

# Ailly Oob

Through  
the  
Ulysses  
Trees

*Lenny  
Everson*



# Ally Oop Among the Ulysses Trees

by Lenny Everson

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## **Before you start.**

This book contains quite a number of characters in several different locales. The sections near the end, *Characters and Places* and *Day-By-Day Summary of Sections* are provided to help you keep track of events.

## **Chapter 1: September 13**

*The story opens in mid-September on an overcast day with a cool wind and the occasional shower.*

*Four days before Button Day* (The day that the aliens press the button that starts the re-activation of Professor Nothing, their spaceship)

*Kitchener, Ontario*

*Headquarters of Wind Turbines Foundation, just south of the Region of Waterloo International Airport.*

It was a sonar scan that first picked up the object in Lake Ontario off High Bluff Island. A couple of geologists and a limnologist were called in right away, sworn to secrecy, and shown the pictures. The Wind Turbine Foundation company had a fair amount of money riding on getting seventy-eight large wind turbines installed on the bottom of the lake, and nobody wanted any problems.

But, right where there was supposed to be nothing but a bit of mud or sand on top of good solid limestone, there was an odd-shaped object in seventy feet of water.

"What the hell is that thing?" the younger geologist with the red hair asked no one in particular.

"Looks like an odd-shaped submarine," the older geologist with no hair noted. "Really odd-shaped." The others just pursed their lips and contemplated the awful prospect of some historical association getting involved. It wouldn't do WTF any good. Worse, there'd been a ban on putting wind turbines into the waters off mainland Ontario since some premier of the province, a little desperate for votes before an election, had listened to an ecological group. This was to be the first offshore wind farm since the ban was lifted, and nobody in the company wanted any problems. None – or at least none they couldn't hide.

It should be explained that the name of the company had started out as "Wind Turbine Farms," with the senior officials blissfully unaware of the use that their grandkids were making of the initialism, "WTF." It also turned out that any use of the word "farm" brought derisive laughter from the farming community, most of whom seemed convinced that wind turbines reduced their wives' sex drives. It was agreed among the officials of the Wind Turbine Foundation that since they'd made up a lot of letterhead, business cards, and some giant letters to go onto the little building they owned in an industrial suburb of Kitchener, "WTF" had to stay, and since the founder and CEO said "foundation" sounded nice and stable, they'd keep it as "WTF." Besides, he noted, every other text message on the planet helped advertise the company, one way or another.

The older geologist with no hair, the sexy blonde limnologist, and the younger male geologist with the red hair looked carefully at the sonar, and at the underwater photographs that had been taken by a camera lowered from a fishing boat.

"At least it's not the wreck of the Speedy, the limnologist noted. She got a bunch of blank looks. "In 1804," the scientist told them, "the Speedy was carrying important people who planned to make Presqu'île

Point the capital of the local district. It was also carrying one of our first nations brothers, whom they planned to try and hang to mark the occasion."

"And it went down here?" a voice asked. Everyone turned, to see the CEO, who had a habit of arriving quietly. Meeting the Dilbert Requirement for managers, he was tall, and had good hair, unlike the younger geologist who had spiky hair and the limnologist who had blonde hair tied in a ponytail.

"Went down off High Bluff Island, with the loss of all lives," the limnologist continued. "The governor of the province moved the capital to Cobourg and the wreck of the Speedy was supposedly never found, although one fellow in Trenton thinks he spotted it out near Weller's Bay. I'm pretty sure this isn't it."

"We hope."

"It doesn't look like any wooden boat I've ever seen," the older geologist with no hair said. " He paused. "Looks a bit like the American Civil War boat, Monitor – the ironclad boat." He looked up to see the expression on the others' faces. "Oh, it couldn't be, of course. It looks like a submarine with no conning tower and a single large round hatch in the middle. And besides, it seems to have no magnetic component at all," he added.

"Ever seen anything like it – other than the Monitor, of course?" The CEO looked over his reading glasses at the limnologist.

"Never. Ever. There's no record of any submarines in Lake Ontario, aside from a wild rumour in World War Two that a German U-boat was seen there. That's impossible, and this doesn't look like a U-boat anyway. You can see it's settled into the mud until it's hardly projecting at all – not even any fishing nets caught on it."

"So what do we do?" the older geologist with no hair asked.

"We ignore it," the tall CEO with good hair said. "Build the foundations beside it. Don't mention it to anyone."

The others nodded, but after the meeting, the limnologist placed a phone call to a number in Langley, Virginia.

In another part of the building, the CEO sighed, got out a little book of regulations, and placed a call to an arm of the Canadian government. At least, he figured, that group might be able to keep the find secret.

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### **Langley, Virginia**

*CIA ("The Company") Headquarters*

*Four Days before Button Day*

In Langley, a phone rang at The Company. "Chung Import/Export," a voice answered.

"Bosco at 7700," the limnologist in Kitchener said, and eventually got the voice of a young man in Langley, with an odd echo to the call.

"This is code Betty Baggins," the limnologist said, untying her ponytail, because even minor people who worked for The Company didn't go around in ponytails. She wished she had a trench coat, just for the phone call.

"Hang on." The young guy in the small basement room at the CIA, who also had a ponytail, looked up the code name. It went back a long way, to the predecessor of a predecessor of both of them. "Are you 97?" the young guy asked.

"I'm the person who inherited the position of Betty Bagging," the annoyed limnologist said. "I was told I'd get a payment for anything interesting I could turn up in my job if I phoned this number."

"Ah, it looks like this project was supposed to have been terminated at the end of the cold war," the young guy admitted. I was wondering if you were 97 years old. "

"As I said, I inherited this number. Do you want what I've got or not. How much do I get?"

"Look, I'll tell you what. Give me a brief description, and I'll look into it, and if it's good I'll get back to you." The young guy was part of an organization that was reduced to chaos. Anything he did was likely to be wrong. On the other hand, a retired general was now running The Company. The general hadn't a clue what to do with anything but his paycheck, but he knew he didn't like guys with ponytails. A confrontation was inevitable, so the young guy was willing to take a chance.

The limnologist thought about it. "I guess. Bottom of Lake Ontario. Sub-like thing in the mud," she said. "Outline looks like the civil war boat Monitor, I'm told. One big round circle, a hatch or a turret, right in the middle. Maybe twenty metres long." She hung up and wondered if she'd get enough for pizza. What the hell.

It took the young guy with the ponytail seven phone calls just to find the name of someone who might have a clue, and it was a day before a call came from an old guy, retired (and, according to Records, dead) who was fishing in Chesapeake Bay with a woman who could have been his granddaughter, but wasn't. "Tell me what you have," his old voice whispered.

The young guy with the ponytail had heard the footsteps of the general pass his office, then pause. He passed along the description. Then the old voice whispered, "I think I just shit my pants. What you said cannot be true, cannot be true. Pay anything you need to pay for more information from the Kitchener woman. Got a pen? Requisition number 888A610. Use code Barbara. I'll call you tomorrow. Be waiting."

The general who was now in charge of The Company was in a foul mood. During the cold war, his antecedents had had the ear of the White House. Now he was lucky to get the ear of the woman in charge of the West Wing cafeteria. But when he opened the door, the young guy was sporting a crew cut and putting a pair of scissors away . His ponytail was now in the garbage can.

The limnologist in Kitchener,, who still had her ponytail and a degree from Conestoga College, got the call a day later from the young guy with the new crew cut hairdo at The Company . "Ten bucks," he said.

"Fifteen," the limnologist said, as she preferred better quality pizzas.

"Two thousand, eight hundred and six if you can get a copy of a picture," the young guy said, making up the number. He had an inspiration. "Double that if you can email me a picture."

"Up that to an even five thousand," the limnologist said, her math being a bit weak, "and I'll have it to you tomorrow." She had, of course, already taken a picture of the sonar scan with her cell phone.

Copies of the picture multiplied slowly in Virginia, kept to a tight circle. But not watertight; an old staffer placed a call from a street phone to Ottawa a couple of days later.

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## **Ottawa**

### *Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS)*

#### *Four Days before Button Day*

“Are there any questions so far?”

Oscar Copeman, known as “Cope” to the other agents in the room, said nothing. He had spent twenty minutes so far watching the presentation and trying to keep his mind on visions of a couple of the office secretaries mud-wrestling, naked. It hadn’t worked very well.

Senior Agent Lafontaine wasn’t good at giving presentations, and he was botching this one up. He was also very new to the team, or he wouldn’t have looked at Cope when he asked for questions. The others knew better. “Mr. Copeman?” Lafontaine asked, into the silence. “What threats do you personally rate most likely from Muslim groups in Canada?”

The other agents sighed, collectively, and tried to get their minds onto naked secretaries or gardeners, as the case might be. They would have preferred running screaming from the room or faking a heart attack, but that had been tried earlier and no longer worked. Cope was not a team player at this point in his life.

A friend had asked Cope why he didn’t just quit the Canadian Security Intelligence Service if he didn’t like it any more.

“Pension,” Cope had answered, sucking on a chocolate cigarette. “In a year I get a full pension. If I quit, I lose about thirty percent of it. I’m only fifty, so that makes a big difference if I live long enough. On the other hand, they can give me an early pension that would be almost as good as a full one.”

“What do you mean, ‘if you live long enough’? You think they’ll bump you off?”

Cope had laughed. “Haven’t heard that quaint old expression in years. No, nobody gets bumped off in the service any more, not after Neil Lucy disappeared mysteriously back in 1968.” He sucked a bit more on the cigarette, a so-far-successful effort to quit smoking. “Three weeks later a whole shitload of classified material – including lots of good stuff about his superiors – showed up at head office, with copies to every major newspaper and the Albanian embassy. No, you can’t threaten a dead man, so they like you alive.”

“So you’re just going to be a nuisance until CSIS gives you an early pension?”

“Worse than that. Much worse. I’m going to tell the truth, but only within the organization.”

“Isn’t CSIS committed to truth?” the friend had asked.

Cope had almost choked on the chocolate cigarette.

“Goat vindaloo,” Cope said, decisively, looking up at Lafontaine. “Goat vindaloo from a Bangladeshi restaurant like the Kismet.”

Lafontaine looked flustered.

“Some people wander into the place and ask for the ‘hot’ version,” Cope said. “That’ll kill some people.”

Senior Agent Lafontaine forced a smile. “I’m trying to be serious, Mr. Copeman. I want to list possible scenarios in which Muslims already within Canada might, individually or collectively, want to hurt this nation.”

“Ah,” Cope said. “This nation. So we don’t have to worry about the other nations in Canada.”

Senior Agent Lafontaine looked confused.

"Canada has several nations within it. Isn't that right, Paul? Richard?" Cope looked at the aboriginal and Quebecois members."

Lafontaine scrunched up his face. "You know what I meant."

"I did," Cope said, "but I find it dangerous to assume that I can always tell what a person means when it's not what he said. I learned that a long time ago."

"Maybe someone else can start the list." Lafontaine grabbed the whiteboard marker somewhat tighter.

"But now that I think I know what you meant, instead of what I know what you said," Cope went on, "I'd be happy to say that this is all pensionable time, but otherwise a waste of a good afternoon."

"And why would that be?"

"We already keep tabs on every possible Muslim threat in this... country. There isn't a mosque from Labrador to Victoria that isn't bugged by us at least twice, once under the water cooler and once under a quotation from the Prophet." Cope scratched himself, wishing for nicotine. "Peace be upon him," he added. "And that doesn't include any illegal bugs our friends to the south have installed."

"We've bugged every place three young Muslims could possibly eat, including every fried-chicken place in every major city. We tap so many phones we've had to install a very expensive computer just to sort out the messages, and if some poor joker mentions that next week's looking good for a picnic, we'll follow him right up to the time his family unrolls a blanket on the beach."

"I think..."

"It's got so my dentist is afraid to put in a filling in case someone thinks he's suspected of inventing tooth bombs."

"You have a Muslim dentist?" someone asked, loudly. Cope suspected this would be added to his file, and if his dentist's brother-in-law's second cousin had visited Pakistan in the last decade, Cope would be checked out again. A note about tooth bombs would be made somewhere.

"You're calling this a pointless exercise?" Lafontaine said, grimly.

Cope waved his hands. "Not at all. Not at all. If we don't chase Muslims, then we don't get big grants to chase Muslims just because our Friends to the South are totally whacko. I'm not trying to stop this exercise; I'm just identifying it as I see it. It's my duty to be perceptive for these younger fellas."

Lafontaine wrote "tooth bombs" on the whiteboard. "You know," he said, "a mouthful of explosive dentures could be used for targeted assassinations. Or for blowing out the windows on an airliner. Thank you, Mr. Copeman. Do we have any other suggestions?" Not everybody in the room was able to keep a straight face, but they did manage to come up with other suggestions, the sensible ones being those that they'd seen many times before.

Cope may have got his point across, but it served him to no good end, for Lafontaine complained to his boss, and Cope ended up getting assigned to drive to Brighton, Ontario, to look around for odd rumors. He told Paula, his wife, and she just sighed. "Better than being assigned to Afghanistan or Glen Miller," Cope pointed out. "I'm only a couple of hours away for a week." It didn't make her much happier, but then, he hadn't supposed it would.



Early the next morning Cope called Jag Stone, an old friend in Brighton. "Jag. This is the man from the movie academy."

"Ah, well hello, old guy." In Afghanistan, Copeman had been ribbed for his first name, Oscar. "Another tango gets an Oscar;" the men had said when Cope had eliminated a Taliban fighter, "add it to the movie credits." It didn't make much sense, but nothing over there had made much sense. He knew Cope was leery about phone conversations – it seemed to be part of the spy business to be a little paranoid.

"I need a favor. Will you have time to meet with me the day after tomorrow?"

"Sure," Jag said. "I'm on duty all day, but we can meet at lunch downtown."

"How about Carrying Place, at the cafe in the gas station."

"12:05. I'll be at the main intersection; the café closed last month."

"Thanks. Bye."

Secret meetings, Jag thought. I wonder what's up. But it didn't keep him awake.

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## **Toronto**

*The Piazza Manna bar facing the harbor*

*Four Days before Button Day*

Outside, the wind suddenly threw rain onto the Queens Quay, onto the people heading to catch the last ferries, onto the Captain John's Restaurant boat tied to the docks. The street shone like diamonds, and people, laughing, ran for cover.

Somewhere above the clouds and beyond the rainbows the stars shone bright and cold and much too far away. Another night, and no communication from the Empire approached the cloudy blue planet.

Inside the Piazza Manna bar five creatures waited out the night. All of them looked human. Two weren't, at least not completely.

Jack, which wasn't his real name (you couldn't pronounce it unless you were born a hgkpphtitrw) was slurring his words. He leaned over towards Jim, and wheezed, carefully, "I say we blow the whole damn planet to hell!"

Jim (which wasn't his real name), thoughtfully stuffed his tongue up his left nostril, in the way that hgkpphtitrw have done for a million years. It was a tribute to what he could will his host's aging human body to do. He'd had his host as long as Jack, but had taught the human form a few civilized tricks. Catching the bartender's eye, he pulled his tongue back.

"Ah," he huffed, in a loud voice, looking toward the bartender, "two more of the same." He was old, and his nose hairs swayed back and forth as he breathed.

Outside, individuals and lovers strolled the darkening street, then turned back toward the string of hotels to the east. At this end of Toronto, there was little to see or do after dark. But lovers were lovers and Toronto had streets aplenty for them and memories of this night forever, even in the rain.

Above the nighttime thunderstorm, the stars twinkled, a lifetime too far away. The two at the bar had long ago stopped looking at them, waiting for their call to come in.

The bartender hoisted out the bourbon bottle, splashed some into a couple of glasses, then sprinkled a generous dose of cilantro into the glass. If that's what they wanted, he figured, that's what they get.



Business was slow at this time of the year, especially in cool weather. To a bartender there was no such thing as absurd, although these two nose-lickers were pushing the limit. But he knew they'd be gone in a couple of hours, as usual.

There was a moment's silence, as the two slurped their drinks. "He never puts the damn cilantro into the glass first," Jack hiccupped. "He'll be first to the slaughter!"

"Kind of pointless, turning this damn planet into a ring of pebbles," Jim pointed out, "when we're stuck here." He fondled an egg-sized object that looked like a beach stone. It was a command unit, but it reminded him of a childhood toy he'd had on the volcano-ridden home world of the hgkpphtitrw, and he began to cry. He was sure he'd never hear the wind in the craters again.

"For crissakes," Jack licked at the cilantro and bourbon, closest thing Earth had to the sacred food of his people. "Stop crying. If you want, we'll open that bar on the beach, like you wanted." Above him, a slow fan moved damp air. A wet drunk stumbled in, fell over a chair, and was quickly escorted back into the rain.

Personally, Jack thought it was a stupid idea. Not, maybe, as stupid as Jim's attempt to revive and market the strigil. The Roman bath tool had reminded the alien of hgkpphtitrw bathing rites, and he'd assumed earth people would welcome the scraping of water off their ugly skins. Wrong. Wrong to the tune of much of what money they'd had at the time, before they sold another lot of their diamonds.

Eventually, he had realized Jim hadn't his horsepower in the cranial area, so he was inclined to humor his friend/niece/grandfather, if only for kinship's sake. He tried to thpddf at the thought, but the human form wasn't equipped for it.

Jim raised his teary eyes from the drink, wishing he could uswaqjI, but the frail and absurd human body was a couple of penises and a heel-horn short of being able to do that. He fanned an ear instead.

"Thanks, Mr. Daniels," he whispered. "I'd like that." He raised his glass in shaky hands. "To our own little exclave of hgkpphtitrw." He farted happily (the hgkpphtitrw talk through their anuses).

"Give me the rock," Jack whispered. or tried to; he was quite drunk by now."

"You don't trust me? I'm not the one ready to blow up Earth."

"Not with sixteen drinks and a planet-wrecker. Bad combo."

"You're just as drunk!"

"You promised I could open a bar on the beach east of Panama City." A hiccup.

Jim looked at the smooth bit of stone. "I've never opened it."

"That's why we and billions of humans are still inhabiting this swamp. The rock." But Jim stubbornly put it into his pocket. "Maybe this year we'll be called back home," he said.

Jack ignored him. So many years had gone by, and every year there seemed less hope that politics in the empire would end their exile. At least their spaceship was still safely in the waters of Lake Ontario. The newer versions of side-scanning sonar were finding old shipwrecks, but the Professor Nothing (the closest translation into human terms) was hidden under the mud. It was also invisible to magnetic detection.

At least, Jack thought, there wasn't a sign of the humans who called themselves "alien hunters." That group of nutbars had actually discovered a bit of the truth, and were going around trying to locate humans

who were controlled by aliens. So far as Jack knew, only one had been found, but he also knew that not all the other nine aliens were in communication with the rest. Some were just too cautious.

The rain picked up outside, tap-dancing on the roof of a white Buick, illegally idling for a moment on the street.

Jim looked at the bartender. "Another of the same. Cilantro first, okay?"

The bartender nodded. Outside, in the dark, the eastern sky was starting to lighten a bit as the clouds blew out over Lake Ontario. The two looked at their drinks, sighed, and tried to keep their minds on opening a little bar where strange hairless apes learned to love a new drink made of Wild Turkey and cilantro and you could watch pelicans riding the sea winds.

