



THE LAST AXIOM

DEREK DEVON



The Last Axiom

Book 2 of "The Last Axiom" Series

By Derek Devon

A 30-Minute Cosmic Experience

Reality Modification Level: Advanced

First Section - The Impossible Signal

Dr. Derek Devon believed the universe hummed. Not metaphorically, but literally—a symphony of physical laws so perfectly orchestrated they formed the very fabric of existence itself.

For 186 nights, ELTA's massive radio telescopes had swept the southern sky like tireless sentinels, cataloging the distant whispers of quasars and pulsars with the methodical precision Derek had inherited from his mentor, Professor Alistair Finch. Tonight felt different. The data streaming across his monitors carried patterns that shouldn't exist—spectral signatures that violated everything he thought he knew about cosmic radiation.

Derek's fingers danced across the interface with practiced efficiency, isolating the anomalous readings from quasar QSO J0439+1634. The spectral absorption line appearing at 1420.4 megahertz should have been impossible—a ghost frequency that had no business existing in the emptiness between galaxies.

"Equipment malfunction," he muttered, running diagnostics for the third time in an hour. But ELTA's systems reported flawless operation across

every parameter. The impossible reading persisted, hanging in his data like a cosmic riddle waiting to be solved.

Derek's hand found the raven-engraved Zippo lighter in his pocket—Professor Finch's final gift, still warm from hours of nervous clicking during late-night research sessions. Click-snap. Click-snap. The familiar rhythm helped him think as terrifying implications crystallized in his analytical mind. If this wasn't equipment failure, if this spectral ghost was real, then something was systematically rewriting the fundamental laws of physics across unimaginable distances.

Eight months ago, Professor Finch had died knowing something Derek was only beginning to understand. In those final weeks, Finch had spoken cryptically about "reality's source code" and "cosmic debugging operations"—concepts that had seemed like the fevered imaginings of a brilliant mind ravaged by terminal cancer.

Now, staring at data that defied every principle of modern physics, Derek wondered if his mentor's final words had been warnings rather than metaphors.

Derek pulled up his secure email client and began composing a message to Dr. Nancy Hammond at Caltech—one of the few scientists in the world qualified to analyze quantum entanglement on cosmic scales. According to Finch's notes, Hammond possessed theoretical frameworks that might explain what Derek was witnessing.

Dr. Hammond,

I'm writing to request your analysis of some unusual quantum field readings we've detected at ELTA. The data suggests systematic modifications to fundamental physical constants

across multiple cosmic structures. Professor Finch mentioned your work on reality stability before his death.

The readings are... unprecedented. I would appreciate your expertise in determining whether we're observing natural phenomena or something more deliberate.

Best regards,

Dr. Derek Devon

ELTA Research Facility

Derek's cursor hovered over the send button. He knew exactly how this would sound to a respected quantum physicist—like the desperate ramblings of a researcher who'd been staring at data too long. Claims of cosmic reality modification belonged in science fiction novels, not peer-reviewed journals.

But the data didn't lie. Whatever was happening out there in the void between galaxies, it was real.

He clicked send.

The response arrived faster than Derek had expected, appearing in his inbox with a timestamp showing it had been sent just eighteen minutes after his initial message.

Dr. Devon,

I appreciate your reaching out, but I must inform you that the scenarios you're describing are physically impossible. The fundamental constants of the universe are, by definition, immutable. Any apparent variations in your data are almost certainly due to equipment calibration issues or atmospheric interference.

I'd recommend consulting with your facility's technical support staff before pursuing exotic theoretical explanations.

Best regards,

Dr. N. Hammond

The stale coffee cup slipped from Derek's forgotten grip, shattering against the polished concrete floor. He didn't flinch. The broken ceramic seemed fitting—everything he thought he understood about the universe was fracturing just as completely.

"Immutable, my ass," Derek whispered to the empty control room, echoing Dr. Hammond's dismissive response. Where had that come from? He'd been staring at her conference photo for months, apparently long enough to give her a nickname based on those remarkable dimples he'd noticed in the image.

A rueful smile tugged at his lips. "Though I suppose calling universal constants 'mutable' would be a terrible pun, even by my standards."

Feeling his frustration build, Derek deployed what he privately called his "reset ritual"—spinning his chair in a complete 360-degree rotation. It was ridiculous, but somehow the physical motion helped clear his head when data refused to make sense.

When he faced his monitors again, Derek's gaze fell on the photograph tucked beside his keyboard. Dr. Nancy Hammond at some long-ago physics conference, caught mid-laugh, those distinctive dimples transforming her entire face. For six months, that photo had been his only connection to the brilliant quantum physicist whose work might hold the key to understanding what he was witnessing.

