordinary food truck parked with deceptive casualness at the edge of the parking lot, its exterior suggesting nothing more exotic than gourmet sandwiches and overpriced coffee. The sign read "Cosmic Burgers and Quantum Coffee" in cheerful letters that now seemed less like whimsical branding and more like truth in advertising.

Inside, however, was some of the most sophisticated scientific equipment Rod had ever encountered—banks of monitors displaying real-time quantum data, field detectors that hummed with barely contained energy, and devices that looked like they belonged in NASA mission control rather than a mobile lunch venue.

"Impressive camouflage," Scrott observed, his musician's eye appreciating the aesthetic deception.

"The health department permit is legitimate," Dr. Dorsey replied with deadpan care. "We actually make excellent breakfast burritos when we're not tracking modifications to fundamental physical constants."

"I would like you to meet my team members and research assistants, Duncan Stanbury and Kevin Smith. Duncan is an MIT grad and Kevin attended Stanford and used to work at Google."

Duncan—a thin man in his thirties with wire-rimmed glasses and the enthusiastic energy of someone who loved his work—waved from behind a particularly impressive array of monitors. Kevin, older and more reserved, offered a professional nod while continuing to calibrate something that looked like it measured things humans hadn't invented words for yet.

Everyone exchanged brief pleasantries and Rod, Scrott and Duke began their visual inspection of all the gear, their combined expertise in engineering, music, and salesmanship giving them unique perspectives on technology designed to measure the impossible.

"This is incredible technology," Scrott observed, settling into one of the surprisingly comfortable chairs arranged around a central console that looked capable of monitoring galactic weather patterns or possibly tracking interdimensional pizza deliveries. "You've been studying this kind of thing professionally?"

"For fifteen years," Dr. Dorsey replied, calibrating instruments that detected energy signatures beyond conventional electromagnetic spectrum measurement. "My research focuses on consciousness-quantum field interactions, specifically investigating reports of non-local intelligence attempting contact with human subjects. Your case represents the most comprehensive documentation I've encountered."

Rod found himself studying her face as she spoke, noting the way her eyes illuminated when discussing quantum phenomena, the subtle smile that suggested she found their impossible situation as fascinating as it was potentially dangerous. The way a strand of hair had escaped her ponytail and she absently tucked it behind her ear while explaining complex theory. The unconscious grace of someone entirely in her element.

"Dr. Dorsey, can I ask what originally drew you to this kind of research? Most quantum physicists stick to considerably safer theoretical territory."

She paused, her professional composure softening slightly as personal history surfaced. "My doctoral thesis proposed that human consciousness could directly influence quantum field states through focused intention. My dissertation committee called it 'dangerously unscientific speculation that bordered on academic fantasy.'" Her laugh carried warmth mixed with vindication. "Turns out they were half right—it was dangerous, just not in the ways they imagined. I've been waiting my entire career to meet people who could prove my theories weren't elaborate career suicide."

"And here we are," Rod said softly, "three guys whose experiences suggest your committee was entirely wrong."

"Here you are indeed." Her smile was warm. "Professional vindication wrapped in impossible golf balls and involuntary rap lyrics. It's almost poetic."

"You mentioned modifications," Rod pressed, his analytical mind engaging with the systematic approach that had made him successful in engineering and kept him employed through three recessions. "Modifications to what specifically?"

"To fundamental physical constants," Dr. Dorsey confirmed, activating a display that showed a world map marked with dozens of glowing points scattered across every continent. Each point pulsed with soft light, creating a constellation of impossibility across the familiar geography of Earth. "Someone or something has been systematically adjusting the basic laws of physics in localized areas around the globe. Each dot represents a confirmed location where similar anomalies have been detected and verified through multiple independent measurement systems."

"That's a considerable number of dots," Scrott observed with the understated tone of someone who specialized in documenting the impossible while maintaining admirable composure.