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## **Toronto**

*The home of a member of The Philip Group*

*Four Days before Button Day*

Not quite fifty years ago a bunch of ghost-happy Torontonians decided to call up a ghost called Philip.

It was a lark. Nobody knew any dead guy named Philip. They just made up a name and asked him to communicate with them by rapping on the table. Well, to their astonishment, he did: they'd not found a ghost but created one. This posed, of course, some interesting questions, not a few of which were theological, but it provided a good time for all the humans, and perhaps even for Philip-the-ghost, who may or may not have existed even when he existed, if you follow.

Jump forward a long time. To yet another group of people who have more time on their hands than is good for them. A heady mix of eight men and women who would have been better off in a bridge club, were it not that too many of them had a tendency to cheat, sometimes at bridge, too.

Oh, they'd read the book, *Conjuring Philip*, and passed it among themselves. There didn't, they figured, seem to be any problems, other than the general spookiness of the concept. Other than rapping on the table, Philip had behaved like a gentleman. No poltergeistish chucking around of the crockery nor any attempts to purchase a soul (assuming a Toronto soul had much net worth these days.)

For a couple of years they'd had a good, if inconclusive time with Ouija boards, without once getting anything rapping except Karn, cracking his toe bones.

It was Pag who brought up the subject of calling up the spirit of someone who'd been a real person, once upon a time. "After all," she explained to the others, "a real ghost will be able to provide details of some historical event, and we could check it out in some book."

Kyle was opposed. "Look. There are no ghosts, so we're going to get a fake ghost anyway, and I really don't want to be disappointed again by some rapping Cleopatra bragging about her marriage to Napoleon." He was sure that the source of rapping communication was in the people around the table, and if this whole project went on a few months or more, he'd be happy and might even figure out a way to get Janet into his bed. That wasn't as long a shot as he figured, what with Janet being less than satisfied with the guy she was currently married to, but Kyle didn't know that at the time.

But Kyle lost that argument anyway. Karn figured out with a little cross-examination that none of the group knew ratshit about Canadian history, and suggested they just pick “an important Canadian historical person.”

"Too bad Tom's not here with us," Janet laughed. "He could talk to the ghost of anybody if we let him." Tom Barrents had been one of their earliest members, a professor at the university who'd helped set up the "rules" of their little society. A couple of months later he was talking to dead people and telling the rest that there was a conspiracy to cover up the truth. A brain scan had shown nothing wrong, so the doctors put it down as another mystery of the mind, and put him on some medication that made him mumble and smile a lot. He'd eventually ditched the meds, accused them all of being creatures from another planet and gone off to hide in the woods. A couple of years later, he was back, a lot thinner, and taking his meds like a good boy, but now he had a hard time with any sentence that had a subordinate clause in it, so he wasn't nearly as interesting being stupid as he was when he was crazy.

"Or Darkh," Karn noted. "Just in case we actually call up a ghost." There was general laughter. The guy from Kitchener was a big ghost hunter and friend of Janet's, but there was something about him that didn't work in groups. Somehow he made any group he was in a bit dysfunctional, although no one could say why. Janet did make a mental note to tell Darkh about their experiment when she met him again.

Pag suggested contacting Pierre Trudeau, but Hap said that one of them might have absorbed some information from a parent, so they'd be better off looking up someone none of them knew much about, but someone they could check on. After a bit of discussion and a lot of booze, they settled on Louis Riel.

"Who?" asked Pag, after she'd agreed.

"Out west, somewhere," Kyle said. "Métis guy. Led a rebellion with Gabriel Dumont against the government of Canada and what's-his-face, John A. MacDonald."

"MacDonald?" asked Pag, to show she wasn't completely lost in Canadian History. "Is he the guy that built the railway?"

"That's the one. They even named the MacDonald-Cartier freeway – the 401 – after him, or at least one half of it."

"Which half?" asked Karn, smiling.

"Whatever half's closest to Scotland, I expect," Janet said. "He was always a good Scot before anything else."

"And Louis Riel?" asked Pag. "What happened to him?"

"Hung," said Janet.

"Hanged, too," added Karn.

"Sure. We could do Louis Riel," Janet agreed.

"Nah," Kyle said, changing his mind. "There's too much of him in the books. Too easy to get it out of someone's subconscious."

"Then what about that Dumont guy, Riel's friend?" Pag asked.

"Died of old age."

"Let's do Dumont, then," Karn said.

There was a long silence, then Pag suggested, "Sounds good. Let's get at it."

“Next meeting,” Kyle said. “We can devote the whole meeting to it. Just nobody look up any information on this guy so we can’t influence the ghost.” There was general agreement.

“We’re not ready to go yet, are we?” Pag was facing a lonesome home and a sick cat.

“Not yet.” Karn got up. “I’ll mix us some more drinks, unless anyone objects.”

No one objected. They talked movies for an hour.

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## **Waterloo, Ontario**

### *Downtown*

#### *Four Days before Button Day*

The rain bounced off the concrete sidewalk outside the Starbucks in downtown Waterloo. A couple of kids riding bikes dodged an old guy pushing a rollator, one of those walkers on wheels that decrepit people use to find their way to the grave, given enough time. One kid, a male of about ten, dropped a McDonalds cup, probably accidentally, beside the old guy. The old fart nudged the kid’s bike just a bit sideways, where it nicked a bit of paint off a parked Aston-Martin before the kid regained control. “Fuck you, you fucking old bastard!” the kid yelled, but the old guy ambled on. Darkh Blood, sitting at a table in the Great Coffee Snobbitorium, watched without comment. That was the state of life today, he thought. The place was almost empty, and the afternoon was growing late. The scene ended, and the actors wandered off his stage.

When people asked, he informed them that his last name, “Blood,” was properly pronounced to rhyme with “rude,” that it was Estonian and meant kindling wood. This was not correct; the name was in fact pronounced to rhyme with “hood” or “good,” and was from a Romanian dialect that meant “serious.” But who cared.

Across the street, a bible book and gift shop looked like it was awaiting the second coming. A clerk, the only person inside, was reading something or other. It had better be the bible, Darkh thought, considering the security camera, one of several the store had to prevent rampant theft, that was pointing in her general direction.

The upper floors of the building the bible store was in were old yellow brick, with the architecture that in 1900 had made the building and street indistinguishable from that in dozens of other Ontario towns. The street-level façade had been renovated at some time to host large glass windows in aluminum frames, a change which currently made the store architecturally indistinguishable from its neighbours and from stores in dozens of other Ontario towns. A paucity of imagination or bravery that came packaged with the province’s merchants had been successfully carried on for generations in Waterloo. The Starbucks was, however, an architectural contrast, having been built to match a few thousand similar Starbucks spread across North America like hogweed.

Outside, the rain fell, as if God wanted to wash away the mediocrity and desolation of the lives of the people of Waterloo, a city whose government was meeting to propose a rather expensive renovation of the downtown, most of which would involve tearing up the asphalt street and paving it with a ghastly yellow brick. The brick would reflect badly in the blank glass walls of the insurance building that took up most of the streetscape on the west side. A few years before there had been a row of stores that didn’t attract enough attention, so they had been replaced by a seven-storey office complex. The complex paid a lot

more taxes, but at street level, except for the Starbucks, all a person could see would be his own reflection in the featureless glass, and that of the bible store across the street. It made one wonder if he should dash across and buy a bible, in a desperate attempt to find meaning in it all.

The guy that founded Starbucks as a plague had come back from Europe with the notion that people needed a “third place.” A place that wasn’t the workplace nor home, but a neutral area where a fellow could meet with friends and talk a while over a cup of coffee priced so high that it must taste just great, and talk about life, politics, the universe, and their increasingly insignificant others.

There were eight people in the Starbucks and none of them were talking to each other. One was reading a book, four were poking away at laptops, and the others either had donated their brains to science, were contemplating string theory, or had escaped to Mars and were ambling down Desolation Road.

None, thank God, were paying any attention to Darkh Blood, who was worrying a now-lukewarm Coffee Magnifico and trying to find something new in the daily news. A trembling feeling in his left testicle told him it was listening time. Why he should be a Listener was something he’d never found out, but thirty years of experience had shown him that nothing he could do would change it, or help him escape it. The guy with the book came over and sat down across the table, setting a mug of tea onto Darkh’s paper, covering a story about an oil spill in Toronto harbour.

“My daughter-in-law isn’t speaking to me,” the man started. “I must have said something that I don’t remember saying. Maybe she imagined it when she was drunk – she gets drunk whenever she visits us. Then she wants to talk about my son, who’s still trying to find another job. He’s a good kid, well, maybe not a kid any more, but the places he finds to work at don’t appreciate him, I guess. So she works at the hospital, because they need the money for the one granddaughter, who’s autistic and has a skin condition that none of the doctors....”

Darkh nodded, his large, sad, brown eyes focused on the stranger. This was a regular occurrence – maybe twice a week – for Darkh, and he’d learned a decade or two before that anything he did would just prolong the situation. If he slipped away with an excuse, he’d find two of the whining leeches after him in an hour. So he pretended to sip on his cold coffee and pretended to listen to the familiar litany of mental and physical complaints.

The guy started talking about his sister, the mayor, and for a moment Darkh listened. His mind had just wandered onto an erotic fantasy about the girl behind the counter when he caught the word, “Soviet.” His focus returned instantly. He’d learned that asking questions was a bad move, so he tried to piece together what the stupid ass across the table had been saying.

“I mean,” the guy whined, “she still gets fifty bucks a month from somewhere in Russia and there’s nothing she can do for them now. The Soviet Union’s been gone for over twenty years. But does she send it back or buy us a lunch sometime with the money? Not on your life.”

Abruptly, as they all did, he stopped, realizing he’d been telling things to a complete stranger, apologized, and was about to get up in confusion. “Ghosts,” Darkh said to him. “Vampires, aliens, poltergeists. Zombies. Any of those?”

The man hesitated. “I think two of my wife’s uncles are under the control of alien beings,” he offered, looking at the floor.

"What makes you think so?" Darkh's gaze was steady.

"We visited them. They used to be great people. Now they keep asking questions they should know the answer to, and they really don't want to see us." the man whispered. "My wife's still upset, and it's been a long time."

"Give me their names," Darkh said. "I'll pass them on to someone who knows what to do." Darkh turned back to his newspaper. The guy wrote onto a napkin, then left the restaurant as quickly as he could, still confused.

For the last year Darkh been using his early retirement to look for evidence of the supernatural, and that included asking the talkers he was forced to endure about such things. Several times there'd been a lead for ghosts, but the ghosts must have been on vacation when Darkh showed up. His girlfriend had told him to keep busy to keep sane in retirement, especially at 43, so that's what he was trying to do.

There was, Darkh knew, very little likelihood that anything could come of the alien lead; but he wanted something to pass on to Clyde Books. Clyde hunted aliens like Darkh hunted ghosts and had passed on a couple of tips that had sounded good at the time, anyway. This time he could return the favor.

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## **Chapter 2: September 14**

*This day is sunny, and warmer than the previous day. A few of the leaves on the aspens are beginning to get their autumn colors – at least on this part of planet Earth.*

*Three Days before Button Day*

*Further In Along the Galactic Arm*

*The palace and the plaza in front of it.*

"Damn!" thought the King of the Galactic Empire (or at least one corner of it). "This just isn't going to work." He reached under his royal robe, unscrewed his penis, and set it into the glass of stale soup beside his throne. The glass now held the penis, a set of fangs, and one royal ear. The King of the Galactic Empire contemplated his toes; he didn't like them, either.

Annoyed, he decided he wasn't going to sleep anyway. He took the secret door that exited behind the magazine stand across the sacred square, where the Castle faced the temple. Abruptly, he paused. He'd forgotten his force shield. He hesitated, swore an oath, then decided to continue on anyway. There were lots of tourists around, and none of the individuals or species looked dangerous – not that the King of the Galactic Empire knew what some species looked like when they were annoyed.

Approaching from the other direction, a birdlike Gu strutted steadily, looking innocent. "Lightly," she thought, tucking the bomb under her arm. "Mustn't alarm the natives." She walked casually across the plaza, moving among the Pthutt, towards the Temple of Temples, Holy of Holies, religious and political center of the south arm of the Galaxy.

Even then, all might have been well, but several of the Empire security staff, alerted by some spies, were checking out all the Gu in the city. Spotting one, they cut across the crowds toward it.

Neither the Gu nor the security staff noticed the King nearby when the Gu, finding herself cut off, touched the detonator.

Less than three days later, the superluminal ether was full of messages, including one to the third planet of a small star out towards the edge of the galaxy.

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## **Kitchener, Ontario**

*A house in one of the older parts of town, close to the river.*

*Three Days before Button Day*

Clyde Books took the rifle out of the hot-water tank. The tank hadn't been used for anything else for years, the water in the Kitchener house being heated by a couple of demand units near the taps. So the old tank was a good place for an unregistered rifle, really big scope and all.

He set the rifle onto the kitchen table, then began dismantling it, while he waited for the information he needed.

He took it apart, piece by piece, then checked each piece, taking special care with the scope. Once it was apart, he put on a blindfold, and shuffled the forty-three pieces around with a ladle. Some pieces, he pushed onto the floor.

Still blindfolded, he reassembled the weapon, crawling on his hands and knees to get those pieces that had fallen onto the floor. When he was done, he felt his way to the window and opened it. Resting the stock on a chair back, he pointed the rifle out the window, then pushed up the blindfold. The rifle was aimed at a window four houses away, across the street.

Satisfied, he went to the ammunition storage, also in the old water heater. He paused for a minute, then decided twenty-five rounds of the long shells would be more than enough. Actually, he figured he'd need no more than a couple in any situation. "One round; one kill" was still the sniper's motto, however unreal it was in most situations.

He loaded all of the rifle except the stock into a packsack. Then he got a wooden cane from the wall. It came apart to provide a hiding spot for the long rifle barrel. That done, he paused, and sighed, then returned the rifle and ammunition to their original hiding places.

Scowling, he loaded his real weapons, a taser and a cattle prod, into his leather jacket. Perhaps the next two days would be good for hunting, even without a gun.

Clyde picked up his pad. The pictures had been delivered, as promised. He printed them off, in color, with the caption, "possibly under alien control," at the top of the paper. Little things like that never hurt. Now to choose a target.

There were twelve guys and a girl in the pictures. He scanned the names, but they meant nothing to him. The only target within easy driving range was a dude named Casey Szczedziwoj, from Kitchener. But Clyde had little faith in the hunter group, so he felt reluctant to chase this one down right away.

He also, to his surprise, got a message from Darkh. Someone had left Darkh a tip about two guys, apparently brothers, Bill and Bob Daniels; who were listed as living on Ward's Island, one of the islands in Toronto Harbour. The brothers intrigued Books; maybe he could get a two for one. Anyway, he'd enjoy the trip to the island. Within the hour his white Buick was on the 401, bound for Toronto, listening to the radio.

Clyde hadn't ever caught, or even seen, a true alien, and in fact only two had ever been seen. One crawled out of a guy being tasered in Boise, Idaho. The fellow hadn't done anything wrong, and the taser was a mistake, but the cop who made the mistake saw a luminescent creature like a slug the size of a big submarine sandwich ooze out from the victim and onto the pavement. Instinctively, the cop had



plugged the thing with six shots from his police-issue gun, separating it into several pieces with a lot of pavement bits stuck in for good. The cop was still trembling when the pieces of the thing seemed to soak into the roadway and disappear.

The taser victim, later known as "Case One," had recovered and had no intention of suing anybody. Rather, he had nothing but thanks for being freed from what he described as years of control. Nobody believed him, of course, except the cop, who had then founded an online association called "Alien Hunters International."

In the following years the organization had acquired a membership of at least five hundred people, of whom, at best, a dozen might be both serious and sane at the same time. A lot of odd-acting people had been tasered without results in the next decade, but the apparent discovery of another alien had given everybody hope. As with the first, an electric shock had caused the alien rider to leave its host body, at least for a moment.

Mind you there was an ongoing discussion on the web as to whether this second one was a hoax or not. But still, many believed.

In any case, the online discussion groups had decided that it took more than acting odd to arouse suspicion. Two important clues had come from Case One. The fellow involved had abruptly started acting strangely, had avoided people who knew him well, and had some undefined source of enough money to live a simple but adequate life. And, of course, there were the diamonds.

This was Clyde's nineteenth foray in three years, and he was realistic enough to know that the odds were against him. But what the heck, it gave him something to do on a weekend, and who knows, maybe one of the people in the picture did, in fact, harbour an alien.

He parked his car by the waterfront and walked onto the ferry.

A couple of hours later, having located "Hatches' Corner," the house the brothers lived in, and having determined no one was home there, he left Toronto. He'd got the impression of a close-knit community, and hadn't wanted to draw too much attention to himself.

It was not a problem; he thought of himself as a leopard, not a lion. He would take his time and pounce when the time for pouncing was right. In the meantime, he decided to check out the Szczedziwoj lead instead, just in case.

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### **Downtown Brighton, Ontario**

*At the hardware store, ten in the morning.*

*Three days before Button Day*

"Diggin' up bones!" Jagger Stone said.

"What?" She seemed puzzled, looking briefly around to see if it really was her he had spoken to.

"Diggin' up bones!" he repeated. "Exhumin' up things that were better left alone." Several people in the hardware store took a quick peek, memorizing her face in the instant way that small-town people do.

As if to make a barrier, she held the long-handled shovel awkwardly in front of her with one hand, stuffing her change and receipt into a small brown purse with the other. She was a small woman, with black hair and dark brown eyes. He guessed her age to be in the mid-forties. Maybe some native blood.

"Darn," the policeman adjusted his hat. "Doesn't anyone listen to Randy Travis any more?" Getting no further response, he added, "The country singer, you know." He smiled his biggest smile.

"Oh." She didn't quite return the smile, and edged out of the store. Behind her, the three customers returned to picking out rakes and nails and sets of tulip bulbs.

It was September in the south of Ontario and the clouds had moved out, leaving bright sunshine. The streets still hissed, wetly, from the night before, as cars edged down the street. A dog wandered loose, blocking traffic for a minute, then a small girl ran out and grabbed it by the collar. Two locals stood on the steps of the small brick post office and talked. The town's most obvious local, the blond dreadlocked Shaman Shaman, sat on the post office steps with a notebook and looked for people to talk to. Jag watched the woman cross the street and load the shovel into the back of a green Jeep Cherokee.

Jag glanced around the hardware store. The earthy and pungent smell of the onions improved the smell of the place, he thought. Most of the year the store smelled of oils and mouse baits. A man in a baseball cap – another stranger to town – was inspecting mousetraps. Or pretending to, Jag thought. Something in Jag's deep memory was triggered by the careful way the man moved. He sighed – in his life he'd learned to be suspicious a little too much.

Jag turned to the clerk. "A nice-lookin' woman, Shawn. And not a tourist." He looked outside again, where the Jeep had been. An old Ford was trying to get into the parking spot, and not doing well. "You want to know why?"