Well, if Hammond dismissed his findings as impossible, he'd simply have to find evidence so compelling that even the most skeptical scientist couldn't ignore it.

Derek pulled up archived data from the Planck space telescope, searching for corroborating evidence in the cosmic microwave background radiation—the universe's oldest detectable light, still echoing from the Big Bang itself.

What he found made his pulse quicken with scientific excitement rather than fear. The background radiation showed systematic deviations from theoretical predictions—tiny harmonic variations that created patterns across the entire observable universe. The same impossible frequencies he'd detected in the distant quasar appeared as whispered echoes in creation's first light.

Someone or something had been editing reality's source code for thirteen billion years.

Derek's mind raced through the implications as he cross-referenced his data with Professor Finch's archived research. In those final months before the cancer claimed him, Finch had been investigating what he called "cosmic programming languages"—mathematical frameworks that might allow for systematic modification of physical laws.

Hidden in Finch's encrypted files, Derek found references to something called "Hammond's puzzle box" and "the prime sequence Modulation Key." His pulse quickened. A quick search through Finch's personal correspondence revealed copies of emails sent to Hammond three years ago, complete with digital photographs of an ornate wooden box covered in constellation carvings.

The emails described the box as containing "a prime number sequence that might serve as the Modulation Key for the Protocol's transformation equations." Derek studied the photographs with growing excitement, noting how the carved numbers spiraled around the box's surface in an elegant pattern: 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, 19, 23, 29, 31, 37, 41, 44, 47...

His analytical mind studied the sequence, that familiar itch of recognition building in the back of his thoughts. Something was staring him right in the face, but he couldn't quite grasp it. The pattern felt almost correct, but not quite—like a song played in the wrong key.

With trembling fingers, Derek input the prime number sequence into the Finch Protocol as a potential value for the missing Modulation Key. The raven carving on his Zippo seemed to watch approvingly as he executed the program, the lighter warm from hours of nervous clicking.

The screen flashed with calculations for several seconds, then displayed a single word in red: FAILED.

Derek stared at the result, frustration building in his chest. "What am I missing?" he muttered to the empty control room. The data was right there—he could feel it. But something in the sequence wasn't quite correct, some crucial element that would unlock the Protocol's full potential.

He leaned back in his chair, the raven lighter clicking steadily in his palm. Whatever Professor Finch had hidden in that puzzle box, it was more complex than a simple number sequence.

Section 2: The Crystal Awakens

Derek awoke to the shrill ring of his secure phone, jerking him from dreams where equations writhed across cosmic backgrounds like living things. He fumbled for the device in the darkness, squinting at a caller ID that made his heart skip: Dr. Nancy Hammond, calling from Caltech at 3:47 AM local time.

After months of staring at her conference photo, he was finally going to hear her voice.

"Dr. Hammond?" Derek answered, his voice still rough with sleep.

"Dr. Devon, I owe you an apology." Her voice was nothing like he'd imagined—warmer, more musical, but carrying the exhaustion of someone who'd been wrestling with impossible data for hours. "I've been monitoring the Global Quantum Entanglement Network, and we're seeing systematic failures that violate every principle of unified field theory."

Derek felt his pulse quicken as he reached for his lighter on the nightstand, the familiar click-snap helping him process this unexpected reversal. After her dismissive email, this was the last thing he'd expected. "What kind of failures?"

"The kind that shouldn't be possible." There was a pause, and when she continued, her tone had shifted to something more personal. "Dr. Devon... Derek—I'd like to arrange a secure video conference. The data I'm seeing suggests your cosmic modification theory might be... less impossible than I initially thought."

Thirty minutes later, Derek sat in his control room staring at his first real-time image of Dr. Nancy Hammond. The conference photo hadn't

done her justice. The woman on his screen possessed an intellectual beauty that made his analytical mind stumble—sharp blue eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses, auburn hair pulled back to reveal the kind of focused intensity that comes from wrestling with universe-scale problems. When she smiled apologetically, those distinctive dimples appeared, making Derek's breath catch in a way that had nothing to do with cosmic physics.

"Dr. Hammond," Derek began, then paused, struck by how inadequate professional formality seemed given the magnitude of what they were discussing.

"Nancy," she corrected gently. "Given that we're potentially documenting the systematic rewriting of reality, I think we can skip the formal titles."

"Nancy," Derek repeated, surprised by how natural her name felt on his tongue. "What changed your mind about my findings?"