"Forty-seven confirmed incidents," Dr. Dorsey said, and all three friends exchanged glances at the familiar number.

"It's a coordinated global phenomenon," she confirmed with the grave certainty of someone who had spent weeks verifying impossible data from multiple independent sources. "And the frequency of incidents appears to be accelerating exponentially. Whatever's orchestrating these modifications is moving into a more active phase of whatever plan they're implementing."

Duke studied the map with growing unease, his business experience recognizing patterns that suggested careful planning and massive resource

allocation. "Dr. Dorsey, who or what possesses the technological capability to modify fundamental physics on a global scale? We're talking about rewriting the basic operating system of reality itself."

"That question," she said with the careful care of someone who had spent considerable time contemplating genuinely frightening possibilities, "is exactly what we're desperately trying to determine. But I strongly suspect you three may represent a critical key to understanding both the source and the ultimate purpose of these modifications."

As if directly summoned by her words, or simply waiting for the appropriate narrative moment to make an entrance, every piece of equipment in the mobile laboratory began chiming simultaneously with harmonic elegance that suggested orchestrated response rather than random malfunction. Data flowed across multiple screens in patterns that looked distinctly musical—waves and frequencies that seemed to pulse in rhythm with familiar songs, as if someone was translating cosmic information into humanity's most universal language.

Duncan and Kevin both straightened in their chairs, hands flying across keyboards.

"What's happening to your equipment?" Rod asked, his engineering instincts immediately engaging with the systematic light patterns that resembled nothing so much as a sophisticated computer attempting to establish communication protocols.

Dr. Dorsey and her team worked frantically at their controls, her fingers dancing across interfaces with the urgent care of someone who recognized the magnitude of what was occurring. "We're receiving some form of direct signal transmission to our quantum monitoring systems. Not through normal electromagnetic channels, but directly into the quantum substrate of the equipment itself." She paused, staring at one particular readout with expressions that cycled through scientific excitement and genuine awe. "Gentlemen, I believe something extraordinarily intelligent is attempting to establish meaningful communication with us right now."

"Should we be worried?" Duke asked.

"Probably," Dr. Dorsey replied without taking her eyes off the displays. "But also incredibly honored. This is first contact, Duke. Actual, real, undeniable first contact."

The main display began organizing the incoming data into increasingly recognizable patterns—not random quantum noise or equipment malfunction, but structured information that somehow bypassed their auditory systems entirely and spoke directly to their understanding, as if the message was being written directly onto their consciousness using mathematics as the universal translation medium.

Rod felt it—not heard it, not saw it, but felt it in some part of his mind that had never been activated before. Like a new sense suddenly coming online.

The data streams suddenly coalesced into something that looked distinctly like the opening sequence of "Money for Nothing"—all computer graphics, impossible digital landscapes, and visual complexity that belonged in advanced animation studios rather than quantum physics laboratories in 1985, much less a food truck in Colorado.

"Is that... Dire Straits?" Scrott asked, his musician's ear immediately recognizing the distinctive harmonic patterns and synthesized rhythms that had defined an entire generation's relationship with technology.

"It appears our mysterious communicator has evolved from simple visual effects to full cinematic music video experiences," Dr. Dorsey confirmed, though her scientific excitement was unmistakable as she monitored readings that suggested intelligence levels far beyond anything they had previously encountered. "This is absolutely remarkable. It's using familiar cultural touchstones to establish sophisticated communication protocols that bypass linguistic barriers entirely and speak directly to our generation's shared cultural memory."

"They learned about us from MTV," Scrott breathed. "They actually studied humanity by watching our music videos."

"Which explains so much about why they think we're interesting," Duke added.

The Dire Straits sequence faded with masterful artistic timing, replaced by something that resembled "Video Killed the Radio Star"—all retrofuturistic imagery, television screens displaying impossible geometries, and visual metaphors that somehow conveyed complex concepts about communication, technology, and the evolution of consciousness across cosmic distances.