Shawn rolled his eyes and packed a tin of Riesling wine mix into a plastic bag. Most people in Brighton pretended to mind each other's business, of course. At seventeen, Shawn probably thought adult business wasn't worth caring about.

This didn't seem to bother the burly constable. Maybe a lot of people rolled their eyes at him. Maybe Shawn rolled his eyes at everybody. It was part of a cop's job to lecture teenagers. It was part of a cop's job to have teenage eyes rolled at him.

There were, Jag suddenly thought, too many teenagers in this country. They seemed to have a burning need to defy authority. Their parents, first, and by extension, teachers, society and cops. Especially cops, it seemed to Jag. There ought to be a law limiting their numbers. For a moment he wondered what a tour in Afghanistan would have done to them, but quickly decided it might have made them into worse grown-ups.

Maybe some day there would be a chemical that eliminated teenagerhood, Jag hoped. Inject the little suckers at puberty, and they'd become instant responsible adults. No drinking parties on the local beaches at night, no spray-painted slogans on the high-school brickwork, no midnight car chases.

Especially car chases. The cop shuddered at that. At least, in this rural area, no kids tried to run cops down. No kids got shot by panicked men in blue. He looked down the street. Ethnically almost all the same, he thought. A shortage of angry minority groups. Except for visiting women buying shovels.

"Well, you've gotta ask yourself," Jag scooped the bag of wine mix into his huge arms, "why she's buying a shovel here." He looked around. "You're charging more than Canadian Tire in Trenton, and they're charging more than the Home Depot in Belleville, so no tourist is going to stop in Brighton to buy a shovel. And if she had moved in, I'd know it."

"Probably visiting a relative." Shawn looked around for someone, anyone, he could help buy something.

"Could be. Could be. We've got enough retired people here, and more from Toronto every year. And they've gotta have nieces and daughters to dig up the peonies, all right." A few locals lined up and waited silently behind the cop.

"Then again," the cop laughed, "maybe she'll be burying her old mother tonight by the full moon." The trouble with Jag's laugh was that it tended to make you acutely uncomfortable. Like he'd a good idea what you did when you were sixteen and there wasn't a hope of hiding it any more.

Jag looked at the ceiling. "You get a short-handled shovel for peonies, Shawn. Long-handled shovels are for deep holes." He gave the teen a knowing look. "This woman is either digging deep holes, or she doesn't know her shovels."

Shawn watched Jag put his purchase into the unmarked white Chev. The cop then walked over to Shawn's car and inspected it. He knelt by the front wheel, and came up with a pinch of sand. He looked up right through the plate glass window and winked at Shawn. Shawn tried not to think of last night and JoAnne Petrie down at Barcovan Beach road.

Brighton is not a big town. A small block of shops and a post office made up the core. Past a few big old houses you came to the Becker's convenience store, and, opposite it, the Brewer's Retail, where local people got their beer. Watching television and drinking beer constituted the primary entertainment in the town. It had been years since the movie theater had closed. Every year the highways got better. Every year the downtown of Brighton got smaller.

Next to the beer store was the town's small park. At one end, senior citizens lawn-bowled in summer. Near the main street, the town council had erected a fountain in hope of improving the park's appearance. It was made of fieldstones and looked like a primary school science-fair volcano, except larger. Somewhere, somehow, someone surely planned to bulldoze it once the town council was gone and the designer, a local veteran, had died.

The downtown itself contained some fifty buildings, most of them made of classic brick. You could still see the brick, if you looked up. The bottom level of each building was glass and aluminum. It had looked like modernization in the fifties; now it just looked like any other small town. Every couple of years, one of the stores would close, to be replaced by a shop selling ever cheaper goods, or by a craft shop with a name like "The Needle and I," destined for an equally short stay.

A few blocks away, the district high school dominated a few acres of land. To the north of the core, the district OPP office sat half way up the hill, on the road out of town.

There was a steady stream of traffic through the downtown, but only a few people on the sidewalk. It could have been any of a hundred small towns in Ontario.

The retired people helped the local economy. They sold their old homes in Toronto and moved to Brighton to live at a slower pace, to walk to the downtown stores in the good weather, to sit in the coffee shop for a half hour in the afternoon and brag about the lower property taxes. You could see them most days, sipping slowly on a coke, or poking at a plate of chips, reluctant to go back to lonely rooms on too-quiet streets.

And, of course, there were the regional services like the police headquarters and Ministry of Agriculture building. Most of the police cars were out cruising the 401 expressway to the north of the town, but Jag's territory normally covered the downtown, the cottages by the shores, and over to Gosport, on Presqu'ile bay.

Across the tracks and past the old swamp, Jag's car rolled quietly into Gosport. It pulled up in front of Grant's Mini- Shop and the cop got out. He bought a diet Pepsi and a bag of chips, smiled at the Grant girl behind the counter, and got back into the car.

Slowly, he toured the community. He drove some of the back streets at random, then ate the chips by the water. He walked to the motel and dropped the empty bag into the garbage can beside the front door. "Mornin,' Chuck!" he called to the middle- aged man cleaning the steps. Then he drove back out over the tracks, several small children and a German shepherd watching him silently.

Gosport caused more trouble than any other place except the park. It was a collection of sixty-odd houses, a small variety store, and one cinder-block motel/marina. In earlier days, Gosport had been a center of fishing and smuggling. Cigarettes and bottles of cheap American liquor still came in on a regular basis, now that the Ontario government had outlawed their perch-fishing nets.

Gosport was poor, no doubt. If you were poor, you drifted into the place, and drank beer on the rotting dock, and fished for pike in the bay. But it wasn't the poverty. It was the attitude. Authority was suspect. The police chased your cars and the government took your fishing nets. Half the place was on welfare and it showed in the attitudes of the teens.

Jag had wanted to buy a house there when he had come from Toronto. The chief talked him out of it. "They'll slash your tires, eh. How many sets of tires can you replace before you shoot somebody?"

That was a low cut. Jag didn't want to discuss the shooting in Toronto. But he gave up the idea of moving into Gosport, and settled into a house on a hill overlooking the town.

After Gosport, the cop decided to do a loop of the lakeshore area, starting with the cottages by the park. If you had asked him, he'd have said, with that smile of his, that he was "just patrolling the town, like they pay me to."

He spotted her car just outside the park, beside one of a group of old cottages. The cottage faced a gravel beach that curved in from the lake. The Jeep was pulled just far enough off the dirt laneway to be out of the way, but not enough to be in danger of getting stuck in the sand. She was not in the Jeep.

Jag edged his car up a bit and spotted her by the lake, standing on the gravel beach, looking out across the water. She had, Jag noticed, a set of binoculars. He reached for his own set.

Close up, she looked cold. There was a chill wind off Lake Ontario and whitecaps on Popham Bay, and her long black hair tumbled and twirled. She was wearing only a dark blue sweater for warmth, and a faded pair of jeans. A good-looking woman, the cop decided, again.

As he focused his binoculars the radio snapped on and off, with the dispatcher's voice and that of various cops on the highways. A minor accident out towards Colborne, an abandoned car on the 401 not far from the McDonalds service center. The usual shit, he thought. In between, he could hear the steady grating of the gravel beach and the call of seagulls.

He followed the line of her sight. She was looking across the water towards High Bluff Island. A small flock of various water birds bobbed offshore, but too far away to tell what they were. Not, he decided, a good place for birdwatchers. There were many places far better, in the park itself.

After a moment, she picked up a stone and skipped it into the cold waves. It bounced twice and disappeared. She knelt to examine the round beach stones or some flotsam of interest.

He called the license plate in, and the dispatcher had it back in less than a minute, the radio crackling a bit. Laura Singer. New Hamburg, Ontario. One parking ticket this year, paid, but still on the computer. Should be in a green Jeep Cherokee.

Carefully Jag turned around in the Patel's cottage lane, and drove the mile back into town. Traffic was light; the tourists left with the summer. It seemed a shame to Jag; in spring, the park was famous for mosquitoes, in July and August the place was crowded. September was best.

Like any good cop, he knew every donut shop, donut by donut. Tim Horton's had opened another franchise here the year before. They were, he thought, spreading like a plague. But they did make reasonably good coffee and he wanted a few minutes to think.

Carrie, at the donut shop, served him his black coffee and chocolate donuts without being asked. Jag pondered strange women, shovels, and High Bluff Island while he ate. He wondered why Carrie was doing the afternoon shift on a Saturday. He might want to check that Tom wasn't getting rough with her again. New earrings, he noticed. Tom tended to buy her new jewelry when he got sober and apologetic.

Afterward he drove over to the "town archives." Her name was Josephine Bryne, and she was older than the trees, and worked at the registry office. He parked behind the building, and took the stairs to the basement.

In the brightly lit registry office Josie looked up from a map of the Township of Cramahe. She was obviously trying not to smile as he pulled out a small bouquet of daisies he'd snatched from the registry building parking lot. He held them out and grinned at her in silence.

"You can't fool an old lady with flowers." She took them, though, and filled an antique Orange Crush bottle with water for them. "You've come for purposes of ultimate evil, I can tell. Probably sold the town to the Hamilton Mafia when nobody was watching you."

"You know about the Hamilton Mafia deal?" His face showed mortification.

"God damn right I do. Hope you got more than ten bucks for the whole town."

"Over a thousand for the town, Josie." Jag paused for effect. "But I had to throw in the town beer store. "

"You took them, Jag. They'll get you for that."

"Josie," he said, getting more serious, "is there anything worth digging for, in the area?"

"Other than worms, or the source of the Nile?"

"Out towards the park, say, or the island offshore?"

"Daigen's Island? If you were really stupid, maybe." She paused. "The government calls it High Bluff Island, now."

"How so?"

She rolled up the map and set it aside. "Buy an old lady a coffee at Bud's and I'll tell you a story of pirates and treasure that will curl your hair." She looked at him. "What's left of it, anyway."

In the booth beside the window at Bud's they made small talk about the people passing until the coffee arrived. Jag inspected the registry clerk. It was said she'd have retired fifteen years ago if she hadn't been so valuable to the town. Or, some said, if she hadn't known so much about people's private dealings. Jag shook his head. He could see himself, someday, in the same office, poring over a map of someone's bad land deal. At the rate he was going, he'd catch up to her in about ten years. He ordered fries, coffee, and a donut.

When the coffee came, Josie pulled a small aspirin bottle from her purse, opened it, and poured clear liquid into her cup. Jag raised a thick eyebrow. "London Dry aspirin for my old bones," she answered his question.

"So what's on the island?"

"It was known as Treasure Island for a couple of years after the war," she said.

He watched her sip the coffee, unable to imagine what it tasted like. "There was treasure there?" Bud's was mostly full, with a crowd of young teens making noise in the far corner. Bud's seemed to specialize in bad, greasy food, and coffee that tasted like old tires had been added to the mix. But it was brightly lit, and on the main street, so people sensed that it was the most cheerful place in town.

"I doubt it. Paul Daigen lived there for about thirty years, and ran a small farm. You know the kind. A couple of Jersey cows, an acre of corn for the cow, and a couple of acres of vegetables, mostly beets."

"Beets?"

"Beets. God knows why. He'd sell them to the local canning place – we had two canners, then, but he didn't make much money from the farm."

"Poor?"

"Lived poor. But every couple of years he'd buy a new car. Brand new, and always paid cash for it. Paid the Smiths to keep it at their place on the mainland. Not that he needed a car much. He spent most of the time on the island."

"So where did his money come from?" The cop waved for a plate of French fries. "Smuggling?"

"Possible. He was there during prohibition, although none of my sources connect him with the trade. Most people think he just didn't associate with anybody enough to be a smuggler. Probably inherited it before he bought the place."

"And I suppose local rumor had him with big bucks in a tin can buried in the yard." Jag knew how small towns worked.

Josie smiled, the creases on her ancient face rolling into small ranges of mountains, uplifted by inner forces. "Fifty thousand dollars in a strongbox below his bed, they used to tell each other. That may not sound like much now, but a thousand dollars was an average year's wage, then."

"I'd think it would be dangerous, out on an island all by yourself." The cop shifted his bulk in the narrow wooden bench and pushed the plate of chips towards her.

She nodded, and added some ketchup to the corner of the plate nearest her. "People thought so, until they found the Mulloney brothers' boat on the beach one morning." She looked him right in the eye. "Everybody knew the Mulloney boys had robbed a couple of banks in Gratton, but it was never proven. So we all assumed that they'd try to lean on Paul Daigen some dark night to help them smuggle cigarettes across the lake. Them or some other of the Gosport crowd."

She held up her cup for another coffee. "They never found the bodies. Never floated to shore, and the cops even did a search of the island. Daigen denied ever seeing the boat. But people left him pretty well alone, after that.

When he died, oh, about 1948, there were a few people who looked around for the money. A few of us." She looked up from the coffee. "After a while, it got to be a party thing. Going out to the island and digging around." She suddenly sounded wistful. "Had some interesting times there, till all them service guys started settling down and I married Al."

"Anyone find anything?"

She snorted. "If they did, I never heard anything about it. There sure wasn't anyone who got a new car unexpectedly, or bought a new house with money no one knew he had."

"You'd have known."

She smiled. "Probably."

"And if someone wanted to look for the treasure now?"

She laughed. "They bulldozed the house and barn when the island became part of the park. They've arrested a couple of people for trying to dig there. It's a bird sanctuary most of the spring and summer."

"Not much hope?"

"Not much hope. You can't even see where the old house used to be, any more. And we searched the island pretty well."

"Even in the deep bushes."

"Especially in the deep bushes, in the afternoons."

"So, no treasure?"

"Other than what young people find in bushes on a summer afternoon?"

"Other than that."

"Maybe if she's looking for flying saucers."

"Pardon?" Jag squinted hard.

"There was a report more than twenty years ago. Bunch of people living down on Popham Bay claim they saw a UFO land around there. Either in the bay or on High Bluff Island."

"You think it's true?"

She snorted. "Depends on how much of Mulloney imports they were drinking. Or smoking."

"Maybe we'd better get you back to the office," the cop laughed.

"No hurry. The sons-of-bitches can fire me, for all I care."

"You'd end up in Gosport."

"Suits me. I could get my medicine at discount prices from the Mulloney boys. Or their grandsons. "Besides," she said, "It's Sunday. The place is supposed to be closed."

Jag escorted Josie back to her office. A couple of people waited patiently outside the locked door.

He checked his watch. Four o'clock. Maybe tomorrow he'd just see where this Laura Singer person was staying in town.

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## **Toronto**

*At a downtown park. The park is on church property, and is frequented by the homeless.*



*Three days before Button Day*

"Quite the planet, isn't it?" the old guy said, farting loudly. "Kee-rist," he added, "can you believe this body I picked up? What was I thinking?" The park was bright in the late-summer sunshine.

"What, indeed, were you thinking?" Tom Barents asked, although it had been one of those questions that nobody was supposed to answer. Especially on a bench in a park on the corner of Queen and Church in Toronto. Tom knew the place well; he'd once (in his crazy days) spent most of a week here trying to figure out which of the bums in the park were actually sleeper agents for someone's World Domination Project. It had seemed important to him at the time to be able to figure out who was in disguise.

A lot of the guys hanging out on benches or sleeping under trees in the park were certifiable nutcases and some of the rest were alcoholics kept from total dementia only by the difficulty of getting more booze. The guy beside Tom looked relatively sober at the moment, though he smelled pretty rank and needed a total beauty makeover.

"Fact of the matter," he said, "I wasn't. First time on Earth and maybe I should have read the reports of the last couple of guys that got sent here, but no, I had to figure I'd just zip in and occupy some dude who nobody'd be too concerned about." He peeled back the top of a dirty paper bag and took a sip of water from the neck of a plastic Glacier bottle. That was the first unusual thing Tom had seen him do. If you haven't got alcohol in a paper bag, you shouldn't have a paper bag, Tom knew— it just attracts moochers. For a moment, Tom wondered if he'd forgotten his meds that morning.

"Where from?" Tom asked him.

He waved his hand at the sky. "Up. Over. Long ways away. You Earth people got no name for it, or even for that part of the sky."

"Been planetbound long?" Tom wasn't really interested. The chances of the guy being a space alien were rather small, and the chances of him being an imaginative old drunk were an awful lot larger.

"Twenty-three years and some. I'm still getting used to the longer year and shorter day." He looked around the park. "Took me one month to get tired of this body and a year to really hate it." He looked at Tom. "Booze turned out to be not so bad after all, once a month or so." He tapped his chest. "This body goes by the name of Al Lamson. He appears to have been a loser for most of his life."

Tom nodded. That category fit a lot of people these days. It surely included alcoholics who wanted to be space aliens. Anything to keep from blaming yourself or Goddamn God for your own mistakes. Tom decided not to leave. "Don't like the planet?" It was a slow afternoon.

"Planet's okay, but people don't talk to bums in the park, which is seriously hampering my research project."

"Got much time to go?"

"Couple of years, then Al can have his damn body back. The only thing I like about it is the smell. Can't say many people agree with me on that on, though."

Tom said nothing.

Al, the guy with an alien in him, turned to look at Tom. He closed one eye, then the other. "Tom Barents," he said. "Forty-eight years old this summer. People call you, 'Mad Tom' and the social workers can't decide if you're sane or not. Got a grudge against God; the one you don't believe in."

"Can you blame me? How did you know who I am?"

"Nope. Your string of bad luck defies the odds and none of it was your doing. So it was either just that you're a really unlucky guy or someone's out to get you. And I knew who you were because you were hanging around here suspiciously a few years back. Had to check you out; there are alien-hunters around you know. 'Alien Hunters International', they call themselves."

"Lots of you space aliens around?" Tom watched a mother maneuver a baby carriage past a man with a paper bag who had abruptly decided to sit on the pavement.

"Can't tell you. We won't communicate with each other until it's time to go home."

"Gonna take me with you when you go home?"

Al shook his head, or the alien shook Al's head. "I hear someone did that once. Didn't work out so hot." He winced. "I guess they passed a law after that."

"I betcha," Tom said. The guy had most of it right, but that didn't prove piss-all. "Best planet I've ever been on, myself," Tom added. "And worst."

"Can't say the same, myself, for either."

"Seen a lot of planets, then?" Tom wanted to see how inventive this guy was. It would be his chance to ramble on while Tom ignored him. He'd probably have planets full of oversexed babes, to start, then work up to dragons or something.

"Eight planets, and a few other things that weren't – space colonies and such, I guess you'd call them. No place I'd want to settle on, but it's a job."

"Places with beautiful women?"

"No." He looked around. "Other species are just variations on ugly, smelly, and silly, even when you get used to them. You guys run about average, maybe a bit high on the ugly scale and way up there on the silly charts."

Tom nodded. He'd come to that conclusion himself a long time ago, and didn't have to travel on a UFO to figure it out. "They believe in God out there?"

"Can't talk about that. That and technology. Rules."

"Might give us humans an edge up?"

Al scowled and took a drink of water. "The universe has quite enough silliness in it without putting humanity into it. Besides, Earth's scheduled to be designated an entertainment zone, sort of like that movie, *The Truman Show*."

Tom rolled his eyes.