Nancy's expression grew serious as she pulled up data displays that Derek could see reflected in the lenses of her glasses. "GloQNet—the Global Quantum Entanglement Network—has been our most reliable tool for detecting quantum decoherence events across intercontinental distances. It's built on unified field theory principles that have been rock-solid since Professor Finch published his work."

Derek nodded, familiar with the network's reputation as the ultimate test of quantum field theory. The system was legendary for its precision.

"Three hours ago," Nancy continued, her voice tightening with concern, "GloQNet began reporting systematic correlation failures that violate the conservation of quantum information. The entangled particle pairs

we use for instantaneous communication are maintaining coherence far longer than theory predicts. It's as if someone has been optimizing the universe's quantum infrastructure."

Derek felt his lighter clicking faster as the implications crystallized, the familiar rhythm matching his accelerating pulse. "The modifications I detected—they're not just changing cosmic structures. They're upgrading the fundamental operating system that quantum mechanics runs on."

"Exactly." Nancy leaned forward, her intensity building, and Derek found himself leaning closer to the screen in response. "Derek, I need to show you something Professor Finch gave me years ago. I never understood its significance until tonight."

Nancy reached off-screen and returned holding an ornate wooden box covered in intricate constellation carvings. Derek's breath caught—he recognized it immediately from Finch's archived photographs, but seeing it in Nancy's hands made it suddenly real.

"This was a gift from him, years ago," Nancy explained, her fingers tracing the carved patterns with obvious familiarity. "It's a puzzle box—you have to manipulate the carvings and panels in a specific sequence to open it. I've been trying to solve it for years, but I could never get the mechanism right."

Her eyes met his through the video connection. "Then last night, after reading your email about the Protocol and everything that's been happening, I decided to try again. Something just... clicked. After all these years, I finally figured out the right sequence."

Derek watched, mesmerized, as Nancy's skilled fingers moved across the box's surface. "And it opened."

Nancy carefully opened the box with reverent fingers, revealing a crystalline structure nestled inside like a geometric flower frozen in time. The crystal pulsed with soft, ethereal light that seemed to respond to their conversation, brightening noticeably whenever either of them spoke about the cosmic modifications.

"There was a note inside," Nancy continued, unfolding a piece of aged paper with Finch's distinctive handwriting. "It says: 'When the music changes, remember that the conductor may not be our enemy, only the composer of a new symphony.'"

Derek stared at the crystal through the video connection, mesmerized as he watched it pulse in rhythm with some frequency beyond human detection. The implications were staggering. "Nancy, I think I know what the carved sequence represents. Professor Finch suspected it years ago, but the mathematics wasn't ready yet."

Derek explained his discovery of the prime number sequence and his failed attempt to use it as the Modulation Key. As he spoke, Nancy examined the carved numbers spiraling around her box's surface: 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, 19, 23, 29, 31, 37, 41, 44, 47...

"Derek, wait," Nancy interrupted, her voice sharp with sudden discovery. Her finger had stopped on one particular carving. "44 isn't prime."

The revelation hit Derek like a physical blow. "Oh my God." He ran his hands through his hair, laughing despite himself. "It was staring me right in the face. I knew something felt wrong about the sequence, but I couldn't see it." He looked directly into the camera, meeting her eyes. "I guess it took a brilliant theoretical physicist from three thousand miles away to open my eyes."

Derek watched Nancy's expression transform as she smiled—a real smile this time, not just professional courtesy. Those remarkable dimples appeared, and he felt something flutter in his chest that had nothing to do with cosmic revelations.

"It's a placeholder," Derek continued, his excitement building. "Finch knew the sequence was the key, but the Protocol wasn't sophisticated enough to handle it when he carved the box. He was waiting for the mathematics to mature. I tried it yesterday using 44—the wrong number entirely!"

Derek input the corrected prime sequence into his Protocol interface while Nancy watched intently through their video connection. The results were immediate and stunning—every anomaly they'd detected, from Derek's impossible quasar readings to Nancy's GloQNet failures, resolved into a coherent pattern of systematic cosmic optimization.

Mathematical models that had been chaotic suddenly became elegant. Data that had seemed random now revealed purposeful design.

"It's not random," Derek said, leaning back in his chair, overwhelmed by the elegant mathematics flowing across his screen. "It's not even just systematic. It's... purposeful. Something is deliberately rewriting reality's source code, and we just figured out how to watch it happen in real time."

The magnitude of their discovery settled over them like a shared revelation. Two scientists, separated by thousands of miles, had just unlocked the universe's most profound secret.

"Nancy," Derek said, her first name flowing naturally now, "this changes everything. We're not just witnessing cosmic modification—we're seeing intelligent design in real time."