The Buggles had never sounded so prophetic.

And then, cutting through the visual symphony like a clear signal breaking through dimensional interference, came words that bypassed human language entirely and spoke directly to their understanding with the clarity of mathematical truth made accessible:

**GREETINGS, FRIENDS OF EARTH. WE HAVE BEEN WAITING.
THE MUSIC IS ONLY THE BEGINNING**

The silence that followed carried the weight of first contact—three ordinary friends and one quantum researcher and her two assistants sat gobsmacked, suddenly face-to-face with intelligence that spanned galaxies and apparently possessed both infinite patience and genuinely sophisticated taste in popular culture.

Rod's hand found the edge of the console, needing something solid to anchor him to reality. Duke had stopped breathing entirely. Scrott's pen hovered motionless above his notebook page.

"Did that just—" Duncan started.

"Yes," Dr. Dorsey confirmed, her voice barely above a whisper. "That just happened."

"Well," Duke said into the profound quiet, his voice carrying the careful tone of someone attempting to maintain conversational normalcy while processing the fact that aliens had just introduced themselves through his favorite decade of music videos, "at least they're remarkably polite for cosmic entities."

Dr. Dorsey was frantically recording every data point her instruments could capture, her scientific training engaged with the kind of discovery that entire careers were built around. "The communication method is extraordinary. They're using quantum substrate manipulation to create shared visual experiences that translate complex concepts into familiar cultural references. It's like they've studied human psychology and determined that MTV represents our most effective universal language."

"So we're having first contact with beings who learned about humanity from eighties music videos," Rod summarized, his analytical mind struggling to process implications that stretched far beyond anything his engineering background had prepared him to handle.

"And they appear to have excellent taste," Scrott added, making rapid notes while trying to capture the aesthetic beauty of what was essentially the universe's most sophisticated art installation. "Though I'm curious about their opinion on Nine Inch Nails."

The displays flickered briefly, as if their cosmic correspondents were checking their cultural database for appropriate responses to industrial music references.

The ominous visual sequences faded with deliberate theatrical timing, replaced by something altogether more cheerful and unmistakably familiar—the opening frames of "Never Gonna Give You Up," complete with Rick Astley's earnest face filling the main display with the kind of

unexpected charm that had made the song a cultural phenomenon decades after its original release.

"Oh, come on," Rod said directly to the screen, his voice carrying equal measures of exasperation and grudging admiration. "Are you seriously Rickrolling us during humanity's first official cosmic contact? That's either the most sophisticated joke in galactic history or evidence that aliens have been studying our internet culture with genuinely alarming thoroughness."

The cosmic intelligence seemed to find his response absolutely delightful, because Rick Astley's image was immediately replaced by what could only be described as interdimensional laughter—rippling patterns of light that somehow conveyed cosmic-scale amusement while maintaining the kind of warmth that suggested genuine affection rather than condescending humor.

"I think it genuinely likes our sense of humor," Duke observed with growing fascination. "Either that, or it's been conducting intensive research into human internet culture and decided that Rickrolling represents the pinnacle of our comedic achievement."

Dr. Dorsey was frantically recording readings from her instruments, her scientific excitement evident as data streams showed intelligence levels that defied every theoretical framework she had studied. "This is absolutely remarkable. The entity is learning human communication patterns in real-time, adapting its approach based on your specific responses and cultural references." She looked up from her displays with the kind of scientific enthusiasm that had probably gotten her into trouble with dissertation committees. "Gentlemen, you're actively teaching a galactic intelligence how to be funny."

"Outstanding," Scrott said with the dry satisfaction of someone whose artistic training had finally found its most important application. "I'm officially adding 'comedy coach to alien intelligence' to my professional resume. That should definitely help with future job interviews."