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## **Chesapeake Bay**

*Not far off Windmill Point.*

*Three days before Button Day*

He'd once been second in command of the Central Intelligence Agency, but now he was just "John Smith," an old dude with a fancy cottage on Chesapeake Bay. And a sailboat named *Obsession*, because you don't have a fancy cottage on that bay without a nice boat or six. *Obsession* floated a half kilometre offshore on this calm day. The sails were down, and John sat on the back with a line over the side. Beside him, on a matching lawn chair with a matching fishing rod sat a fellow still in the Agency (known as The

Company to insiders). That day, he called himself, "Lee." They sipped Forty Creek Canadian whisky and talked. On the table between them was a black-and-white picture of a sonar scan.

The occasional fish bit on the line, was retrieved, was removed from the barbless hook, and was returned with a splash to the water. A couple of seagulls and a heron flew by just to check the boat out. John wasn't absolutely convinced that the Agency, or its army equivalent, hadn't developed flying microphones that looked like water birds, but it seemed unlikely. And Obsession herself was a bug-free boat; John was pretty sure of that. So, eventually, after he'd brought out sandwiches for his guest, he broached the subject at hand, picking up the photo and handing it to Lee.

Lee set his fishing rod into a holder and examined the photo. He looked up at John. "Means nothing to me."

"Back in the day," John began, taking a sip of whiskey and ignoring the sandwiches until he realized Lee wouldn't eat before his host, "the Company did the odd thing that wasn't strictly within its charter." He looked at Lee, and the two men smiled. The Company had been illegally spying on Americans in America since its founding, at the specific request of every American president except Jimmy Carter.

"You're probably aware, by now," John said, "of the rather, er, tenuous relationship between the Company and the President."

Lee smiled again but didn't say anything. This was common knowledge. For each president, the CIA had a different unofficial charter. For each president, there were different rules about passing on information. Some presidents wanted to know everything that the Company did. Some didn't: they wanted "plausible deniability," so that they could look the public in the face, if it came to that, and honestly say they didn't know such an evil was being done. Some presidents never contacted the Agency at all, not trusting anything the CIA claimed to know. Some presidents had limited the Company to spying. Others had found it perfectly suitable that certain people overseas be terminated without trial, in order that the US of A remain the bastion of liberty and a shining beacon to other countries. "What do you think of the President?" Lee asked instead of replying.

"Another loser." John started to take another sip of whisky, then thought the better of it, taking a pill from a small bottle first. "I guess that's what you get nowadays."

The CIA had a spotty record at best, often missing coming events completely. A succession of Presidents had appointed outsiders, usually friends from the military, to run the Agency, on the theory that the CIA needed to be 'shaken up.' After the cold war ended, it had been shaken up enough that there were few old hands left and even the Soviet moles were taking their pensions. Lee took a small goldeye off his hook and threw it back. "So how can I help you," he asked.

"Once or twice," John said, "the Company was of assistance in helping the military carry out some operation that hasn't reached the ears of anybody but the senior brass and, of course, the Soviets."

Lee said nothing. If half the rumours that went around Langley were true, the Agency had done as much covering up as spying. Planning cover for military ops was pretty standard stuff.

John went on. "At the height of the cold war, we were aware that the opposition was improving the accuracy of its missiles dramatically. The top brass went looking for places to hide them." A sip of whiskey. "At one time we considered putting nuclear subs with a few Polaris missiles into Lake Superior.

The Russians would know they were there, but not close enough to be sure of taking them out in a first strike."

Lee picked up the picture. "Doesn't look like a sub to me."

"We canned the idea of subs in the Great Lakes because the Canadians would raise a stink. They're like that." He looked at Lee. "Someone came up with a discount idea." He jabbed at the picture. "Small launcher. One Polaris missile. Set on the bottom of the lake."

Lee nodded. "They thought it would work?"

"They didn't care. As long as it might work, that was enough to help deter the Soviets from a first strike. Hell, if it had come to war, half the missiles we had would have blown up in their silos on launch or have gone into the nearest schoolyard. The chemicals in those things get old and the mice get into the wiring. All we wanted was for the opposition to know that there were some that might work, and that they didn't know quite where they were."

Lee looked at the picture. "This is an ICBM launcher? And it's at the bottom of a lake?"

"Can't be." John put his chair back and rubbed his eyes."

"Why not?"

"For one thing, the Navy put five launchers into the Great Lakes. And twenty fakes. Ten years ago the Navy took out the last of the them at night. All of them. That's one thing."

"And?" Lee watched his line move. A seagull landed on the cabin of the boat and watched them both."

"This picture was taken on the Canadian side of Lake Ontario. The only one we put onto the Canadian side was one in Superior. Therefore, this can't be one of our launchers."

There was a silence filled with Lee pulling in a herring, then tossing it to the gull.

"You like gulls?" John asked.

"Just making sure it was a real bird," Lee chuckled. "So give me a list of other things this bottom boat could be." Lee looked at John.

"There are no other things it could be. Not that I can find. There's a possibility that somebody on the Canadian side is faking this, just to see if we show up with a guilty look on our faces."

"You think?"

"Not likely. The Canadians would just as soon not talk about items like that. They've got oil to sell. And, sooner or later, water."

"How come it wasn't hidden?"

"We scooped a bit of mud on them, but currents rearrange that mud, sometimes, in a bad winter," John said. "And last winter might just have done the trick."

"You want me to find out?"

"If you would."

"Can I get any help?" Lee asked. "I really don't know how to start this thing going."

"You've got a point there," John laughed. "Silly of me not to think of that right away. Getting senile, I guess." He thought a moment. "I'm going to put you in contact with Lester and Sammy, a couple of guys that used to be with the special forces. SEALs, actually, which might or might not come in handy, since

this thing is in water." He scrawled numbers onto the bottom of an empty cardboard bait box. "Here are some phone numbers. The Canadian one is a woman who lives on an island in Toronto harbour."

"Why would we know anybody there?"

"Oh," John said, "there are ten or fifteen ex-spooks living on those islands. They even have a special guard unit just to watch them."

"To watch out for them?"

"And to watch them."

"Well.... Thanks."

"Get back to me, will you?"

"You can count on it."

"And keep it under your hat?"

"Your eyes only."

John went to the cabin and started the motor.

Lee watched him. Did John know about Lee's Canadian connection or not? Was that why he'd been chosen? The boat turned toward shore and Lee watched the gulls.

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### **Chapter 3: September 15**

*This day is sunny but the first cool of autumn is creeping across the land, especially at night.*

*Two days before Button Day*

#### **Gosport Ontario**

*At the marina.*

Jag Stone parked at the Harbourview Marina, Motel, and Café, and went around to the water side where the entrance to the café was. It was small, but adequate, and not crowded, since there were few boaters using the marina in the fall. There were only a half-dozen tables, and Laura Singer was having breakfast at one of them. She looked up briefly, obviously recognized him, then went back to reading her paper.

"Morning, Mary," Jag said to the waitress. "I'll have the usual."

Mary, who barely knew the policeman except through gossip, was confused for a minute, then got her wits about her, and got him a bagel in a bag and large coffee in a paper cup. "The usual," she said, and winked at Jag as he paid. He smiled, just a little nervously, and thanked her. When he turned to go, Laura was behind him, purse in hand.

"Ah," he started.

"Small town," Laura noted. "Not many people dropping by in the fall. Things get dull, I bet." She looked him in the eye.

""Not that dull," he said. There was a silence. "Gotta go, now." He banged into the door as he left, spilling a bit of coffee onto his hand and wincing.

"If I didn't know better," Laura said to Mary, "I'd swear he was following me around. Are things really that dull here, or is he just someone I should avoid?"

"Nothing wrong with Jagger," Mary laughed. "He's probably just getting interested in women again. His wife ran off with a lady rap singer in Toronto over a year ago, and he's been a bit girl-shy since he

moved here." She took the money for the breakfast and added. "There are half a dozen women in this town keeping an eye on him. Meanwhile he arrests drunks and writes poetry for little literary magazines."

"What kind of poetry?" Laura tilted her head.

"Poetry poetry. Probably about how evil women are, if you could figure it out, I guess." She looked over her glasses. "He's a good guy. You staying here long? Not that I want to be nosy."

"Renting a cottage down by the park for a couple of months. A vacation, sort of. I get to move in today."

"Here? In fall?"

"I can use the peace and quiet."

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### **Near Guelph, Ontario**

*A Tim Hortons Coffee place in Puslinch*

*Two days before Button Day*

Clyde Books was waiting for another alien-hunter, John Altman, from Johnstown, in eastern Ontario. Altman had called about the Szczedziwoj lead and was coming to look into it.

The Tim Hortons was mostly empty at 11 in the morning, and Books was most of the way through his double-double and glazed donuts when Altman came into the lot on a Harley. Books watched him park the bike, knowing that noisy motorcycles were high on his list of things he disliked. On a summer Saturday afternoon he'd gladly have tasered every bike rider that dropped down a gear and hit the accelerator to get up the hill by his house. He'd tracked a few of them with the sniper scope.

Nonetheless, he stood and shook hands with Altman when the biker noted the red hat with the "BEM" logo on Books' table, and came over. Altman smiled through his beard, a finger going to the red and black stripe on his helmet. "I'll just get a coffee," Altman said, and went to the counter. It took a little longer than planned, since the order space was occupied by an elderly woman with a granddaughter who was completely unable to make up her mind as to which cookie she wanted, and the grandmother was overly patient.

Eventually Altman returned to the table with a coffee and a muffin. Books decided that Altman sometimes had his own view of truth, and was a bit liberal with the word "just." But you got all kinds in this alien-hunting business, and sometimes things worked out anyway.

Altman looked at his white mug and Books' paper cup and said, "Gotta ask for a 'china mug' or they stick you with a paper cup." Altman was a thin guy, his white beard making him look like a biker Q-tip.

"You're ecological."

"Nah. I just prefer a bit of class."

After a couple of Canadian preliminaries about the weather and the routes taken to get to the donut shop, Books pulled out the printed copy of suspected aliens. Altman slurped his coffee a bit, then pulled his muffin to bits and stuffed it into the coffee. Taking out his spoon, he began to eat what was an approximation of caffeine and muffin stew. Books ignored him, other than to make another mental post-it note to ask someone, somewhere, if aliens could be running a double agent who passed as an alien hunter.

Books pointed at one picture. "Casey Szczedziwoj," he said, pronouncing the name as "S-che-gee-voy."

“I’ve looked at that one,” Altman said. “What we got on him?”

Books leaned back, and raised one finger. “First, our source said he traded about ten thousand in small, uncut diamonds, worth maybe twice that much.”

The link with diamonds had been almost accidental, and only the fact that a jeweller in Boise had confided to the wife of a friend that the guy who'd been tasered the other day had previously sold him a bunch of uncut diamonds led to the clue. The tasered guy who died had been one from whose body an alien form had emerged, before disappearing. The cop hadn't reported the strange event, but he'd told someone and a new conspiracy theory began.

When the alien-hunter movement started, there had been much discussion about diamonds, before most of them came to the conclusion that uncut diamonds were the ideal revenue source for space creatures. There were probably lots of places in space, the hunters decided, that diamonds were common as gravel. A physicist from Wilfred Laurier University had confirmed that to the group (via email), that diamonds appeared to be common outside the Earth.

“Can you tell a diamond from outer space from one made on earth?” a hunter had asked.

“Usually,” the physicist had replied, “since it’s become routine to check the spectrograph of a diamond to be sure it doesn’t come from a war zone. But,” he added, “some diamonds on earth got here by meteorite, so people find the odd one that doesn’t match any earthly source.”

After a bit of discussion among the members of the group, they decided that anybody who offered a jeweler uncut diamonds at a big discount would ensure the jeweler's silence, and probably get a faked certificate of origin. So the hunters had started inquiries into any uncut diamonds being sold to jewelers. Jewelers are reluctant to disclose the sources of their stock, so it was a slow process, but a few leads had drifted in. One small diamond, said to be from such a transaction, had been acquired, and was tested to determine its origin. The lab was unable to determine the source, so the hunter group had a celebration.

Another clue came from the other alien sighting. The host had recovered consciousness and eventually told part of his story. The creature in him (the victim had told an alien hunter) seemed to have control of the host's body, including hormone levels and speech, but couldn't read the host's mind. If the creature (which became known as a “rider” in hunter circles) needed to ask a question of the host, the host would hear a small voice in his ear, but would have to answer aloud for the rider to hear it.

“If someone asked me what kindergarten I went to, the host wouldn't know,” the victim said. “The creature would make me answer the question out loud, like, ‘Let me see – oh, yes, ‘I went to Maple Avenue Kindergarten.’ Sometimes when people heard me explaining human behaviour, people thought I was talking to myself. Eventually, I bought a cell phone and talked into it without turning it on.” The victim had become agitated. “All my friends just left me. Nobody tried to understand!”

“So this Szczedziwoj fellow meets the criteria?” Altman asked Books.

“According to the rap sheet here, someone by that name traded in a bunch of uncuts in Buffalo.”

Altman pondered this awhile. There were, according to some hunters, dozens of likely indications, but the diamonds were the surest. “And there aren't too many people by that name, I suppose.”

“We found only this guy, but our methods are a bit limited. We haven't got a complete data base yet, but we're working with a guy from Homeland Security.” Books paused. “We met a guy who gave us a



picture of the only guy with that name, and he says this guy doesn't have a cell phone, but he mumbles to himself a lot."

"So what do we do now?"

"I've put a tracker on his car, and he likes to drive around on Sundays, so we find him. I'll bump his car, and when he stops, we'll take him down and taser him a few times. You can follow me on the bike."

Altman looked a bit dubious, but nodded. "What are you carrying?"

"Pardon?"

"I've got a High Standard with me. A Sport King. With the bike."

"Takes .22 long rifle, doesn't it?"

"Clip of ten."

Books looked at the ceiling. "Good for home defence, that size, I guess, but a bit hard to conceal when travelling."

"In this country you take what you can get. I would have preferred something smaller, like a Walther PPKs .380 ACP or a Colt Detective Special. I've got a line on a Glock, too, if you want to go in with me."

"Neither registered, I presume."

"That's the way it goes."

"Why would you bring a pistol to this," Books said, looking around the room.

"Well, you never know what might happen. Might have to kill that rider, once we get it out of the human."

"There's not much indication that you can."

"You don't have a pistol with you? Just the taser."

"And a cattle prod."

"Suit yourself." Altman got up. "But I think it's always wise to bring something with you if you're dealing with space aliens."

"Maybe." Books thought it would be like bringing a stone tomahawk to deal with a JTF2 commando squad, but he didn't say anything. Hidden and suspicious his rifle might be, but it wouldn't land him in jail. That's why he didn't have a handgun; those things had to be registered.

Less than an hour later, Books' Buick and Altman's Harley were closing in on Casey's old Volvo. Casey was taking it slowly, having rescued the car from a scrapyard and repaired it, more or less. The back seat contained tools, wiring diagrams, and repair manuals. Even then, the car shook strangely every now and again.

Just north of St. Jacobs, on a country road, Casey saw a small Honda on the shoulder, its trunk and hood up and a thin young woman in a short skirt peering into the engine. He pulled off the road to see if he could help.

Behind him, Books watched as some of the shoulder of the road collapsed under the Volvo's right front tire. The Volvo left the road abruptly, going into the pine forest and stopping against a tree. Both Books and Altman parked in front of the Honda, then went running to see what happened to their quarry. The woman at the Honda stood there dumfounded.

Books got there first, and assured himself that the car wasn't on fire. Szczedziwoj was pressed against the steering wheel, apparently unconscious, so Books pressed the taser against his neck. Szczedziwoj

neither jerked at the voltage nor regained consciousness, and no creature emerged from him. Altman reached over and tried the cattle prod. There was a snap, and the smell of burning hairs, but Szczedziwoj didn't move. Altman pressed his fingers against Szczedziwoj's neck. "No pulse," he said, in a high voice.

The two looked at each other, and went back up the hill. "He's dead," Books told the young woman, who had a cell phone to her ear.

"I called the police," she said.

"Gotta go," Altman said, and the two ran for their vehicles.

Two hours later the two met in a quiet coffee shop. Altman was shaking a bit. "He was going to die anyway," he whispered. "I'm sure of that. He was probably dead when we got there. We didn't check, did we?"

"I wonder if we missed something," Books said. "Or if somebody got something wrong. Can't imagine it; there's only one Casey Szczedziwoj in North America. I know; I did a thorough search." He got some more chocolate in the form of a double chocolate cookie to help him think. "Maybe we should have given the body a bit more electricity."

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In North Tonawanda, just outside Buffalo, Katherine Camille Szczedziwoj, known to her friends as "Casey," was reading the daily paper to her rider when she sat up abruptly. A loud rattling was coming from a cookie tin. She walked over to the tin, and took out what looked like a vibrating rock. "Holy crap!" she said. "Holy crap. I'm going home."

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That night Books didn't get much sleep. He was still trying to convince himself Szczedziwoj was dead when he was hit with the electricity. Hell, he thought; we might even have restarted his heart for a moment.

In Johnstown, Altman was concealing his pistols out behind the church.

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## **Toronto**

*On the Mainland and on the Islands*

*Two days before Button Day*

Lester the ex-SEAL read the sign outside the Piazza Manna Bar and watched the traffic on the street, a habit left over from his time in Iraq. The traffic, though, was free of suicide bombers. They were inside a commercial building, with the restaurant through a further set of glass doors.

"Special on spring rolls. I think spring rolls would be fine, though I wouldn't mind a roll or two in fall, either, especially with the waitress there." Sammy had a tendency to ramble, even if it meant pointing out the obvious. He didn't ramble, Lester knew, on a beach landing at night in Honduras, or in a centipede-infested hole in Nigeria. Not even on a hillside in Afghanistan, hidden behind a boulder. But back here in civilization, or as close to it as Toronto represented, the younger man seemed to like to keep sounds coming out of his mouth. Lester had long ago flipped a coin to decide whether to shoot him or ignore him. Someday he'd let Sammy know how the coin toss went.

They'd talked about eating at the Captain John's Restaurant, floating at dock across Queen's Quay, but they'd both had enough of boats before they retired, and even if their current mission was in Canada, both preferred to be in some place where there was more than one door out.

"Spring rolls," Lester agreed, still looking outside the window. The street was busy with people, most of them, in Lester's opinion, a little too easy on terrorists, like most Canadians. "Sounds fine to me." He watched the ferry come in from Ward's Island, across the harbor. He didn't like ferries especially, having taken one out in his younger years. They were just too vulnerable and full of strangers. "Let's do it," he said, holding the door open for Sammy. Spring rolls for lunch, and maybe a chocolate donut for Sammy for dessert.

"Glad to be back in Canada?" Sammy asked, when they were seated. "I rather prefer this to a lot of other places, even if we hardly ever get to shoot anybody here. Spies for spooks, that's what we've come to, isn't it? Spies for spies."

Lester grunted. Being an ex-SEAL got one odd jobs, if one went looking for them, and even if one ended up in Canada it was still better than fishing in Chesapeake Bay, which was where the Old Man spent his retirement. This job was going to pay a few bills, and he was glad to get it – after the Americans pulled out of Iraq there were too many trained (and half-trained) people looking to do "security work" anywhere in the world.