"It's responding to our conversation," Nancy whispered, watching the crystal pulse more rapidly in her hands. "To our awareness of the changes. Derek, Finch was right—there is an observer effect. It knows we're watching."

Derek felt a chill as he observed the crystal's accelerating rhythm through the video connection. "This isn't just responding to us—it's like a cosmic communication device." His expression grew more unsettled. "Something out there knows we're home and watching."

Before Nancy could respond, her secure line began flashing with an urgent incoming call. She glanced at the display, her face paling. "It's the GloQNet monitoring station in Denver," she said, dread creeping into her voice. "Something's happening."

As Nancy took the call, Derek remained in his control room, staring out at the vast Chilean desert stretching endlessly under star-filled skies. Somewhere out there in the cosmic void, forces beyond human comprehension were systematically editing the fundamental code of reality itself. And thanks to Professor Finch's posthumous gift, humanity now had front-row seats to watch it happen.

The question that haunted him was simple yet terrifying: were they witnesses to destruction, or observers of a cosmic renovation project?

The Zippo clicked one more time in his hand as Derek settled in to monitor the universe's rewrite, armed with nothing but mathematics and the growing certainty that everything was about to change forever.

Section 3: The Human Connection

Three days later, Derek's secure line rang with the sharp tone reserved for highest-priority communications. The caller ID showed an unfamiliar number, but the encryption signature identified it as coming from the Global Science Council—the international body that coordinated responses to worldwide scientific crises.

"Dr. Devon?" The voice was crisp, authoritative, and unexpectedly familiar. "This is Dr. James Okoro, Chairman of the Global Science Council."

Derek felt a jolt of recognition that made his coffee mug pause halfway to his lips. "James—we met at the hospital when Professor Finch..." He paused, the memory of that terrible day flooding back with unexpected intensity.

"Yes," James's voice softened with genuine sympathy. "I was the visiting researcher from CERN. I'm sorry we're reconnecting under such extraordinary circumstances, but I suspect Professor Finch would have appreciated the cosmic irony—his former student now coordinating humanity's response to the very anomalies he predicted."

Derek felt his pulse quicken as he set down his coffee mug, the raven-engraved lighter clicking automatically in his free hand. The familiar rhythm helped him process what James was really saying. "James, our analysis suggests coordinated modifications to fundamental physical constants across multiple—"

"Derek," James interrupted gently but firmly, "we've been monitoring similar reports from facilities in seventeen countries. The situation has escalated far beyond individual research projects. I'm calling an emergency summit of the International Physics Consortium. We need

you and Dr. Hammond to present your findings to world leaders within the next six hours."

Derek stared out at the vast Chilean desert, the morning sun casting long shadows across the endless expanse. Six hours to explain the impossible to people who dealt in political realities, not cosmic ones. "James, the scope of what we've discovered—"

"Is exactly why we can't afford to wait," James replied, his voice carrying the weight of someone who'd been fielding panicked calls from governments around the globe. "Derek, whatever is happening to our universe, it's accelerating. We've had three more facilities report impossible readings just this morning. The Japanese are seeing quantum fluctuations that violate conservation of energy. The Germans are detecting gravitational waves that shouldn't exist according to any known physics."

He paused, and Derek could hear papers rustling in the background. "And the Americans are demanding answers while simultaneously wanting to classify everything. I've spent half the morning explaining to defense officials why we can't simply throw money at rewriting the laws of physics."

Before Derek could respond to James's revelation about Finch, his personal line began ringing with insistent urgency. The caller ID displayed a name that made his heart skip: Nancy Hammond.

"James, can I call you back in ten minutes? Dr. Hammond may have additional urgent information."

"Of course. But Derek—" James's voice carried the weight of global crisis. "Humanity needs answers. I knew Professor Finch personally. He mentioned you specifically in our last conversation before his death.

He said you were the one person who truly understood the implications of his work."

The line went dead, leaving Derek staring at the phone as Nancy's call continued ringing. The responsibility of Finch's final endorsement settled on his shoulders like a lead blanket.

"Nancy?" he answered, surprised by how naturally her first name came to him now.

"Derek, thank God you're there." Her voice carried that familiar blend of scientific excitement and barely contained worry that he was beginning to recognize. "The crystal—it's been acting differently since our conversation three days ago. It's not just responding to us anymore. It's... anticipating."

Derek felt his pulse quicken, the lighter clicking faster in his palm. "Anticipating what?"

"Our questions. Our thoughts about the cosmic modifications. Derek, I think it's been trying to prepare us for something specific." There was a pause, and he could hear her moving around her lab. "It started pulsing in complex patterns this morning, almost like it's trying to communicate directly."