The displays shifted again with purposeful intention, this time showing what appeared to be a three-dimensional map of the galaxy that put every astronomy textbook diagram to shame. Earth sat at the center of a vast network of interconnected points, each pulsing with the same harmonic frequencies they'd been experiencing throughout their impossible morning—a cosmic web of civilizations connected by mathematics, music, and apparently shared appreciation for sophisticated humor.

Words appeared on the screen—not typed text or visual overlays, but somehow directly written into their understanding, bypassing language entirely and speaking to them in concepts that felt more fundamental than vocabulary:

**YOUR WORLD BRINGS UNIQUE GIFTS: MUSIC THAT
TOUCHES QUANTUM SUBSTRATE. FRIENDSHIP THAT
STRENGTHENS UNDER PRESSURE. HUMOR THAT
TRANSFORMS FEAR INTO WONDER. WE INVITE YOU TO
JOIN THE GREATER SYMPHONY.**

"A galactic network," Dr. Dorsey breathed, her voice carrying the awe of someone witnessing the scientific discovery of several lifetimes. "They're offering humanity membership in some kind of cosmic community."

"What's the catch?" Duke asked with the practiced skepticism of someone whose decades in sales had taught him that every offer, no matter how attractive, inevitably came with carefully concealed fine print designed to benefit someone other than the customer.

The response appeared instantly, written directly into their consciousness with the clarity of mathematical proof made accessible:

**NO CATCH, NO OBLIGATIONS, CHOICE REMAINS YOURS!
BUT CONSIDER: ALONE YOU ARE TALENTED; TOGETHER
WE ARE MAGNIFICENT!**

The elegant simplicity of the cosmic sales pitch would have impressed Duke under normal circumstances, but something about the timing felt almost too convenient. Before Dr. Dorsey could formulate a response to their interdimensional correspondents, Duke's phone rang with the distinctive tone he'd programmed for important business contacts.

He glanced at the caller ID and his expression shifted to the kind of confident smile that had been charming clients and getting him into interesting situations for decades. "Sorry," he said to the group, gesturing apologetically toward the phone, "I should probably take this call. It might be..."

He stepped outside the mobile laboratory, seeking privacy for what he apparently assumed would be another successful business conversation. Through the thin walls of the disguised food truck, they could hear his end of what quickly became a puzzling exchange.

"Duke here, and I have to say you've reached me at a fascinating time—" There was a pause that stretched longer than his usual confident patter normally allowed. "Oh. Hi there, Sandra. No, I... how did you possibly get this number? I don't recall giving my personal contact information to..."

Rod and Scrott exchanged meaningful glances that carried the weight of longtime friendship and intimate knowledge of Duke's conversational patterns. His voice had shifted from confident charm to something approaching genuine wariness, which was distinctly unusual for someone who treated every telephone conversation as a potential performance opportunity.

Dr. Dorsey's attention was suddenly divided between monitoring their cosmic correspondents and eavesdropping on what was clearly becoming an unexpectedly complicated phone call. "That timing seems remarkably convenient," she murmured, her scientific training recognizing patterns that suggested coordination rather than coincidence.

Through the laboratory walls, they could hear Duke's conversation taking an increasingly cautious tone: "Coffee? Well, I suppose I could consider... no, I understand entirely. Yes, I have been experiencing some rather unusual phenomena lately." Another pause, longer this time, during which his voice carried growing confusion. "How could you possibly know specific details about that?"

Through the lab's small window, they could observe Duke pacing with agitated energy, his free hand running through his silver hair in a gesture they recognized as his "thinking too hard" behavioral tell.

"Sandra Hollingham, was it? Strategic consulting?" Duke's voice carried the tone of someone who was simultaneously intrigued and concerned despite his better judgment. "Yes, I think I would like to know more about my available options."

Thirty-Five minutes later, Duke returned to the laboratory looking pleased and slightly confused, carrying an elegant business card between his fingers like evidence from a crime scene.