This was their fourth time in Canada, supposedly making sure certain Canadians were doing what they were supposed to do, even if international law said the two had no business doing just that.

Three times in Canada, the fellow they were supposed to deal with had been deported. The last time, they'd had to convince the guy to take a vacation. They figured they were running a hundred percent, but they never knew for sure. This time was supposed to be observation and note-taking. They were more action types, but they figured they'd pick it up.

"Don't we have spies for that sort of stuff?" Lester had asked The Boss. "It doesn't sound like a job for SEALs. Or ex-SEALs." He was right; SEALs are supposed to be dropped off the coast of Nicaragua and return two days later having stuck limpet mines to the bottom of a Soviet "trawler." Or, the Soviet Union having vanished, they were supposed to be hidden on a mountain slope between Iraq and Iran, ambushing a convoy of special equipment meant for killing US troops. Decidedly, they were not supposed to be in Canada dressed in civilian clothes unless they were on holiday, seeing the top of the CN Tower or canoeing in Algonquin.

But a few tours of duty working as non-government contractors in Iraq for a private firm broadened both a SEAL's scope and his bank account. Sammy complained, then took things as they came, but Lester often wondered just how much of the US government knew what they did.

Waiting for their food, Lester saw four people come in. He judged them to be in their forties and probably none of them had ever been spies, even if the two men checked the room out rather carefully as they entered. He reminded himself that there were actually a lot of people living on the islands who weren't former spies.

Their egg spring rolls arrived, and the Asian waitress asked if they'd like a drink. "Anything special, here?" Sammy asked.

She shrugged. "Same drinks as usual, unless you like bourbon with a cilantro sprinkle."

"A what?"

"We don't have a name for it," she said, tilting her head at the group that had just come in. "But it's the drink of choice for those guys over there. Doesn't appeal to me; I tried it once."

For a moment, Lester considered it. But they were supposed to blend in, not stand out, and he didn't want to be added to a subgroup of people known to order strange drinks. "I'll just have a shot of Forty Creek on the rocks, if you have it."

Sammy ordered a Bud, on draft.

For a moment, Lester thought he saw one of the guys that had just come in turn his head away and stick a tongue up his nose. Couldn't be, he thought. Even Canadians don't do that.

A half hour later, they were on the ferry to Centre Island. Their destination was Algonquin Island, and the Ward's Island ferry would have taken them closer, but there were too many spooks on Ward's, and some of them could spot a special forces type a long way away. Lester watched the skyline of Toronto behind the boat. He never felt comfortable on islands unless a team submarine was waiting offshore at the end of a mission.

The two joined the crowd getting off the boat, and followed a path through the amusement rides and marinas. In no hurry, they got a coffee at the Rectory Café and watched people from the deck.

"Got a good feeling about this one?" Sammy asked.

"The pay's good," Lester said, "for us the technically nonexistent"

"Deniable, disposable, deletable." Sammy repeated the mantra of the Iraq war contractors. "No medals no matter what you do. Throwaway soldiers." He scowled as he looked around at the island. "Ain't it great?"

A half hour later, they held hands as they crossed the bridge to Algonquin Island, ensuring that most people would assume they weren't anything but tourists. On Dacotah Avenue, they found the safe house that had replaced an older cottage. It had a couple of secrets built into it, and was owned by the US government, or at least some branch of it, although no one in Canada was supposed to know that.

"Can I help you?" a white-haired woman with a regal bearing said when they tapped at the door.

"The roses bloom in Damascus each spring when the kindly rains fall," Sammy said. Lester rolled his eyes.

The woman frowned and said nothing.

Sammy started to say something else, but Lester interrupted him. "Invincible Insurance. Cheaper rates."

"You and your smartass friend can come in," the woman said, turning away and leaving the door open.

The summer had passed, but it was still warm enough to sit behind the house on lawn chairs around a patio table. Lester looked around, but he was a special forces guy, not a professional spook, so he hoped there was no one around to hear their conversation. "I'm Lester," he said. "This is Sammy. We're here because a guy named Vince Vincent told us to come here. More than that, we don't know. We're SEALs, not spies, Ms...." He looked the woman in the eye.

"They get some silly-ass ideas in Virginia." the woman said. "I'm Patricia. Do you have any idea what this is about?" she asked.

Lester looked over his sunglasses without comment. Neither he nor Sammy were wearing the Maui Jim sunglasses that might have identified them as SEALs. Sammy merely shook his head. "No. Isn't that why we're here?" He looked annoyed, waving an arm at the house as he reached for cheese and crackers to go with the Diet Coke he was offered. Lester put his sunglasses away and put on a pair of regular glasses.

Patricia sighed. "This goes back to the cold war. You've got to understand that we were fifteen minutes away from nuclear destruction."

Lester gave Sammy a look, not quite rolling his eyes. Just how young and stupid did this woman think they were?

"I'm glad I look that young," Lester said. "Now, Sammy here's just a kid, but I'm a bit older than that."

"Okay," Patricia said. "You look like a retired furniture salesman and Sammy looks like a ex-Marine who's covering up his first graying hair."

"Hey!" Sammy ran his fingers through his hair. "You weren't supposed to notice. Some of that's due to a couple of explosive devices in Iraq, though. Not all my fault."

"There was," Patricia went on, "a desire to hide a few nukes in places that the Soviet Union couldn't find." She poured herself another cup of tea and looked away. "We put one of our smaller boomer subs into Lake Ontario, circling the lake in a random pattern. Seemed like a good idea at the time."

"And?" Lester asked. Sammy, for once, said nothing.

"Don't know what happened. But we lost it." She looked each in turn straight in the eye. "We didn't want to alert the Canadians. So we stopped looking for it."

"And someone's found it?" Lester didn't look up.

"We think so. Off a village called Brighton, in the mud at the bottom of the bay." She scratched her nose and looked away.

Sammy scratched his crotch and took more cheese. "So what do we do?"

"Well, for the first part, look around and see what's there."

"And?" Lester noted that Sammy was paying close attention for a change. "Why special forces? Sounds like spook work for a guy with an innocent look."

"We think the Canadian government may be looking into the same thing. If muscle is needed, you guys have what it takes."

"Can't use muscle in Canada. We didn't even try to get a Glock through customs, darn us."

"I told them" Sammy said, "that I'd be happy with some firepower, but I guess we just have to do it with our bare hands. You got a Pepsi in this place?"

Patricia ignored that. "Look. I don't know why anybody chose you for this. Maybe you're all they could get. That seems unlikely, since there must be three thousand trained security guys looking for work after we got out of Iraq. Most of them can't find anything. And if you throw in the CIA people who got out in the last cleaning, there's a lot to select from."

"We're freakin' superheroes," Sammy said. "You don't have a chocolate donut, do you?" Abruptly, he excused himself, stood up, walked over to the hedge, and farted.

"You'll have to excuse Sammy," Lester said. "He's a health nut now, with some funny recipes, and it makes him rather flatulent. Hard being in a car with him. Might I use your toilet?"

"In the door and to the right," Patricia said. She turned to Sammy, who was just sitting down again. "Lester says you have a flatulence problem."

"Yes, ma'am. One of the tragedies of life."

"Doesn't that make it hard if you're trying to ambush someone?"

"Nah. The places I've served, they smell worse, and as long as the guys don't make me walk behind the bus, I'm okay. They did send me out to check out the IEDs a lot, though. Got suspicious about that, after a while." He indicated the house. "Lester's problem's with his old prostate. Gotta piss a lot. Of course he says it's a lot easier to piss in a bottle than to fart in one." Sammy gave her a big grin.

"I know this isn't official government work. Some big favors were called in by someone. Maybe you can keep secrets or something, Patricia said. "

"Maybe," Lester said, as he returned.

"Okay, there's a Pepsi or two in the fridge."

"Thanks. I'll find it." Sammy went into the house.

"Our instructions," Lester said, "were to come here. After that, well..."

"Like I said, someone trusts you guys. I'm used to dealing with spooks, so pardon me if I assume a few things that aren't true." When Sammy came back with a large bottle of Pepsi and a couple of glasses, she went on.

"You're to go to Brighton, and look around for suspicious activity by the bay. Find out what you can."

There was a long silence. "That's it?" Lester said.

"The people who sent you must be getting crazy or desperate. That's it."

"Okay. They keep paying us; we'll do it," Sammy said.

"I imagine they'll pay."

"Hey. I was guarding the leader of a country once, and they screwed us on vacation time, so we all went on strike. The poor bastard we were guarding had to hide in his basement for a week."

"Look," Lester said. "We'd be happy with any assistance you can give us. Is there a way we can get a boat?"

"You can take my boat: *Serenity*. She's a cabin cruiser currently parked in Cobourg."

"Your boat? Must be some favors someone's calling in."

Patricia smiled. "They'll owe me more, after this."

"Okay," said Sammy. "You have maps?"

"Just these." She opened Nautical Chart 2059, Scotch Bonnet Island to Cobourg, then pointed to a spot. "This is approximately the area." There was no mark on it.

"I can't dive that deep holding my breath," Sammy noted.

"I don't think you'll have to. Just get us as much information as you can by walking around and asking questions." She paused. "And watch out for any other of your type."

"Our type?"

"Special forces."

"Ah. In case someone needs to be strangled silently and his body hidden. Can I keep the map?"

She pushed it his way and stood up, handing him a piece of paper and a set of keys. "Here's my number. Memorize it and get rid of the paper."

Sammy stared at it for a full minute, then swallowed the paper, chewing slowly, with a broad smile.

"A comedian. Don't quit your day job." She showed them out.

Against advice, they went back by the Ward's Island ferry, touring the community of tiny houses as they did, hand in hand.

On the ferry back to the mainland, leaning on the railing, Sammy turned to Lester. "A tiny nuclear submarine, cruising Lake Ontario with Polaris missiles."

Lester started laughing so hard he blew some of his Pepsi up his nose. BBQ chips fell from his shaking hand, and were taken by seagulls before they hit the water. "And tiny reindeer," he finally managed to say. "And Santa sitting on the conning tower delivering toys to mermaids." He started laughing again.

"That seems more likely?"

"Like you could get a boomer into Lake Ontario without anybody knowing. Through the locks."

"Maybe they launched it on the American side."

"Way too big. Them mothers are over five hundred feet long – twice as long as a football field – and carry more than a hundred sailors."

"She said it was a smaller one."

"Right. Like they could make one only three hundred feet long. That would be about the minimum, what with the reactor and three or four missiles." Lester looked back at the island. "Would take a heck of a flatbed to get it from Massachusetts. And if it went down with fifty guys, the rescue effort couldn't be hidden."

"They'd try to rescue them. In Canadian waters?"

"For sure, even if it let the cat out of the bag. They had ten thousand missiles at the time. Revealing a couple wouldn't make a significant difference. They'd blame it on a faulty new system, and apologize" Lester threw the rest of the chips to the gulls. "You couldn't sail a sub that big without continuously hitting the bottom of the lake and bumping into lake freighters and getting tangled up in fishing nets."

"Suppose you're right. Then what is it?" Sammy watched the dock coming at them.

A shrug. Something smaller. Maybe the Russkis planted a nuke there. Maybe they discovered Santa's sled."

"Any why they sent us instead of calling in the spooks?"

Lester looked around. "The Boss told me that there's a suspicion in some circles that the CIA doesn't have an agent that isn't known to the Canadian spy agency."

Sammy had nodded: the CIA had screwed up so often that other agencies started looking good. "You think?"

"I suspect someone's trying to get under the radar of both governments. And we're the choice. Or the decoys." He shrugged. "Like we'll ever know."

"Then again," Sammy said, "At least we follow orders. Can't count on the spooks for that."



"Better Canada than sitting in a jungle hole full of centipedes." Lester pointed across the harbor to the CN tower. The top had disappeared into the clouds and it was starting to rain again.

"And who knows, maybe some of our SEAL skills might get used." Sammy spat his chewing gum into the water as the boat docked.

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## **Toronto**

*On the Mainland and on the Islands*

*Two days before Button Day*

Jack and Jim were sitting on lawn chairs outside Hatches' Corner cottage when the signal came.

On the narrow street between the cottages of Ward's Island a couple of mainland tourists from Kitchener came by, the man, bald under a cowboy hat, was pushing a woman in a wheelchair. They saw the two men, and being visitors to this little community, waved and went on without comment.

Jack turned to Jim. "I think I got a signal." His voice was suddenly high and squeaky, and he almost managed to make a sound no human should make.

"A signal?" Jim kept watching the tourists as they stopped to take a picture of another little house in its terminal quaintness.

"The signal." Jack was sitting bold upright.

Jim looked over at his companion. This would be big news if it were true, but Jack had had false alarms before. It seemed to happen every few years. "Let's see the rock" he said, skeptically.

In Jim's hand, the rock remained totally still, and Jack was about to make a remark that would seem sarcastic on this planet when the rock vibrated once, then twice, then once again. It was still for a minute, then repeated the pattern again. Jack suddenly realized his host would pass out if he didn't resume breathing.

"Holy fuck," he whispered, expressions from other parts of the galaxy not being as suitable as the best English comments. He held his hand steady for another five minutes as the rock cycled through its communication a few more times.

A strangled voice came out of Jack's mouth. "Does this mean you guys will be leaving us?"

Jack merely said, to his human host, "Yes." The human host began to cry silently, and Jack fully sympathized for once.

"Now what?" Jim asked. "I mean, what first?"

"Well," said, Jack, "we go over to the Piazza Manna to celebrate – it's spring roll day, you know!"

"Damn straight," Jim whispered. "Damn straight."

Jack thought briefly. "I guess we should tell Barb. We owe her that much."

Jim nodded. That was true; Barb had been a good friend for almost eleven years, and had made living in the community a lot easier. A long pause. "Yeah, she deserves to know." They sat a bit longer in the late afternoon shade. It was getting colder now; another winter would be coming in, but these two aliens had no plans to face it. Across the water, the buildings of Toronto stood golden in the light. Two of the ferries to the islands passed each other, out on the harbour water, looking like illustrations in some children's book.

The two turned in at the short path to Barb's cottage. A small hand-lettered sign said, "Barb's Jams" and another, hung below it, with "Open" printed on it. Below that, on a concrete shelf, were a couple of small figurines, including a garden gnome with a tiny rake and a couple of sailors.

Barb saw them before they got to her door. "Jack! Jim! Come on in. I'll make you some tea."

The two aliens arranged themselves around the small kitchen table and waited while Barb made cilantro tea. They preferred bourbon and cilantro, but Barb was a teetotaler, so they had to make do with cilantro tea and cilantro-chocolate cookies.

After a couple of sips and the appropriate thanks, a silence fell. "Is there something wrong?" Barb asked?

Jim looked at Jack, then took out the rock and set it on the table. It vibrated and moved a bit towards the down side of the surface a bit at a time.

"What's that? Barb looked at the device but didn't reach for it. There was a long silence, then Barb said, suddenly, "That's not your call to go home is it?"

Jack and Jim said nothing for a moment. Jack scooped the rock back and put it into his pocket. "That's what it is," he said.

"Holy Mazinaw." Barb took a jam cookie. "For real?"

"For real. Something's happened, we guess, and we're needed back in the Empire."

"How long have you been on Earth, now? I forget what you told me."

"Twenty-three years," Jim said. "Almost twenty-four," Jack noted.

Jeez, I gotta work on this for a minute," Barb said. She watched them and sipped tea. "I've known you for twelve years, now. Seven since I guessed your little secret."

Jack nodded.

"What happens to Jack and Jim, the Daniels brothers?" Barb asked. "Do they get their bodies back in one piece?"

"It'll take a few days," Jack said, "and those guys will be free and good as new. They'll be the same Jack and Jim Daniels you used to know, at least physically, but older."

"Well, you've kept the bodies in good shape."

Jack nodded. "Of course. Jack would be dead now, for one thing, if we hadn't cured him of a nasty tumour on his lung. And stopped his smoking. So he'll live a bit longer than he would have, otherwise." He reached for a cilantro cookie.

"Won't they be a bit traumatized?"

"We've kept them pretty well sedated and happy – it's a matter of tuning the cannabinoid receptors and fiddling with the serotonin levels mostly...."

"But when they get real again....?"

"Yeah," Jack admitted. "They'll probably take some time to deal with it."

"And become the dickheads they used to be?"

"Maybe."

"Well, you were an improvement on them, at least." Barb paused. "Why did you come to tell me about this?"

Jack looked at Jim, then to the ceiling. "There will be effects."

"Gonna blow up the Earth?" Barb crossed her arms.

"No, no! Nothing that bad."

"Then what?"

"First thing, we're going to start up the spaceship. That's mostly physics, but a bit of metaphysics."

"I don't understand."

Jack almost ran his tongue into his nose, but remembered in time what that did to human social interaction. "You can't go faster than light in natural physics. You need a bit of supernatural, too."

"What's that going to mean to us earthlings?"

"The supernatural in this area is going to get ramped up for a week or so." She looked puzzled, so he added, "you'll be seeing some ghosts, and unnatural things will happen around this end of Ontario. Not sure exactly what, but you earthlings have some strange things hanging around."

"Sounds entertaining." Barb looked skeptical.

"I suppose it will be. The one thing you must be sure of is that you don't call up specific dead people during this time."

"Why is that?"

"Well," said Jack, "we have laws against that back where we come from. The people you call up tend to come back and stick around in the flesh. Of course, that probably won't happen here. You earthlings are used to dead people staying dead."

"And that's it?"

"Ah, no. We need fuel, too. A lot of matter."

"I can think of a country or two we might not miss, if you leave the people behind."

"Lake Ontario would do it," Jim broke his silence.

"Lake Ontario?"

"Just the water. Not the boats. A few of the fish."

"Wouldn't that make people suspicious about things from outer space?"

"Well, we talked about that, and decided to see if we can skip over to the ocean and take a bit of that. It wouldn't lower the ocean much."

"Might counter a bit of global warming," Barb said.

"I suppose."

There was a long silence. "Well," Barb said, "I've always believed you guys were aliens, but I think like a lot of other people would have to do that too, if Lake Ontario went dry."

Jack and Jim nodded. "We'll try for the ocean."

"You said you cured Jack's cancer, didn't you. Any chance of crawling into me and curing mine? I've been free of it for three years, but my doctor's looking worried and I have a lot of tests coming up."

"Oh, we don't have to do that," Jim said. "We'll write you up a recipe that should work, won't we?" He turned to Jack.

"If you'll agree to come with us tonight for wings day at the Piazza Manna."

Jim corrected him, "Wings night was last night. It's spring rolls today."

"A recipe?"

"We're not magicians. We just know a few things your people will figure out soon enough anyway. Tastes like hell, but works. Will you come with us to celebrate?"

Twenty minutes later, the three of them, with a friend of Barb's named Tanya, stood on the dock as the ferry, the Thomas Rennie, arrived. Barb was puzzling over a list of items Jim had written on a piece of paper.

By dark the Daniels' brothers were at their cottage on the shores of Popham Bay.

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## **Brighton Ontario**

*At the Dixie Lee Chicken Place.*

*Two days before Button Day*

Laura Singer came into the Dixie Lee about four in the afternoon, just as Jag had paid for a coffee. He noticed her, but pretended it was more in the way cops keep their eyes open at all times than anything else.