Derek felt the pieces clicking together with mathematical precision, forming a picture that was both thrilling and terrifying. "Nancy, I just got off the phone with Dr. James Okoro from the Global Science Council. They're convening an emergency summit. We're supposed to present our findings to world leaders."

"When?" The single word carried the weight of understanding.

"Six hours."

There was a long pause, filled only by the soft humming of equipment in their respective labs. "Derek, I don't think this timing is coincidental. Something's orchestrating events."

Through their video connection, Derek found himself studying Nancy's face—the determined set of her jaw, those remarkable blue eyes reflecting both excitement and apprehension. Even under cosmic pressure, she was absolutely captivating.

"I need to clear my head," Nancy said suddenly. "Peloton session in thirty minutes? Username: QuantumHammer."

Derek felt a genuine smile tug at his lips for the first time in days. Even with reality unraveling around them, some human constants remained reassuringly normal. "Username: RavenRider," he replied. "You may want to prepare to lose this time."

Thirty minutes later, Derek adjusted his laptop screen on the makeshift desk he'd assembled in front of his rarely-used Peloton bike. The ELTA facility provided excellent employee accommodations, including a surprisingly well-equipped fitness center that Derek had been neglecting for months. He clipped his cycling shoes into the pedals just as Nancy's face appeared on his screen.

"Didn't figure you for a Peloton enthusiast," he said, taking in her Chicago Cubs headband holding back auburn hair that looked slightly damp from pre-ride preparation. Her expression carried that focused intensity he was learning to recognize—the look she got when approaching any challenge, scientific or otherwise.

"Thirty minutes of exercise balances sixteen hours of sitting hunched over quantum data," she replied, making final adjustments to her camera angle. "It's basic ergonomics, Devon. Also—" She flashed that

transformative grin that always caught him off guard, dimples appearing with devastating effect, "—I'm absurdly competitive about everything."

Derek's prepared comeback died completely as Nancy stood briefly to adjust her bike seat. The movement provided him with an unobstructed view of athletic legs and a physique that clearly resulted from considerably more than thirty minutes of daily exercise. He forced himself to look away, feeling heat rise in his cheeks that had nothing to do with the workout instructor's warm-up cues.

"Five-mile Alpine road race?" Nancy challenged, settling back onto her bike with fluid grace. "Unless you'd prefer something less... demanding?"

"Five miles sounds perfect," Derek managed, carefully not mentioning that his bike had been gathering dust for weeks. "But let's use the time productively. I've been thinking about those gravitational anomalies—the aircraft displacement incidents."

Nancy rolled her eyes with obvious affection. "Always working, aren't you? Fine. Science and cycling it is." Her competitive smile returned. "Let's synchronize our start... now."

The virtual instructor welcomed them to a scenic route through the Swiss Alps, mountain peaks rising majestically around their digital path. Nancy immediately took a commanding lead, her pedaling smooth and powerful, while Derek struggled to find any semblance of rhythm. Between increasingly labored breaths, they managed to discuss the terrifying implications of localized gravitational shifts.

Even gasping for air, Derek found himself stealing glances at Nancy's focused expression, the determined set of her shoulders, the

economical precision of her movements. Somehow, discussing cosmic catastrophe while being thoroughly outpaced by a brilliant woman made both experiences more memorable.

"If—" Derek gasped after a particularly brutal virtual hill climb, sweat already beading on his forehead, "—the modifications are manipulating fundamental constants at quantum scales, the effects would propagate upward. Macro-scale consequences of micro-scale changes."

Nancy barely seemed affected by the same incline, her cadence remaining metronomic and powerful. She was already two-tenths of a mile ahead, her competitive focus evident in the slight furrow of concentration between her brows. Despite his struggling lungs, Derek found himself captivated by the determined set of her jaw, the economical precision of her every movement.

"Exactly," she agreed, her breathing still perfectly controlled. "But propagation should take time. These aircraft displacements were instantaneous. The F-35 didn't gradually descend 22,000 feet—it must have passed through some kind of spatial distortion that compressed the distance."

She paused to take a sip of water, the movement drawing Derek's attention to the graceful line of her neck, the intense focus in those blue eyes when she worked through complex problems. "That suggests localized reality bubbles. Not just changing constants, but temporarily folding spacetime itself."

Derek pushed harder on the pedals, trying desperately to close the gap between them. Sweat stung his eyes, his breathing ragged, and he became acutely aware that Nancy was observing his struggle with what looked like a mixture of amusement and... something else. Assessment? Interest?