"Who was Sandra?" Scrott asked, his documentation instincts immediately engaging with potential new data sources.

"Someone who apparently possesses detailed knowledge about our situation," Duke replied, studying the business card with the careful attention he normally reserved for important contracts. "She wanted to meet for coffee to chat. She said she represents certain interests that might be able to help us navigate our current circumstances."

Dr. Dorsey's expression shifted to something approaching professional alarm. "Duke, what exactly did she say about your experiences? How specific was her knowledge?"

"She knew about the song lyrics phenomenon. Said she'd heard I was dealing with some unusual auditory anomalies and wanted to discuss... options for managing the situation." Duke looked around at the cosmic

equipment surrounding them, displays still showing galactic networks and interdimensional communication protocols. "Given that we're currently receiving messages from space through 80s music videos, her timing seems remarkably convenient."

"Too convenient," Dr. Dorsey said with the grim certainty of someone who understood the implications of competing interests in cosmic contact scenarios. "Duke, there are other organizations monitoring these events. Not all of them have humanity's best interests at heart."

"Are you suggesting Sandra might be working for the bad guys?" Duke asked with characteristic directness.

"I'm saying be very careful about who you trust," Dr. Dorsey replied with professional seriousness. "The modifications you're experiencing are components of something much larger than localized phenomena. And not everyone wants humanity to understand what that something actually represents."

Section 4: "Integration, Romance, and Other Universal Constants"

Dr. Dorsey studied her data displays with growing scientific frustration that creased her forehead in concentration. "The problem is, my readings remain incomplete. I'm detecting the phenomena and measuring their quantum signatures, but I'm missing crucial data points about how they manifest in real-time human experience."

She turned to Rod, her expression earnest and professionally focused. "My data has significant gaps, and I need you three to help fill those informational holes. Your direct observations, Scrott's systematic documentation, Duke's social interactions—you're experiencing things my instruments can't measure or quantify."

Rod blinked, then cleared his throat as the unintended implications of her phrasing registered. "So... you want us guys to be responsible for filling all your holes?"

The words hung in the air for exactly two seconds.

Duke snorted with barely suppressed laughter while Scrott suddenly became very interested in his observation notebook—though the way his shoulders shook suggested he was finding the margin notes extremely amusing all of a sudden.

Duncan and Kevin both stopped what they were doing. Duncan's hand froze halfway to a keyboard. Kevin actually turned around in his chair.

Dr. Dorsey paused, her scientific mind catching up with the unintended double entendre. A slight flush crept up her neck as professional composure warred with human embarrassment. "The data gaps, yes. The informational... holes."

"Right," Rod said, his engineer's brain finally registering why Duke was grinning like a teenager who'd just witnessed the world's greatest accidental comedy and Scrott was staring at his notebook with a childish grin while making what appeared to be rapid sketches of the moment for posterity. "The data holes. Of course. The informational data gaps that need filling. With information. Data information. For the gaps."

"You're making it worse," Duke whispered helpfully.

"Perhaps we could phrase that differently in future scientific discussions," Dr. Dorsey suggested with diplomatic care while extending a purposeful

playful grin in Rod's direction that somehow made the embarrassment worth it.

"I vote we refer to them as 'incomplete datasets,'" Duncan offered from his station. "Much less room for misinterpretation."

"Or 'observational deficits,'" Kevin added.

"How about we just move on and pretend the last thirty seconds didn't happen?" Rod suggested, though Dr. Dorsey's smile suggested she might not be entirely willing to forget.

As if to emphasize her point about careful communication, or possibly to rescue Rod from his linguistic catastrophe, the laboratory's displays flickered with another music video sequence—this one distinctly darker, all shadows and ominous imagery that looked like it belonged in a Depeche Mode video about surveillance and hidden agendas. The cheerful 80s pop aesthetic vanished, replaced by noir cinematography and synthesizer tones that carried unmistakable warnings.