But as they got closer, she looked him in the eye and said, "I've got a question for you."

"Sure," he said. "I'll be over there." He pointed at a table in the far corner.

She brought a small combo pack with a Pepsi to the table. They sat in silence for a moment, as she opened the chicken. She offered a piece, but he shook his head. "That stuff'll kill an old guy like me."

"I should think the coffee here would do that quicker."

"A cop gets used to most anything. And for some reason this place is popular with people who the long arm of the law should keep an eye on. Don't know why."

"I like that picture," she said. "An arm with an eye." He said nothing, so she added, "How would I get to High Bluff Island?"

"There's no boat rental places around," he said. "You'd have to rent a kayak or canoe in Belleville and bring it here."

"Found that out already. That's why I'm asking you."

"Well then, I guess you already know it's a protected area" – he held up a hand when she started to say something – "but you'd already know that the protected season's over."

She nodded.

"I didn't grow up here, but I understand that people used to go there looking for old man Daigen's treasure. Then it was mostly kids going there for adventure. Often as not, a boy and girl or a couple of very close boy friends. Must have found something," he added. "People said they came back smiling." He shook his head. "But I haven't answered your question, have I?" Laura said nothing.

"I can try to find someone who'll rent you a boat or a canoe big enough; the waters can get choppy sometimes and you don't want a small canoe. Or," he said, shifting a bit in his seat, "I can borrow my neighbor's big Coleman canoe and paddle you out there. Tomorrow or the day after, for example. The weather's warm and the winds should be down, so it shouldn't be all that hard. We'd have watch the winds though." He looked at the young redhead behind the counter serving a dude who looked like a man you wouldn't want to deal with.

"Would we run into young couples looking for treasures?"

"Not in September, on a school day. Besides, young couples probably have better ways of getting it off." He watched the dude take his box of chicken to an outside picnic table. The dude watched Jag out of the corner of his eye.

"Sounds like a plan," Laura said. "How about tomorrow. What time can you pick me up? I presume you know I'm staying at the Lasenby cottage on the bay."

Jag nodded. "Ten a.m. good enough?"

"Sounds fine." She got up and left without looking back. A half hour later she'd found the Lasenby cottage on the edge of the bay, found the key hidden under the mat, and opened the door to have a look at the place she planned to spend the next week. Not far away, at the cottage next door, two middle-aged men were sitting on the deck at the back. Laura figured she might as well go over and introduce herself.

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### **Toronto, at a downtown park**

*The park is on church property, and is frequented by the homeless.*

*Two days before Button Day, a little less warm*

"Hello body that goes by the name of Al something-or-other," Tom said. "Might I sit down?"

The guy sitting under the tree smiled, and his eyes came into focus. "Hey, I remember you. Tom Barrents." He offered a paper bag. "Care for a drink?"

Tom inspected the contents. This time it was Pusser's rum. "Kind of a pricey drink for a bum," isn't it?" He settled himself next to Al in the mid-morning sunshine. A couple of orange maple leaves dropped onto his lap and he brushed them off.

"Al," said Al, "is celebrating. He's getting drunk on good booze."

"Okay." Tom, having taken his meds, had to be okay with most things, although his difficulty in formulating a complete response to Al was getting him annoyed, and taking the edge off his peacefulness. He said, "Why?"

"I'm going home!" Al giggled, and reached into a large duffle bag that had seen better days. He came out with another paper bag.

Tom opened it enough to see a plastic mickey of 40 Creek Whiskey. "Home?"

"To the stars! To my home planet! Way up there!"

Tom's mind didn't work very fast these days, but this whole scenario wasn't all that far from the delusions he'd had when he wasn't on his meds. He pursed his lips and tried to think. A couple of tourists came by, one of them pretending to talk on a cell phone but actually taking a picture of the two men under a tree. Tom closed his eyes. Were people spying on him? That had been another of his delusions. Yet here he was, having that morning taken every goddamn pill they prescribed him, and it sure looked like he was talking to a space alien disguised as a human while innocent-looking passers-by secretly took his picture.

God, he thought. If Jasna Jones finds out about this, it's either more pills or the loony bin for sure. He opened the bottle and took a drink. "But what about your study?" he asked Al, who was having trouble focusing his eyes. "You said you were doing a study of humanity."

"Study, shmuddy! I made that up. It was only to keep me busy until someone let me get the hell off this miserable water-soaked ball of mud! Now I can leave!" Al took a chew of a bunch of greens from his

coat pocket, then sucked back another sip of rum. He offered the greens to Tom. "Cilantro," he said. "You guys might be able to export it some day."

"If you can leave, then why are you sitting here?" Tom noticed that a couple of the local bums – or maybe secret agents from a hidden Bilderberger Special Forces group – were shuffling towards them.

"It'll take a few days to get the ship ready. A few lucky or unlucky days."

"Say," said a voice above them, "you wouldn't be able to spare a sip of that, would you, Al?"

They looked up. A guy with dark hair, a coat that needed replacing, and a face that needed shaving, looked down at them.

"Peter!" Al reached into the duffle bag and took out another paper bag. He handed it to Peter. "Here. All yours."

Peter took it, looked into the bag, then, looked around. "For me?"

"All for you. There's room on the grass, if you want to join us"

"No." Peter shook his head. "If I pass out or something, I want it to be in my room. Thanks, man." He headed off, a spring in his step. At the edge of Church Street, he paused as he passed another man, and pointed back towards Al.

"We might be getting company," Tom observed, taking another sip from his bottle.

"That's okay."

"You drunk yet?"

"Al is," Al said. "Stuff doesn't do much for me, though."

For a minute they were alone. More leaves fell. Then another guy, this one looking much better than Peter, with a good set of shoes and a new jacket, walked up to them.

Al looked up. "Johnny," he said. "You're an asshole. Here, have a bottle."

Johnny was just starting to turn red when he checked the bag and inspected the bottle. He removed the cap and sniffed. Then he smiled. "Al," he said, "some days I'm happy to be an asshole. This asshole thanks you." He looked around. "Watch for the cops, now." And he was gone.

"Let's go." Al got up, unsteadily, and Tom followed.

For the next hour, they meandered the streets east of Yonge, Al moving less steadily than Tom. Eventually, Al gave away fifteen bottles in paper bags, and, to one short man, a small additional bag.

"If you're leaving the planet," Tom asked, "can't you afford bigger bottles?"

"They deserve more, but you can't give them too much at once."

"Oh." That made sense. "What was in the little bag?"

"Couple of diamonds." Al looked at Tom. "Brian'll know what to do with them."

"Aren't you being a bit generous?"

"Emeralds and rubies used to be worth a king's ransom. Pearls used to be even more valuable."

Tom thought about it for a bit. "You mean things get cheaper for someone who knows where to get them in bulk."

"In space, a diamond the size of a walnut will get you a couple of carrots and a can of Bud Light. They're everywhere."

"You get Bud Light up there?"

"Yeah, but we make our own. A couple of species like the stuff." They kept walking. "You still with me?"

Tom stopped. "I guess I was. Well, thanks for the entertainment."

"No problem. Don't tell anybody for a week." Al looked around. "And don't buy any lakeshore property around here, just in case."

Tom watched him walk away. Lakeshore property? Was there a problem with property around Lake Ontario? Tom remembered that his cousin Laura said she was spending time at a cottage on the lake, in Brighton. Maybe he could call her.

But not till after he visited Pine Lake. It had been more than a year since a helicopter had taken him away from the place he'd spent more than a year hiding in the woods. That was in his pre-medication days, when his mind was good at thinking, even if it was thinking the wrong things most of the time. By late afternoon he had a rental canoe on top of a rental car, and was heading for the lakes north of Peterborough.

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### **Toronto**

*In a large office building in Scarborough*

*Two days before Button Day*

From: jajones

To: LauraSinger@hotmail.ca

Subject: Re: Case YJ9903 Tom Barrents

Hi, Laura:

Thanks for getting back to me so quickly about your cousin Tom Barrents.

While I agree with you that his last analysis showed decidedly antisocial tendencies, we must remember that that analysis was done two years ago and by someone he really didn't like. (Not of course that he likes many people anyway.)

He's been good about staying on his medications, although I must agree with you that they rather diminish his intellectual and emotional capacities – it's certain that he'll never go back to teaching philosophy, even to first-year students.

On the other hand, if the alternative is hiding in the bush north of Peterborough, convinced that sinister entities are out to kill him, I'd vote for the meds. He's getting too old to survive an experience like that again.

Still, even if he's bitter about a lot of things, I can't see adding any further medications to his list to make him more amenable to his current situation.

In the absence of any possibility of getting Mr. Barrents' cooperation with any true testing, I think it's better to go with a (slightly modified) version of the Metcalfe Observational Methodology for the time being. I don't think that Mr. Barrents presents any current danger to society. He's directed his anger and frustration at God rather than man, and tolerates verbal and physical abuse from people remarkably well.

It's only God he has issues with, and short of The Deity showing up in this end of Toronto, I don't see much probability that he'll cause any damage.

You might think that he'd burn churches or something like that, but instead he regards them as deluded rather than dangerous, run by people rather than housing God, so he ignores them.

With your permission, I'll keep him under observation for a while longer (assuming he stays in Toronto) before we make any decisions, A summarized copy of the MO Methodology-based observations is attached.

Jasna

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### **Carrying Place, Ontario**

*The main intersection in the community*

*Two days before Button Day*

Both Jag and Cope were ten minutes early to Carrying Place. They met in the parking lot of George's Fish and Chips, since neither of them had specified exactly where in downtown Carrying Place to meet. Jag rolled down the window in the police car, as did Cope in his rented Impala. "There's this place, and The Mason Jar," Jag said. "It's just over there."

Cope looked at the sky. George's was mostly picnic tables, and there was a cool wind blowing dark clouds across the skies. "The Mason Jar sounds fine," Cope said.

They parked in the gravel lot and walked in. Peggy waved them to the almost empty room. "Anyplace you want," she said. "I'll be right with you. She handed a menu to each of them and went into the kitchen.

"Well," Cope said. "I see they've got something called 'The Whole 9 Yards' if you're hungry. And they serve it for lunch, too. 4 eggs, 3 bacon, 3 sausages, 1 ham, 1 peameal, homefries, 1 pancake, toast and coffee."

Jag read it. "I've never ordered it. Jesus, man. If Afghanistan didn't kill me, that would. Maybe I'll just get a BLT. What about you?"

"I'll have their chili, I think. How is it?"

"It's actually very good, but I've got a date tonight, and I think I'll avoid the beans right now."

Cope looked up at Jag. "A date? You're seeing women again? I'd have thought Tammy would have put you off that species for life. Must be someone you arrested."

"Thought so, too, for a while, but she seems nice. Interesting, anyway." He looked up as Peggy came."

"Sorry," she said. "Can I get you guys a coffee?"

Jag nodded, but Cope said, "Just some white milk for me. And we're ready to order."

While waiting for the food they caught up on details of each other's life. "Heard you and Tammy split up," Cope said.

Jag just nodded. "After the Toronto thing." He shrugged. "Maybe she'll come back."

"The kids still speaking to you?"

"Sure. They're just trying to stay neutral in case we suddenly see the light. You still married?"



"Oh yeah. Haven't strangled each other yet, but Paula's taking care of my daughter's two boys; they're four and seven, and they've still got a lot more energy than we can deal with at our age."

Jag raised his eyebrows.

"My daughter," Cope said, "is running through a few personal problems right now. Paula offered to take the boys for a month or two. She's having a tough time of it. She was working as a consultant part time, but she's put that on hold and wearing herself down."

"Well, if this is a vacation, it's probably a good place to have one. Not much happens in Brighton, compared with most places."

"Paula's just too uptight for a couple of kids at her age. She's trying to control them too much. You can't keep an immaculate house with a couple of boys that age. She loves them, but they're boys, after all." He paused. "The seven-year-old cries a lot most nights."

"Can't get her to relax?"

"She's a woman with a daughter she worries about. Can't do anything about the daughter, so she's hoping that if she sets an example and controls the house, the rest of the universe will take the hint and straighten itself out."

"Can't imagine you straightening out, at least until the undertaker does it for you."

"Paula tries, but I'm never enough help and whatever she does seems to make her crazy. Either I didn't do it right, or I didn't do it at the right time, or I didn't do it the way she saw me doing it in her mind before I did it."

"What about your son?"

"In Europe for a year, working at a branch of his company. Can't help with this one." Cope looked at the ceiling. The food came and Cope decided it was time to get to the point. "I'm here on assignment," he told Jag.

"Spies at the air force base?" Trenton had a big air base.

"Brighton, actually. Your turf."

"Brighton? Who did you piss off?"

"I don't know. Well, actually, there's a long list, so it could be any of them. Probably just trying to keep me out of the way until I retire."

"Next year, isn't it?"

Cope sighed. "Damn right. Going to get you taxpayers paying my retirement money. Can't hardly wait."

"I could ask you what you're looking for, but I probably don't want to know."

"Well, I don't know either." He smiled at Jag's confusion. "I'm supposed to nose around and find out if anything's going on in..." He got out a Blackberry Playbook. "Ah, yes. Popham Bay. I guess that's your territory."

"Oh yes. A long sand beach in the Park, and a few cottages facing the bay on the mainland."

"Anything suspicious?"

"Caught a couple of young guys in a car there last week. They had no booze or drugs, weren't racing, weren't guys out for a quickie, and hadn't stolen a thing."

"That's suspicious?"

Around Brighton, it is. It's not an exciting place."

"Anything on the water?"

"The usual boats, which is to say not many. Sailboats prefer the other side since it's more sheltered, and other boats find Popham a bit choppy in a wind. Pretty quiet after labor day. Sorry. Can't say if there's a fleet of Yemeni submarines cruising the bottom."

"I can hang around without raising suspicion, I guess. Just for form's sake."

"I can ask Laura. That's the woman I've been seeing. Since last week, anyway. She's renting a cottage on the shore of the bay."

Cope took out the Playbook again. "Shall I look her up?"

"Ah..."

"Well, maybe you don't want to know. Got a point there."

"Sure," Jag said, after getting a second cup of coffee. "Why not. Might as well find out the truth before it's too late. Laura Singer. Don't know any more than that. Oh. Writes poetry."

There was a moment's pause as Cope entered the information. "Does she know you write poetry, too?"

"I doubt it."

"Keeping the strange stuff for later, are we? Did she write *The Minor Odyssey of Lollie Heronfeathers Singer*?"

"Don't know. Why not?"

Cope peered at the tablet. "No problems in our files. Wrote a guidebook to Ontario wetlands. Didn't sell all that well, but what do you expect. Probably doing research on UFOs in Ontario for her next book with *Passion Among the Cacti Press*."

"Pardon? How would you know that?"

"Didn't mention it, eh? I hear she offered the publisher a book on ghosts or UFOs or ghosts, and he asked for UFOs. Probably doing research."

"Brighton has UFOs?" Jag had stopped eating entirely.

"One reported twenty or thirty years ago out over the bay somewhere." He looked up at Jag. "Hey, the government keeps tabs on all reports of UFOs. Anybody has any real knowledge, they like to know." He saw Jag's stunned look. "I gather you didn't know about that old report. Well, it was long before you got here. She's probably trying to get enough material for the book." He smiled. "Bound to sell better than poetry. I'd have thought she'd have mentioned it to you."

"That's for sure." He paused. "She'd have done better to stick to ghosts, or treasure."

"Haunted town you got?"

"Always a few in a town like this." A pause. "Maybe they sent you to check out a UFO."

Cope gave him *The Look*. "How many people would I have to piss off for them to send me to check out a UFO report from twenty years ago?"

"I don't know. How many?"

Cope thought about it. "Maybe the prime minister. Or the Queen. But I don't think I'm that important, even in the nuisance department."

"So you just hang around and look for suspicious things....."

"Should have brought a trench coat and a spy hat, so I can lurk around the street corners of Brighton."

"I'll keep you informed if I hear of anything besides ghosts."

"Well, there must be some reason they sent me here. I'd appreciate anything."

"Where you staying?"

"Ah, the cop question, of course." Cope finished his chili. "A place called the Presqu'ile Beach Motel."

"You do know it's nowhere near Presqu'ile Beach?"

"That's okay."

Jag watched Cope drive away towards Brighton. He himself had a few things to check out near Barcovan Beach before going home. As he drove the sandy back roads, he thought about things. At the end of his shift he got a call from Tammy, his ex-wife. That didn't help things much.

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## **Gosport Ontario**

*At the marina.*

*Day before Button Day*

Cope drove into Brighton in the afternoon, having spent a happy morning going up north as far as Warkworth then following the gravel roads south through the hills and back across the 401. He'd bought a gift for his niece in the Eclectic Mix, a Warkworth arts store and taken a few pictures of some old wooden fences and the pines on the hills. The aspens were starting to turn yellow, and the maples wouldn't be far behind.

The winding highway into Brighton followed a creek most of the way, and Cope thought he might just like to settle in some place like that someday. Someday soon, perhaps, if his relations with the agency continued to deteriorate. Perhaps a bit later, if he lasted till his pension kicked in. and after his daughter had figured out her life and taken her kids back.

On the other hand, he could always take the option of settling on Algonquin or Ward's Island across Toronto harbor. The place was already a hangout for ex-spooks, mostly Canadian. Your average ex-intelligence-agent would have preferred a remote cottage, or even, God forbid, the hamlet of Glen Miller, but the islands were safer, and the people there kept a close watch for strangers.

He passed the provincial police station, circled the small downtown a couple of times, then, after consulting a map, took the road towards the park.

On a weekday, and in the off season, there was no one at the gate, so he dropped money and the required self-serve form into a battered collection box and went into the park. There are some private cottages on the peninsula, as well as the park itself, so the road is maintained. But Cope saw no one except a blond guy with dreadlocks taking pictures of dead trees a ways back from the road.

He took a long look at the waters of Lake Ontario, at High Bluff Island, and at the bay between the island and the mainland. It was choppy out on the bay, with a lot of water birds bobbing on the waves. He'd once tried bird-watching, but hadn't taken to it, finally deciding that James Audubon had had the right idea; shoot the birds, then identify them lying motionless on the kitchen table. He took a couple of pictures on his cell phone, then drove back out of the park, thinking maybe he shouldn't have paid the entrance fee for such a little time.

Just outside the park entrance, he turned left, away from the town, following the dirt road past the town dump and along the entrances to twenty or so cottages. Most of these were separated from each other with a bit of forest, and from the bay by a high gravel mound of storm wrack. A good place to watch the water, he decided. He passed Laura's cottage without knowing it.

Finally, about four, he checked in to the Presqu'ile Beach motel, just outside the downtown. He had a supper downtown, then resumed his wandering, eventually getting to the Harbourview Marina. There wasn't much activity, so he sat in the car and watched the bay. Far out in the bay a cabin cruiser came steadily in, at no great speed. The water on this side of the peninsula was a lot calmer than over in Popham Bay. Cope loved boats, although he didn't have one himself at the moment. He loved creeks and rivers and lakes, even puddles. Even more so since his dusty time in Afghanistan and a few other dry places.