"You look like you're about to collapse, Devon," she said, though her tone carried more concern than mockery. "When was the last time you actually used that expensive piece of equipment?"

"Theoretical physicists," Derek managed between labored breaths, "live in our minds, Hammond. The body is just... transportation for the brain."

Her laugh was genuinely musical, rich with warmth that made his chest tighten for reasons unrelated to cardiovascular stress. "Your 'transportation' appears to be having mechanical difficulties. Maybe you should invest more time in maintenance."

Something in her tone made Derek look up from his handlebars. Nancy was watching him with a subtle smile, those devastating dimples just barely visible, her gaze making a quick but unmistakable journey over his sweat-soaked shirt before returning to meet his eyes. The moment lasted only heartbeats, but it sent butterflies coursing through his stomach before she smoothly returned to their scientific discussion.

The Swiss Alpine scenery scrolled past them both, but Derek found the view on his screen far more captivating than any mountain landscape.

"So if we're dealing with localized reality bubbles," Nancy continued, her pedaling rhythm never wavering despite the increasingly challenging virtual terrain, "then prediction becomes exponentially more difficult. We'd need a way to detect incipient modifications before they actually manifest."

Derek nodded, grateful for the return to familiar scientific territory, even as he found himself mesmerized by the graceful efficiency of her movements, the determined set of her shoulders as she powered through each hill. He'd spent so many years staring at distant stars and

abstract equations that he'd nearly forgotten the simple pleasure of observing another human being—especially one who combined brilliant intellect with such obvious physical competence.

"The crystal," he suggested between increasingly ragged breaths. "It resonates with the modifications somehow. If we could reverse-engineer its structure, build detector arrays based on similar principles..."

"We'd need understanding we simply don't possess yet," Nancy finished his thought with the easy synchronization they were developing. "But it's definitely worth pursuing. I've been analyzing its internal structure using every scanning method I can access. It's unlike any crystalline formation in the literature—almost as if it was grown rather than formed naturally."

The Peloton chimed its one-mile warning, and Nancy's entire demeanor shifted. The discussion was momentarily forgotten as pure competitive fire took over. She increased her pace dramatically, rising from her seat to attack the final climb with impressive power.

Derek tried valiantly to match her acceleration but knew he was hopelessly outclassed.

"Are you even trying, Devon?" she called out, her voice carrying just the slightest breathlessness as she shifted to a standing position, muscles clearly defined as she powered through the final thousand meters. "Or is the celebrated astrophysicist content to admire the scenery from behind?"

"Just—" Derek gasped, his lungs burning, "—giving you—a proper head start."

"Mmm-hmm," she hummed with obvious skepticism, but her tone carried unmistakable affection. "How very gentlemanly of you."

The race ended exactly as Derek had expected, with Nancy finishing nearly half a mile ahead. He collapsed over his handlebars, completely spent and dripping with perspiration, while she looked barely winded, taking a celebratory sip from her water bottle with evident satisfaction.

"That was..." Derek managed once he could form coherent words again, "completely humiliating, but I have to admit I enjoyed the view."

Nancy's face flushed with something beyond mere exertion, her smile knowing and pleased. "The Alpine course really is spectacular, isn't it?" she replied, her eyes twinkling with shared understanding of his double meaning.

For one perfect moment, the crushing weight of cosmic revelations and impending global crisis simply disappeared, leaving just two people discovering they genuinely enjoyed each other's company.

"Next time," Derek promised, still catching his breath, "I'll actually be prepared. Then you'll get to enjoy watching me from behind for a change."

Nancy's laugh was warm and genuine, her post-workout glow making those dimples even more pronounced. "Next time we might be living in a completely different reality," she replied, her tone carrying layers of meaning that extended far beyond cycling competition. She glanced at her fitness watch. "I need to check the latest GloQNet data streams. Same time tomorrow?"

"It's a date," Derek said without thinking, the words escaping before his brain could engage proper filters. His eyes widened in horror. "I mean, not a date-date, obviously, just a—"

"I know exactly what you meant, Derek," Nancy interrupted, her smile softening with what looked distinctly like affection. Those remarkable dimples appeared again as she shook her head at his flustered state. "See you at the summit follow-up."

The video connection ended, leaving Derek staring at his blank laptop screen in the sudden silence of his makeshift gym setup. He wasn't entirely certain whether he felt more exhausted from the cardiovascular punishment or from navigating the increasingly complex emotional terrain developing between them.