"Even our cosmic DJ seems worried," Scrott observed, making careful notes about the atmospheric shift while sketching the visual transformation. "That's not particularly encouraging when beings capable of rewriting physics decide to switch from 'Rio' to 'Personal Jesus' in terms of tonal messaging."

Duke pulled out Sandra's business card, stared at it for a long moment, then pulled out his phone.

"What are you doing?" Rod asked.

"Calling her back," Duke said. "Might as well get this over with."

Dr. Dorsey's eyebrows rose. "You're sure?"

"I want to tell her myself," Duke replied, his finger already dialing. "Face the thing head-on. It's how I've always operated."

The call connected. Duke put it on speaker.

"Sandra," Duke said with the decisive tone that had closed countless business deals throughout his career, "I genuinely appreciate the offer and the apparent concern for my wellbeing. But I think I'll stick with my friends. They've never steered me wrong in fifteen years of impossible situations, and I don't see any reason to start doubting them now."

"Jeff, you're making a catastrophic mistake that will—"

"Maybe I am," Duke interrupted with growing confidence, "but it's my mistake to make. And honestly? Any organization that's this genuinely worried about people maintaining friendships and exploring cosmic possibilities probably isn't one I want to join. That kind of fear-based thinking went out of style with my first marriage."

He ended the call with a satisfying click, added "But she was drop dead gorgeous", then looked around at his companions with the kind of smile that had been getting him into interesting adventures for decades. "So, what do you say? Ready to join the cosmic symphony and see what kind of universal music we can make together?"

Rod thought about his impossible putts, his recently concluded marriage, and the two best friends a man could reasonably ask for during a midlife crisis that apparently included alien contact. He considered the loneliness that was ending, the problems that might actually be solvable when approached collectively, and the genuine possibility that the universe might possess a sophisticated sense of humor after all.

"You know what?" he said with growing enthusiasm. "I think I am absolutely ready for whatever cosmic adventure comes next."

Scrott closed his observation notebook with a satisfied snap that seemed to mark the conclusion of an important chapter in human development. "Well, I've just documented humanity's first successful integration into a galactic network. That's definitely going in my memoirs, assuming anyone believes them."

The laboratory displays around them filled with gentle, harmonious light that seemed to celebrate Earth's entry into the cosmic community becoming officially recognized. But before they could fully process the magnitude of what had just transpired, Dr. Dorsey's secure communication device rang with an urgent tone that suggested important developments.

"Dr. Dorsey here," she answered, automatically activating speaker mode so the group could participate in whatever was coming next.

"Robbie, this is Derek Devon calling from the ELTA facility in Chile. I hope I'm not interrupting anything critically important."

"Derek! Actually, your timing is absolutely flawless. I'm here with three individuals who've just completed successful integration protocols. Rod Alpaugh, Duke Lukas, and Scott MacDonald—the Colorado team whose quantum signatures have been generating some genuinely fascinating data patterns."

"The gravitational anomaly team from Colorado?" Derek's voice carried immediate recognition and unmistakable scientific interest. "We've been tracking their quantum signatures for several days through our global monitoring network. Are they by any chance available for consultation? Their adaptation patterns have been remarkably sophisticated."

"More than available," Dr. Dorsey replied, glancing at the three friends with a smile that carried implications extending far beyond simple professional collaboration. "In fact, I was just about to suggest they accompany me to the Denver Integration Facility. We could all travel together and combine our research efforts."

Rod felt his pulse quicken with what he told himself was entirely scientific excitement about cosmic adventure, though Dr. Dorsey's meaningful look suggested additional possibilities that had nothing to do with quantum mechanics and everything to do with personal chemistry that apparently functioned correctly even during interdimensional first contact.

"Denver sounds ideal," Rod said, surprising himself with how easily the words came. "When do we leave?"

"As soon as we pack up the equipment," Dr. Dorsey—Robbie—replied with a smile that made Rod's recently divorced heart do something it hadn't done in years.