He was only a little surprised when Jag's patrol car came into the lot. It was possible his old friend had ways of keeping tabs on him, but it was more likely that this was just part of Jag's usual patrol route. Someone had to check that people weren't smuggling stuff into the country or people into the States. He flashed his lights and Jag parked the cruiser beside Cope's Subaru.

Jag stood beside Cope's window like he was about to make an arrest, then said,

"The movie man, shows up again; shall I hum 'The Shadow of Your Smile?'" Jag asked. It had been a joke in Afghanistan, an Oscar-award-winning song to note the fact that Oscar Copeman hardly ever smiled when on duty, except when he killed someone. "I'll have to make it quick, though; I've got a dinner date with Laura tonight. Meanwhile, can I buy you a coffee?"

"Cops gotta pay for coffee in this town?"

"It's a tough place."

The two sat at the back, a longstanding habit that allowed them to watch the other customers and the door. Jag also watched Cope, wondering why the man seemed so alert.

As the cabin cruiser got to the dock, one of the customers, a tall, balding man with glasses, got up and walked out of the Harbourview café, towards the boat. The tall man greeted the boat as it tied up.

Jag read the name: *Serenity*.

"Nice boat," Jag said.

"Not a likely name for anybody dealing with that guy," Cope said. "Not bloody likely."

"Oh?"

"Special forces in Afghanistan. Get a look at the guy getting off the boat, too."

Jag took a quick glance at the younger man, memorizing details. "Special forces, too?"

"Don't know him," Cope said, "but he looks like one." He took a long sip of coffee and finished his date square. "Interesting, isn't it? I see someone I knew, down at the marina. The old guy is a fellow named Lester Miller. American, a former SEAL who worked for the agency in Langley before getting jobs with private firms. Left about a month before you got there. He meets a guy I don't know getting off a boat named *Serenity*."

"Interesting," Jag said. "Did he see you?"

"For sure, but we pretended we didn't know each other."

"What do you think?" Jag tapped his fingers on the table.

“I think this assignment just got a lot more interesting.”

“I’ll see what I can find out tomorrow.”

“Thanks,” Cope said. He stayed seated, watching the boat..

Jag had just got up when Laura’s Jeep drove in. “My current interest,” he told Cope.

“Probably not a wise time to introduce us,” Cope said. “It’ll make me nervous enough if they link the two of us, let alone anybody else.” His eyes narrowed, wondering about coincidences.

Laura, it turned out, was just doing another tour of the local area, and declined Jag’s offer of an escort with sirens wailing. “See you tomorrow,” she said.

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## **Chapter 4: September 16**

*This day is overcast, and windy..*

*Day before Button Day*

### **Pine Lake**

*A Small, Isolated lake north of Peterborough*

The shelter he’d started a couple of years before was still there, although two winters’ snows hadn’t done it any good. Not that it had been much, anyway; dry branches leaning against a couple of fallen trees, and a covering made of a green tarp, mouse holes and all, that he’d liberated from the snowmobile camp.

It would have been his second winter in the area and his first at Pine Lake, and he doubted that he’d have survived it. How he managed to survive the first winter was beyond him. Luck, perhaps.

Thomas Barrents, doctor of philosophy in philosophy knelt and studied the assemblage. A couple of tall pines creaked in the wind and leaves from aspens higher on the hill fluttered madly, but on the forest floor there was barely a whisper of wind. He didn’t know what to make of it, but then, these days, thinking wasn’t his strong suit.

Two years before he’d been hauled from the lake by float plane after an encounter with some other people on the only island in the lake. The hospital in Peterborough had pumped his stomach and told him, for Christ’s sake, to take his meds every day.

Now he took his meds every day, and the world was sane and gray, and it took a lot of effort just to think. Thoughts would form and fade off before he could get them finished. He hummed to himself sometimes, but the lyrics to the tunes usually included only a couple of lines.

And nothing bothered him, not even the white contrails from a Toronto-bound plane overhead.

There had been a time when he’d gone off his meds, and within a week he was thinking what seemed brilliant thoughts. The world was sharp, and full of colour and movement and things out to get him because of his brilliant thoughts. He’d raved about planes and their contrails spewing stuff the governments used to keep the populace happy and uncomplaining and he’d suspected every person he met of being in some plot to get him or even controlled by alien beings.

Now he was a rag doll, stumbling day to day towards dusty death, incapable of caring. For a moment that seemed all wrong, but he couldn’t figure out why, and a moment later the image was gone. He opened his canteen, took three pills from his pocket, and swallowed them.

For a moment, he considered camping right there, beside the incomplete shelter. Or over across the lake, on the island. But there were too many of his own ghosts there. He realized that he didn't want to spend another night on Pine Lake, and decided he'd portage over to Sparkler Lake and spend the night there. The aspens and maples were more colourful there, and the landscape was brighter.

He walked among the trees down to the lake where his rental canoe was tied, humming without smiling. He didn't look back.

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## **Popham Bay**

### *High Bluff Island*

#### *Day before Button Day*

From the shore, they looked out over Lake Ontario to High Bluff Island. Jag pointed out the remains of the causeway that Paul Daigen had once maintained to the island. "He used his tractor to get back and forth," Jag said, "so he didn't mind a bit of water sloshing over the road at times. But, of course, a lot of it's been washed away now." He pointed. "You could probably wade most of the way, but there's that one section you'd have to swim." He turned to Laura. "But I presume you'd prefer the canoe."

She nodded. "Does the park plan to rebuild the road sometime?"

Jag shook his head. "As long as it's a bird sanctuary, they want people kept off." Then, seeing her raise her eyebrows, he added, "Up till the second week in September, anyhow. After that, boaters sometimes visit it. The water's calm right now, so we might as well be off. Are you a good canoeist?"

"I'll paddle stern," she said. "It's my expedition, after all." She put a backpack into the canoe near the back.

Jag loaded a rather large and new picnic basket into the middle of the canoe, then slid the canoe across the gravel shore until most of it was in the lake. He got into the back of the canoe, and moved to the front, stepping around the basket. When he'd settled in, Laura shoved the boat into the water as she stepped in and sat in the rear seat.

The canoe, a big and old plastic Coleman that Jag had borrowed from a neighbour, rocked a bit in the small waves as they followed the causeway to the island. Gulls circled, screaming gull songs, and a flock of cormorants on a tree on the island watched them approach. "It's calm enough to circle the island by canoe first, if you want," the policeman said, not looking back.

Laura said nothing for a moment, merely looking at Jag's back and the clouds, and squeezing her fingers on the paddle handle. "No," she said, "No. I think we should just get on with it. Have a picnic. See the island." She took a deep breath.

They landed on a shingle beach not quite below the cormorant tree, as the birds, one by one, took flight. The tree and vegetation around it had been killed by the birds' waste so they put the canoe in a little closer to the causeway. Jag made the leap to the shore, his feet noisy on the stones, as he pulled the canoe up far enough for Laura to get out. Then he dragged it up and well into the tall grass and shrubs.

He offered a hand, and she took it long enough to get up the slight rise of the shore. Beyond that, the island appeared flat, with the stone foundations of a small old building to the north, and a small copse of poplars to the south. Jag looked at Laura. "Picnic first," she said.

"There's a clear area on other side of the foundation," Jag said, "where there's a good view of Popham Bay and you can see your cottage." Laura said nothing. "Over there" – Jag pointed south – "there's a grassy area where you might see boats going by, though they'll probably be mostly lake freighters." Laura put her backpack on then moved inland.

Abruptly she stopped at a place surrounded by long grass and shrubs. "Here."

"Not much of a view."

"That's for sure. Did you bring a blanket?" she asked firmly.

"Ah, of course. Need one for a picnic. Since there are no picnic tables on the island. More comfortable that way."

After the picnic, they did a tour of the island. Jag pointed out the herd of deer keeping just out of their way. "They have no predators, except the occasional hunter sneaking in from Gosport, so they've multiplied more than the island can hold and, come February, a lot of them starve." At the southwest tip of the island, he showed her the automated lighthouse, looking more like a pile of steel barrels with a lens on top. It was surrounded by a space of flat rock with the mummified remains of birds. "A lot of birds die here in winter," he said. She didn't reply.

When they were back to the old farm foundations, she took a notebook out of her backpack, and examined the stones. She paced off distances from one corner of the foundation, and wrote something down several times.

"A lot of people have looked for Daigen's treasure, if that's what you're after," Jag said. "If anybody's found it, there's been no indication, or so I hear. But I'm not a local," he added.

"Paul Daigen was an uncle to my mother," Laura said, not looking up. "He kept in touch with her, and she passed some information on to me."

"But you didn't bring that shovel you bought."

"Wisdom says 'survey first; shovel later.' I'll be back here again."

"Okay." He waited until she seemed satisfied with the surveying, then said, "We should be getting back before the lake gets any choppiest." He waved towards the shoreline where there was now a definite roll to the surface and the odd wave was breaking into whitecaps.

"I think you're right."

Jag dropped Laura off at the cottage she was renting by the bay. High Bluff Island was visible through some aspen trees.

"Thanks," she said, getting her pack from the back seat.

Just before she got down, Jag handed her a piece of paper. "My phone number," he said. "In case you need help with anything."

"Thanks," she said again, and went into the cottage.

Jag backed the blue FJ Cruiser onto the road, and drove home.

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## **Gosport**

*In the boat Serenity, at the marina on Presqu'ile Bay*

*Day before Button Day*

After they'd had an early supper, Sammy and Lester drove out of Gosport towards Brighton.

“How was the trip on the boat? I meant to ask that” Lester asked, after a few minutes.

“Up and down; up and down. How was the drive?”

“Fine?”

“What’s wrong? You mad at me because I took the boat?”

“Nope?”

“Well, you’re uptight about something. Even you aren’t usually this quiet. You’re going to have to tell me sometime, you know.”

Lester grunted. “In the café, at the marina....” He paused and reached into the back seat, coming up with a bag as they waited out traffic at a stop light.

Sammy opened up the bag. “Hey, you did get me some!” He brought out a chocolate donut. “So what about the café?”

“There was a guy and a cop talking in there.”

“Saw them through the glass. The cop left after you, and talked to a chick in a Jeep. That the one?”

Lester nodded. The guy talking to the cop is a fellow named Oscar Copeman, known in Afghanistan as ‘Cope’.” Lester looked at Sammy, who was finishing his second donut and already looking a bit carsick. “Intelligence officer with the Canadians. Tough bugger and a good shot.”

“Not as tough as a SEAL.”

“Who is? But someone you got to keep an eye on at all times. He thinks fast on his feet.”

“You knew him well?”

“We worked in a field team near Jalalabad for a couple of weeks. Can’t say we got all that close, but we knew each other.”

“Did he say hello?”

Lester watched the traffic behind him. “I pretended not to know him and he pretended not to know me.”

"What do you think?" Sammy asked. "Maybe he didn't remember you."

Lester managed to keep from rolling his eyes or making a sarcastic comment. Sammy had never learned the art of reading the eyes and body movements of Afghan tribesmen to know when a lie was being told or something in the village was definitely wrong. Sammy would be hiding behind a wall to cover the retreat of all his company, still firing, but his people skills were lacking.

"Cope and I knew each other." Lester didn't have to say the meaning of that sentence. It meant that they'd been in action together. That they'd depended on one another at some point or other. Although the result of that dependency varied; it was usually positive – there were very few bad apples sent to Afghanistan. But many men were unable to maintain either friendship or trust afterwards; the lifestyles just diverged too much, even if there hadn't been suppressed anger at some point.

“Sounds suspicious to me. Bumpy roads around here, aren’t there?”

“Use the donut bag if you have to. If CSIS is here, then the Canadians know something.”

“Probably know more than we do.” Sammy got the bag ready, just in case.

“That wouldn’t be hard.”

“So now what?”



"We'll call the boss tomorrow. Right now, let's have a look at the bay." Lester took the road to the park. Ten minutes later, from the end of a long beach, the two looked over the waters of Popham Bay.

"What's the island again?"

Sammy unfolded the navigational map. "High Bluff Island. Nothing there but an automatic lighthouse and a bunch of birds. It's a sanctuary."

"Keep it in mind. Never know when we'll need a place to hide."

Sammy frowned. "Not a lot of cover in those trees. And I don't like islands."

"Sure. Sure." Lester pointed to the north. "There seems to be a few houses along that shore, probably outside the park. If anyone wanted to watch the bay, they'd come in handy."

"Want me to drive?"

"Sure." Lester knew Sammy was less likely to get carsick if he were driving, although, the way Sammy drove, his passengers often got a greenish hue.

They followed the gravel roads along the north shore. Most of the cottages were old, worth less than the land they were on, and the land was swampy and forested. "Did you see that?" Sammy asked abruptly.

"Yeah." Lester turned to look at a cottage they'd just passed. "That's the same Jeep that met the cop that talked to the CSIS agent at the marina, isn't it?"

"Sure looks the same. And here comes the cop, I think. Not in a patrol car this time."

Lester looked away as Jag's FJ Cruiser went by, then turned into Laura's cottage. "You got good eyes. For a kid. That's the cop all right. I think we have someone here just watching the bay."

"Now what do we do? They'll be watching the boat. Should we get a motel?"

"Nah. Let's get supplies and go back to the boat. They'll find us wherever we put up."

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## **Toronto**

### *The Day before Button Day*

#### *On the Islands*

Clyde Books got off the ferry at Centre Island, wearing a Blue Jays hat and carrying a small camera on a strap under his jacket. Darkh Blood followed a couple of steps back, trying to get ahead of a zit-marked teen who was endeavoring to tell Darkh his life's troubles. Clyde was wearing a blue nylon rain jacket, but Darkh had a black umbrella over his shoulder, with which he managed to fend off the teenager. Only Darkh looked back over the bay where the towers touched the lowering clouds and three small sailboats courageously braved the harbor winds and steady rain.

Thousands of tourists had stood at various points along the shores of Toronto Islands and taken pictures of the scene across the bay, but that day it was a photographer's dream. The clouds were weaving themselves in black and gray over the city and a beam of sunlight had survived long enough to illuminate a couple of golden skyscrapers. "Ain't that a National Geographic moment!" Darkh noted, but Books was paying no attention.

"We'll take the roadway to Ward's Island," he said. "through the amusement park and east."

It took twenty minutes to follow the path to the Ward's Island community and past Hatches' Corner cottage. Clyde thought he saw a dim light in one window, but no other sign of the Daniels brothers. That

was fine, then; he was going to do more homework this time. "That's it," he told Darkh, looking past the cottage and not stopping.

"Hm." Darkh took a few pictures of the area, including the cottage, then moved to catch up to Clyde.

As they walked past the "Barb's Jams" sign, Clyde paused, and turned back. Making it look like he was hesitant, he looked around, then followed the flagstone path to the cottage doorway. He hesitated again, for effect (in case someone was watching) then tapped at the door. Darkh followed him like a shadow. When the door opened, Clyde waved his hand in the general direction of the sign behind him and said, "Hi. You sell jams, I guess."

"Sure do. Come on in and I'll show you what I have. You're from the city?"

"Ah, no. We're from Vancouver, just visiting on business, and I thought I'd see the islands, even if it is raining a bit. We get a lot of rain in Vancouver." Hat, jacket, and umbrella went onto a coat rack by the door.

"Well, then, welcome," Barb said. "What kind of jam do you like?" She ran off the names of ten types of jam. "You'll find they cost about double what you can get jam for in the stores, but the ingredients are as pure and nature-friendly as a person can get around here."

"Well, I'm not that particular about the type of jam I put onto my toast, but my wife likes to try different jams and I always try to bring something home for her. Do you have anything unusual?" He turned to Darkh. "And what would be your preference?"

"Anything but rhubarb. There's way too much of that in Vancouver."

"Can I pour you guys some chamomile tea?" Barb asked. "I've got a pot of water on anyway."

"We'd like that. Even us Vancouver people like to stay out of the rain when we can."

"I second the motion," Darkh said.

For the next ten minutes they talked about jams, and Barb sold him a large jar of strawberry-apricot jam. It came with a little brochure about its manufacture. They talked for a bit about Toronto and Vancouver, then Clyde said, "I've been told a couple of my wife's cousins live somewhere on the islands. You might know them; the Daniels brothers." He sipped the tea and ate a cookie. "I've met them only once, when I was young, so I don't think I'll drop in or anything."

Barb tilted her head. "I know them, but not well. Their close friends are all over in Mississauga, so I see them only at the community meetings. They have a few people over to Hatches' Corner – that's their cottage – every now and then, but generally they like to respect everybody's privacy, like the rest of us here."

"Well, maybe I'll write them a letter. I haven't seen them since I was a kid. I bet they've changed." He laughed a bit.

"I couldn't say to that," Barb said. She didn't offer to pour any more tea. There was a silence in the room for a moment.

"Do you have ghosts on the island?" Darkh Looked up. A couple of people looked at him as if they suddenly realized he was there and wondered how he'd got in.

"Haven't seen any myself," Barb said, sitting down and looking into Darkh's eyes. For a moment it seemed as if she were about to say more, but then she stopped.

"Well, actually, neither have I. I've been hunting for a real ghost for years, and I must admit I'm a total failure. Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Not a ghost, not a vampire, not a zombie, nothing. Mind you, I prefer ghosts, but I'm getting to think I'll spend my life looking without finding any."

Barb poured more tea. "There are rumors of ghosts everywhere, but I've never seen any, either, not even the ghost of Rademuller. You've heard of Rademuller?"

Darkh shook his head.

"Well," Barb said, "he's the most famous ghost on the islands. A German guy, the first lighthouse keeper. The lighthouse on Gibraltar Point. You've seen it?"

Darkh and Clyde shook their heads.

"It's probably not the best day to see it, in the rain. Although you could take some nice pictures if you didn't get your camera wet."

"And the ghost of this guy hangs around there?"

"So they say," said Barb, "but people say these things, you know. Like maybe they want to see ghosts. He kept watch for Americans during the War of 1812. And for a few years after, so the story goes. Lost his head, you know."

"A headless ghost."

"So they say. The story is, he used to sell moonshine to soldiers from the blockhouse. There was a blockhouse there, in case Americans showed up. A couple of soldiers were charged with murdering him, after he disappeared one day in 1815. They had witnesses, but nobody could find the body, and I guess in those days you needed a body before you could convict people."

"And now he walks the shores, I guess." Darkh tilted his head.

"Well.... Years later they found part of a skeleton, and now people believe he was dismembered and parts of his body buried at different spots. There used to be reports of a light in the lighthouse long after the place had stopped being used. People told their kids it was old Rademuller looking for his head." She laughed.

"I thank you for your hospitality," Clyde said, getting up. "I guess we'll be going now."

"Are you going to see if the Daniels brothers are in?"

"No. They've never been close to the family and I should respect their right to privacy. I always wondered how they managed to keep food on the table."

"On the island, that's not a question one asks." Barb wrapped the two jars of jam in newspaper and put them into separate plastic bags, and added brochures. She watched as they left the laneway and headed south, away from the Daniels' cottage.

When they had gone, she made a call to Brighton.

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## **Virginia**

*Phone conversation to an anonymous agency building*

*Day before Button Day*

Sammy's call triggered a few events in the Washington area.