The raven-engraved Zippo found its way into his palm automatically. Click-snap. The familiar rhythm helped center his thoughts, though it couldn't quiet the embarrassed voice in his head cataloging every potentially inappropriate comment he'd made. Even as the fundamental laws of reality shifted around them, some things remained frustratingly constant—like his apparent inability to interact with brilliant, attractive women without stumbling over his own tongue.

Had Nancy been offended by his more personal observations? Was she simply being polite when she laughed off his awkward "date" comment? The questions circled through his mind like orbital mechanics problems he couldn't quite solve.

But there was no time for such self-doubt. Across the continent, the crystal at Caltech was pulsing with increasing urgency. The Denver facility was receiving more complex communications from unknown sources. And somewhere in the vast cosmic expanse, an intelligence beyond human comprehension was systematically rewriting the fundamental laws that governed existence itself.

In less than five hours, Derek would have to explain the impossible to the most powerful people on Earth.

First, though, he desperately needed a shower and a strong cup of coffee. Some priorities remained wonderfully, reassuringly human.

Section 4: The Cosmic Performance Review

Ninety minutes later, Derek found himself staring at a digital grid containing the most powerful faces on Earth. Presidents, prime ministers, defense secretaries, and Nobel laureates filled his screen in a virtual assembly that would have been pure science fiction just decades earlier. The weight of addressing this collection of global leadership made his mouth dry despite the strong coffee he'd consumed.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Dr. James Okoro began with the practiced authority of someone accustomed to managing international crises, "thank you for joining this emergency session of the International Physics Consortium. Dr. Derek Devon and Dr. Nancy Hammond will present findings that suggest we are witnessing systematic modifications to the fundamental laws of physics."

Derek felt Nancy's virtual presence beside him through their shared video connection, her calm competence helping to steady his nerves as he prepared to explain the impossible to people who dealt in very concrete, very terrestrial realities.

"Three days ago, I detected what initially appeared to be an equipment malfunction in data from quasar QSO J0439+1634," Derek began, his voice finding its rhythm as he settled into familiar scientific presentation

mode. "What seemed like a simple calibration error proved to be evidence of something far more profound."

As Derek methodically explained the cosmic background radiation anomalies and their harmonic correlations, he watched the assembled faces transition from polite skepticism through confusion to growing alarm. Nancy seamlessly assumed control of the technical explanation, her expertise with the Global Quantum Entanglement Network lending crucial credibility to claims that should have belonged in science fiction rather than peer-reviewed research.

"The mathematics are unambiguous," Nancy concluded, her voice carrying the weight of absolute scientific certainty. "Someone or something has been systematically editing the universe's fundamental operating code for an unknown period of time. The modifications appear designed to enhance quantum coherence and reduce dimensional instabilities across cosmic scales."

Dr. Lena Hanson's image leaned forward from her position among the scientific advisory panel, her expression skeptical bordering on hostile. "Dr. Hammond, Dr. Devon, you're asking world leaders to accept that some cosmic intelligence is debugging reality itself. That's not rigorous science—that's elaborate fantasy."

At that precise moment, as if responding to her challenge, every screen in the virtual summit began displaying something that made Derek's breath catch in his throat. A three-dimensional map materialized showing interconnected nodes stretching across the entire galaxy, with Earth highlighted as a single glowing point among thousands of others.

And beneath this galactic network display, text appeared simultaneously in every language represented at the summit:

WELCOME TO THE NETWORK.

The stunned silence stretched for several heartbeats before Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney found his voice. "Dr. Devon, who exactly just sent that message?"

Derek glanced at the impossible galactic display still dominating every screen, then back at the collection of world leaders staring at him expectantly. "Prime Minister, I believe it may be the very cosmic intelligence we've been discussing—unless someone has developed a rather elaborate sense of humor about global security."

The President of the United States, clearly unwilling to be upstaged by a Canadian in matters of international importance, leaned forward into his camera. "Dr. Devon, can we simply shut down the internet to prevent them from communicating with us?"

Derek paused, noting the mixture of confusion and growing panic on the faces of the assembled leadership. He chose his words with diplomatic precision. "Mr. President, this entity just synchronized every atomic clock on Earth and displayed messages on systems that weren't connected to any network. I suspect our cybersecurity protocols might be somewhat... inadequate for this particular challenge."

"Well then," the President continued with remarkable persistence, "perhaps we can impose significant tariffs on their... cosmic exports or whatever they're sending us."

The digital silence that followed was so profound Derek could hear his own heartbeat, punctuated only by the nervous clicking of his lighter. The situation had moved beyond surreal into territory that had no established protocols. "Mr. President, I'm not entirely certain that

entities capable of rewriting the fundamental laws of physics operate within our current trade frameworks."