"You know what, Dr. Dorsey?" Rod continued, finding courage he hadn't accessed since his twenties. "After forty-seven impossible puts and a divorce that systematically taught me everything I thought I understood was fundamentally wrong, I think I'm absolutely ready for whatever cosmic adventures the universe has planned."

"Excellent, and please—everybody call me Robbie," she said, moving closer to check readings on sophisticated equipment that definitely didn't require such intimate proximity for proper calibration. "Because I have a genuinely strong feeling we're going to work very well together on multiple levels."

Duke was openly laughing now with the delighted appreciation of someone witnessing his friend's romantic confidence returning after months of post-divorce hibernation. "Rod, your ex-wife complained that you were too methodical and systematic. I don't think Robbie's going to have that particular problem with your analytical approach."

"Not at all," Dr. Dorsey confirmed with scientific care mixed with unmistakable personal interest. "I deeply appreciate a man who takes his time and pays meticulous attention to important details. Those are exactly the qualities needed for successful cosmic integration... and other collaborative endeavors."

"Hello fella's. I am glad to meet you and hopefully meet in person in the near future. Dr. Dorsey, if I can help in any way, just let me know and I hope to see you at the Denver facility. I have to head into a meeting but I am sure you guys are in good hands with Dr. Dorsey," Derek said before ending the call.

Scrott looked up from his final documentation with the satisfied expression of someone whose artistic instincts had captured something genuinely historic. "I'm officially recording this as 'Humanity's first successful integration into a galactic network, followed immediately by the universe's most sophisticated pickup line delivered through quantum mechanics."

"It's absolutely not a pickup line," Dr. Dorsey protested with mock scientific seriousness that fooled absolutely no one present. "It's entirely legitimate scientific collaboration protocol."

"Right," Rod said, his engineer's care failing to disguise the genuine happiness in his voice. "Scientific protocol. Of course."

As they prepared to gather their equipment and leave for Denver's Integration Facility, none of them noticed that Rod's golf ball had finally, quietly, completed its long-delayed journey—rolling the remaining seventeen inches with perfect mathematical elegance and dropping into the hole with a satisfied plop that seemed to celebrate the restoration of physical laws and personal happiness simultaneously.

Some constants, apparently, were worth waiting for—whether they governed gravitational forces or matters of the heart.

Outside the mobile laboratory, the morning sun cast long shadows across the golf course where three friends had discovered that the universe was far stranger, infinitely more wonderful, and significantly more humorous than any of them had dared imagine. The cosmic network had gained new members, but more importantly, it had gained a family whose friendship would help guide humanity's integration into something magnificent.

We are family—the thought arrived not as musical intrusion, but as joyful confirmation of universal truth that connected consciousness across impossible distances while preserving everything that made friendship sacred.

The constants had changed, but the best things about being human remained exactly the same. Though apparently, they were about to become considerably more interesting.

End of Book 4: "The Constants"

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You have completed a 30 (plus) -minute cosmic experience. I will apologize to you that this particular book exceeded my 30 minute reading length by about 15 minutes. Some stories are just too good to start chopping great dialogue simply to meet a time length goal. I hope it was worth it! Hope you continue the journey with me. The choice... will always be yours...

Wondering what is next?

Book 5! The Observer Effect

Dr. Maureen Hamner thought her morning runs around CERN were solitary affairs—until she realized she wasn't running alone. When impossible shadows begin stalking Europe's leading consciousness researcher and government agents transform her laboratory into an interrogation room, Maureen faces the same cosmic choice that changed Derek Devon and Luke Matson forever. But her escape

from military acquisition leads to something neither Derek nor Nancy expected: a consciousness bridge between three brilliant minds that could revolutionize both human evolution and the meaning of love itself. Some discoveries change science. Others change everything.

Hope you will continue the series.....

Cheers,

Derek 😊

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