The uncomfortable silence stretched until Dr. Okoro smoothly intervened, his diplomatic skills on full display. "Mr. President, those are certainly creative approaches that our scientific team will carefully evaluate. We appreciate your strategic thinking." The graceful deflection seemed to ease the tension slightly.

But Derek had stopped paying attention to the political maneuvering. Something embedded in the corner of the galactic map had caught his eye—a familiar pattern that made his scientific mind race with implications. The same raven-like formation he'd been detecting in cosmic data for months, identical to the symbol carved into Professor Finch's Zippo lighter.

"Nancy," he whispered urgently, his voice barely audible over the continuing discussions among forty-three world leaders trying to process first contact, "Finch knew. Somehow, he knew this was coming years ago."

The raven had been more than just a symbol—it had been a signature, a calling card from intelligences that had been preparing humanity for this moment long before anyone realized the universe was listening.

The cosmic intelligence that had been systematically editing reality had just announced humanity's graduation from cosmic isolation to galactic membership. Derek Devon, still struggling to process the sheer magnitude of this moment, realized with crystalline clarity that everything—the anomalies, the puzzle box, even his connection with Nancy—had been carefully orchestrated preparation for this exact revelation.

The lights in every facility around the globe flickered simultaneously, as if the planet itself was taking a deep breath.

Then every atomic clock in every connected facility began displaying an identical countdown: 10... 9... 8... 7...

"What the hell is happening now?" General Mitchell's voice cracked with barely controlled alarm, his military composure finally showing stress fractures.

"I believe," Dr. Hanson replied with bone-dry humor, watching the synchronized countdown with the expression of someone who'd been anticipating this exact scenario, "we're about to receive our performance evaluation."

6... 5... 4... 3... 2... 1... 0.00

Every screen went black for a single, pregnant heartbeat, then displayed two words in simple, unmistakable English:

"ANIMAL HOUSE"

Derek's face broke into a grin of pure scientific vindication mixed with genuine delight. "They quoted 'A-Blutarski' from Animal House! Our cosmic friends have clearly been studying human cinema!"

The screens flickered again, and every LED display across the globe—atomic clocks, equipment readouts, emergency systems spanning continents—began forming letters using their digital segments: L-O-L

Derek felt his pulse quicken with excitement rather than fear, his lighter clicking in rhythm with his accelerating heartbeat. "It's been listening to

everything. Every word, every reference, every moment of human interaction. And it has a sense of humor that spans galaxies."

Dr. Hanson's voice cut through the stunned silence with surgical precision. "So now it's providing commentary on our species' political dysfunctions. How perfectly reassuring."

The universal text display shifted one final time:

**CONCERN NOTED. FURTHER COMMUNICATION
SUSPENDED PENDING INTERNAL CONSENSUS.**

Then every screen returned to normal operational displays, leaving the most powerful minds on Earth staring at suddenly mundane data streams that felt utterly insignificant compared to the intelligence that had just politely dismissed their entire debate with cosmic courtesy.

The digital silence stretched until General Mitchell cleared his throat, his military bearing somewhat restored but his voice carrying unmistakable uncertainty. "Dr. Hammond, Dr. Devon, I believe we need to discuss the future scope of your research under significantly more secure parameters."

Derek stared at his screen, processing the uncomfortable truth that none of them wanted to acknowledge. Whatever intelligence they were dealing with had just demonstrated—politely but unmistakably—that human security concerns were essentially quaint relics of a more isolated age.

The universe had become infinitely larger and infinitely more complex in the span of a single exchange.

Then, just as the summit seemed to be concluding, all screens went black one final time. Slowly, deliberately, one last message appeared in elegant script across every display simultaneously:

THE CHOICE... WILL ALWAYS BE YOURS.

And somewhere in the quantum foam between realities, Derek had the profound sense that something vast, patient, and ultimately benevolent was waiting to see what humanity would choose to do next.

End of Book 2 - "The Last Axiom"

You have completed a 30-minute cosmic experience

The universe is waiting for your decision...

Follow up from the Author!

Well you have completed the first two books in the 15 (actually 16 books) 'The Last Axiom' series. The first 2 books have laid a foundation for you and you are free if you wish to now read the books out of order. While I think they are best read in order, the choice is always yours. That being noted, please do not read book 15 until you have read all the others. It may ruin your experience. Finally, if you did enjoy the read, please do me a small favour and tell a friend and leave a comment on the website (www.thelastaxiom.com).

If you ever want a bit of a different read, you may want to try my very first book titled; 'A Letter Guide for Rebecca'. It is available from Amazon around the globe.

**Cheers,
Derek
12757982**