In the US government, as with any government, there are official channels and procedures. These are a last measure after unofficial measures and channels have been used. That's because official channels are apt to be recorded somewhere and read someday by a senate committee.

Unofficial stuff includes a lot of hints and suggestions (the meaning of which is always abstract enough that the true meaning will forever be unclear) and the use of markers and debts, however small. Eventually, and occasionally, some unofficial stuff generates some official stuff, but not often.

The fact that Sammy had seen not one but two intelligence officers (no one cared that Jag was supposed to be a "former" officer) in Brighton caused a bit of a stir among a few people who met at a yacht club from time to time. Even those who knew no real details about the problem in Brighton were concerned that "John" was concerned and happy to tag up a marker for future use.

"Let's get this straight," one of the less-bald men said. "You say a small plane with one guy on board was lost in Lake Ontario, on the Canadian side a couple of years ago."

John nodded and pretended to take a sip of his martini. Not that he got away with it; three of the four other men noticed his fake sip and immediately decided the concern level might be more profitable than they'd thought. "Right next to the Canadian shoreline, by a town called Brighton."

"And you don't want the Canadians to dredge it up."

"There are things in the pilot's briefcase that the Canadians shouldn't find." John made a wry shrug.

"And there are some Canadian intelligence types there. Did they spot your operatives?"

"It seems so. The guys I sent are SEALs, without much training in intelligence operations. Just supposed to nose around."

"Well, if the Canadian government wasn't interested before, they might be now."

"I should think," one of the other guys said, "that it wouldn't be that hard to tell the Canucks that we've located a lost plane, with diplomatic papers. They should be happy to let us haul it aboard an American barge. They understand about diplomatic papers."

"Well..." John said, then let the sentence slide into silence.

"Ah," one of the other guys said. The rest just nodded. "I'll see what I can do," one said. The others nodded again.

"I might need some physical assets," John said. "A boat big enough to throw its weight around, and maybe a helicopter. In the next couple of days or maybe after."

"The Canadians won't like that."

One of the other guys said, "Maybe passing through fishing or visiting the area."

"We might have to go with the lost plane explanation," John said. "We can pull it off if we offer the Canadians something."

"Something the White House and press don't find out about?"

"It's possible," the guy with the Cleveland Indians cap said. "The Canadian Coast Guard's pretty strapped for cash, and some free fuelling and a couple of parties in Rochester, made to look like conferences on border security.... We can get a bit of leeway, as long as this doesn't get up to the higher levels in the Canadian government."

John took a long drink. "Yeah; sure." He didn't look too convinced, but it was obvious he had no better idea.

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## **Brighton**

*Presqu'ile Beach Motel*

*Day before Button Day*

Cope sat for a while on the bed, watched TV, and sucked on chocolate cigarettes as he tried not to think about nicotine. The patch on his arm didn't seem to be doing much. He phoned Paula, who wanted to know why he hadn't stocked up on puffed wheat before he left.

That left his duty to his CSIS contact in Ottawa. For a while he debated just emailing the person on duty, noting briefly that a couple of US former special agents were in Brighton, but that they didn't seem to be doing much. He wasn't satisfied with the compromise message, but at least his ass would be half covered that way. After a while he sighed and made the phone call to a guy called Johnson. Johnson was the poor schnook who had been assigned to handle Oscar Copeman and the Brighton expedition. He knew Cope's jaunt was being recorded as an investigation into something obscure, and that the whole thing was mostly about getting Cope away from anywhere he could annoy people.

So Johnson wasn't happy to have his afternoon interrupted by the call. He was a busy man, his work having expanded to fill the time allotted and not a minute less. But he took the message about Sammy the SEAL and Sammy's younger companion, and about the boat, *Serenity*, and the license number of the car Sammy drove. He said he'd pass it on, and, remarkably, he did just that before he left for a little vacation fishing for muskellunge in Bobcaygeon.

The message got passed along to three people in the next half hour. One person immediately started planning on how to apologize to the Americans, whichever ones were involved, in some fashion or other.

Another person recorded the details of the call into a registry that would be looked at only if other developments that could affect the reputation of the organization ensued. Otherwise, it would sit happily on a disk somewhere in her office, as unnoticed as a dandelion in a vacant lot, perhaps until time corrupted the last byte.

The third person put his hands over his eyes for a minute or two, then said a few things that weren't polite. His eyes said he didn't like the look of this at all. He made a call to a special number. Then he got Cope's phone number and called him.

"Cope here."

"Oscar Copeman? You don't know me, but I need you to call a special number. I'm with the federal government here in Ottawa. You can do that for me? "

"My pension's coming early?"

"Not so far as I know. Maybe something can be arranged, but that's not why I'm calling."

"Discount on duct cleaning, I bet. Who do I call?"

"The Prime Minister's Office."

"Right. Sure. How will I know it's the Prime Minister's Office. Sorry to be so skeptical, but that's how I am."

"I'll leave you to figure that out. Just call the House of Commons and tell whoever answers, 'Schedule F, Bobolink'. Got that? I'll call back in an hour and check that you got through."

"Do you have the number of the House of Commons?"

"I'll leave you to find that out."

It took fifteen minutes. There were four layers of people who had to look up whatever Schedule F was, then make the next connection. Then Cope was talking, as far as he could tell, to the Prime Minister's secretary. "Oscar Copeman, Schedule F, Bobolink," he said to the guy who answered.

"Oh, really? What's your agent number?"

Oscar gave him the whole thing.

"You're sure you recognized an American agent in Brighton."

"Knew him in Afghanistan. Not sure what he's doing now."

"Our records show him probably working for one arm of the US government. He and Sammy, the guy with him, have done a number of intelligence jobs for the Yanks up this way."

"We let them do that?"

"Most of the time, if it's in our interest too. We didn't know anything about this thing."

"How can I help?"

"There's an object on the bottom of Popham Bay. We don't want it disturbed, especially by the Americans."

"Are they likely to?"

"We don't know. They might claim it's something they lost. Don't believe it."

"I'm not sure I can arm-wrestle the young guy. And Lester's still got a few tricks up his sleeve, I imagine. Can you send in a squad and a couple of tanks?"

"Not going to happen at this point. I'm going to give you a number. If you need help of any sort, just call it, and we'll get something out of Trenton as quick as we can. And here's the direct number to me. I'm Ronald." Ronald gave Cope two numbers. "Good luck," he added.

Cope looked at his phone. "What the fuck?" he said into the silence.

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## **Virginia**

*Phone conversation to the White House*

*Day before Button Day*

"Johnny! I wanted to speak to the President. The big guy himself."

"Well, you might have to tell me. 'John', is it now?"

"This sort of thing should go a bit higher, possibly."

"Possibly?"

"We might have a Blue Arrow event."

"Might. What's this 'might'."

"Unregistered cold war asset on Canadian soil. The Canadians might have found it."

"Shit. This is an election year, you know. He shouldn't have this to deal with, what with the economy to handle."

"Look; he can blame it on a previous administration. He was a kid when the cold war happened."

"He's too stupid for that. Next thing you know he'll lie about it and cover it up and get caught. Shit! He's too stupid to be more than Mayor of Boise. Just what we need, to piss off the Canadians. We're going for deniability if it gets out. Can you cover it up?"

"I'll try, but I'd like a couple of assets for backup."

"I can get you something, maybe, but if it's in Canada, no weapons, not even a pea shooter. That's the only hope we have if we get caught. Is that clear?"

"Got it."

"I'll get back to you. See what we can do off the record."

"Thanks, I guess."

"Yeah, you guess."

"Aren't you glad I kept you in the loop?"

"Aren't I glad you put my head in the noose?"

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## **Brighton**

*Day before Button Day*

*There were two calls made to Brighton that day.*

Laura found a message on her phone.

"Hi, cousin Laura. This is Tom. I'm In Belleville. I've dropped off a rental car and a rental canoe and I'm coming to visit you in Brighton. We'll have a great time. I mailed all my meds to Jasna, my social worker. Ha! Now the world is full of government plots and spies and space aliens! But I'm learning to like them. Where is the cottage you're renting?"

Laura sighed, then phoned back. He didn't answer, of course, but she left instructions. Tom was an ongoing tragedy, but she liked him even when he drove her nuts.

On the same day, the Daniels brothers got a call from Barb. She described the two men who'd visited her, and the questions they'd asked.

"One of them sounds like a guy named Clyde Books. He's part of Alien Hunters International," Jim noted.

"Dangerous?"

"Their success rate's pretty low. Humans got one of us by accident, but none of the hunter group's ever had a success. The other eleven of us should be out of here in a few days. We'll keep a watch out though, just in case. Thanks, Barb."

"You guys take care."

Jack had a solution. "The moment we leave, blow this planet to pieces."

"Illegal."

"The Empire's probably in chaos now. Nobody'll notice."

"Someone might."

"An ice age. Just crank up an ice age. A couple of good supervolcanoes and they'll be freezing in the dark. Serve them right."

"They're not all bad." Jim closed the conversation and poured a bourbon-and-cilantro.

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## **Brighton**

*Along Popham Bay*

*The day before Button Day*

Jack and Jim Daniels sat on the deck of the cottage, drinking cilantro in bourbon and watching the waves get larger over Popham Bay as the afternoon reached its peak. There was a constant grating of rocks on the shore, and a couple of townspeople walked slowly by, back from the edge where the vegetation stopped amid a few large tree trunks pushed in by last winter's storms.

"Doesn't that grinding noise get you down?" Jack asked.

"Doesn't bother the locals, it seems. I guess this one planet is all they know."

"They'd miss it."

"The planet?"

"The grating noise. If we drained the lake for fuel."

Neither of them said anything more, but they knew things were soon going to happen under the bay. They'd arrived the day before driving the silver Camry that they kept stored in Scarborough, at some guy's place. Not that they knew the guy, but he didn't drive and was happy to keep the Daniels' car in his garage for a fee.

A half hour after arriving, when the cottage was aired a bit and the tea made, Jack had placed the small "rock" (which still vibrated a bit) into what looked like a souvenir Mexican ashtray. Immediately, the "ashtray" had begun to glow with a gentle blue light that was best seen with the window curtains closed. They'd watched in silence, not quite ready to start the power-up sequence in that ship out in the bay, the one that would take them home. It had been twenty-three years, after all.

A few hours later, sitting on the deck, they were both restless.

"Going to take at least a couple of days," Jack said. "Even after you push the button."

"Could be longer than that. The old ship's been sitting for a while. And you deserve the honour, anyway."

Jack had another piece of bread with some of Barb's jam on it. "A couple of days longer, maybe. Say ten days to get the automatic stuff going, then three or four days more for us to finish off." He didn't touch the button.

"Then we can ditch these bodies. I'm going to like that." Jim's host twitched a bit, until he delivered a bit more joy juice to the appropriate brain structures.

Jim turned as a green clue SUV pulled into the laneway of the cottage next door, visible through the swamp elms between. He saw the woman leave the car and go into her rental cottage. Just before she closed the door, she stopped and looked over towards the Daniels' cottage, and waved. Jim waved back; Jack, deep in thought, hadn't noticed.

They discussed Barb's call about the guy who might be Clyde Books.

"Odd, but probably nothing," Jim said. "Everybody wants to spend time on the islands."

"Well, apparently he wondered if we'd changed since we were young."

That caught Jim's attention. "One of the hunters, maybe?"

Jack sipped slowly. "It would be a shame to get taken down a week before lift-off, after all these years." He picked up the rock that contained the "button" that would start things going.

He jumped as the crunching of leaves caught his attention. Both aliens-in-human-bodies turned, to see the woman from next door coming towards them.



She stopped at the edge of the deck. "Hi, she said." I'm renting the cottage next door for a couple of weeks. But I suppose you heard that from the rest of the village."

"We hear remarkably little from the rest of the village," Jack said. "We're outsiders to this place and don't communicate much with the locals. As far as they're concerned, people from Toronto might as well be space aliens from another galaxy."

Laura laughed. "I'm Laura Singer, and I live in New Hamburg. I was here only five hours before the entire town were making notes in their little books. Luckily, I'm only staying for a couple of weeks."

"I'm Jack Daniels, like in the whiskey, and this is my brother, Jim. You'll find people here ignore you after a few years. We've had this cottage twenty-three years and would you like some tea or a drink of bourbon with cilantro?"

"I'll take the bourbon and cilantro," Laura said. She found the steps to the deck and pulled up a Muskoka chair to the railing facing the lake. She put her feet on the railing, as Jack found a glass and poured her a drink. "Not bad," she said, after a sip.

Jim looked at her, surprised. "So what brings you to this place in September?" he said. "I'm naturally nosy, in case you're wondering."

"Well," Laura laughed, "I've convinced the locals that I'm after the Treasure of High Bluff Island."

"There's treasure out there?" Jack looked at the island suspiciously.

"Probably not. If the guy who lived there ever buried any money, it was probably found long ago."

"So what are you doing in this place? Running away from life?"

"Probably. Thanks." Laura held her glass up as Jim poured a refill. He also handed her a paper plate with cookies and jam on it. "I'm here to write a book about UFOs and space aliens in Ontario."

There was a long silence. "Why?"

"I've written a couple of books. There's a guy who prints books on Ontario topics. Just Ontario topics. They sell well enough to keep the publisher – he's a nice fellow by the way – in business. Anyway, this publisher did well by his first book on Ontario UFOs, so he suggested that he'd publish another, if I could come up with enough material."

"You didn't write the first one?"

"No, but that chick didn't think it was worth the effort to get any more data. It doesn't pay much to the writer, you know, and she'd got all the easy ones." Pause. "Good jam. You make it?"

"We get it in Toronto, on an island."

"Must write down the address for me, for next time I go there."

"Will do. There was a long pause. "Why did you... why would you pick Brighton as a place to look into UFOs? Just asking."

Laura laughed. "There were a couple of reports quite a while ago – more than 20 years ago, actually. A couple of teenagers – they're married now – on the beach in front of here say they saw something land in the bay out there."

"You believe that?" Jim asked.

Laura snorted. "It's all a crock of crap. There was also a report from one Bob Dalbine, who said a slimy thing took over his body for a while. I can work that into a lot of scenarios. Bug-eyed monsters hiding from Darth Vader and the Evil Galactic Empire."

"You think?"

"Four more, and I've got a book."

"They might not be down there forever," Jack said.

"The aliens? They could have very long lifetimes." She shifted. "I've got to be going I guess."

"We might have information."

Laura sat up. "You'll make something up for me?"

"We could do that. When's this book coming out?"

"Next year, maybe the year after that. These things take time. Well, I gotta go. Time to make supper."

Laura got up, a bit unsteadily.

"We're ready to start power up."

"Pardon?" Laura stopped.

Jack looked at her seriously. "The spaceship. It's been there a long time. It'll take a while to power it up once we start."

"Bubbles? Will there be bubbles?"

"Pardon?"

"Don't these things make bubbles when they start up? I saw a movie, once."

Jim smiled. "Ghosts."

"That's a different book. I try to link UFOs and ghosts, and nobody'll believe it." Laura smiled as she went down the steps.

"Nothing in physics allows faster-than-light travel."

"Okay...." Laura looked up.

"We have to use a bit of metaphysics. Parapsychology. Astral medium. You humans don't have a good word for it."

"You're a space alien, and you use it?"

Jim joined his brother at the railing, and nodded. "That's about it. It underlies quantum physics and is so strange we don't understand a lot of it. But we use it, and it causes disturbances in the...."

"A disturbance in the Force." Laura laughed and started through the woods to her rental cottage.

"Well, maybe. Certainly a disturbance in this part of Ontario."

She turned and asked, "Unicorns?"

Jim shook his head. Not imaginary stuff. You'll see."

"I'll watch for it." She paused again. "Promise me bubbles when you leave?"

"If we can."

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## **Brighton**

*Jag's Place, on a hill.*

*The day before Button Day*

Jag looked out his glass patio doors at the lights of Brighton below. His house wasn't on much of a hill, but then again, Brighton didn't have many big hills. It had been founded in a valley beside a mill stream – now long gone – and the valley wasn't all that much. Actually, Brighton wasn't all that much, and perhaps that had been why he'd chosen it. He'd done his service in Afghanistan and had come home

with a nervous habit of watching everything, all the time, a habit that his wife and son had found disconcerting.

The Metro Toronto Police had been happy to take him, once his police training had been completed.

And now he was in Brighton, alone in a smallish house on a smallish hillside as the early autumn sunset – blocked from his view by a large willow – ate the shadows and the town lights came on. The Ontario Provincial Police station was barely in view, as was the Dixie Lee fried-chicken outlet. Other than that, the place had the tranquility of a town of three thousand people seething in their own angst and criminal desires. You never knew when it would pop up. He smiled, for a change, and put on some Fred Eaglesmith music.

Jag checked the clock. Seven. He went to the basement and brought up a bottle of whiskey. Carefully he poured some into his special whiskey glass, up to the line marked on the side. Then he returned the bottle, which had a phone number prominently taped to the side. That was the number of his contact in the Police Drunks Not-So-Anonymous group, an organization that included members from a few of the small towns around. Getting drunk was pretty well expected among the police at police functions and at the occasional other social gathering. But for those cops who chose, especially those who lived alone with their thoughts, alcohol was an ever-present danger. If a member wanted to exceed his or her nightly maximum, the phone number was supposed to put him in contact with someone in the organization who would either talk him down or chaperone him through a binge. There were a lot more people that joined than people that stayed, but it worked for Jag.

After watching the town for ten minutes, he turned on a small reading light and looked at the stack of books on the table. He was partway through a rereading of Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, halfway through a second Crouch sailing mystery, *Red Sky at Morning*, and barely into a new Smith book, *Raven's Bridge*.

He reached instead for a thin book he'd driven a half-hour to Belleville library to borrow. The copy of *The Minor Odyssey of Lollie Heronfeathers Singer* wasn't much used, but then Jag supposed most poetry books got thrown out of libraries long before they got worn from use.

Jag had called up Laura after the picnic, to ask her out to supper. She'd sounded hesitant, then suggested meeting in Trenton, ten miles away, in a couple of days.

He'd then spent a half-hour on the Web, searching for any information on Ms Singer. Finally, he'd found that she'd written a book of poetry under the name "Lollie Heronfeathers Singer" and that there wasn't a copy available at any local bookstore, but there was one in the Belleville library.

After the trip to High Bluff Island, and a couple of hours after getting the supper date with Laura, he'd walked into the registry office.

Ten minutes later he was having a tea with Josie in a corner of the office. She brought out a bag of chocolate-chip cookies, which he declined. "Getting fat," he explained. But she held out the bag until her arm started to tremble and he took one. It was home-made, and good.

"Heard you canoed to the island," Josie said. She tilted her head forward to look over her glasses. "Looking for treasure were we?"

"Laura wanted to see the island." There was a long pause. "She did some looking around." Another long pause. "We walked around the island." Jag let the next pause get longer and longer.

Josie looked straight at him. "Should have taken a picnic lunch. It was a fine day. There are some nice places in the island where a couple can have a sandwich and look across the bay to the town, or out to the lake." This time it was Josie who waited.

"Well, yes, we did have a picnic lunch, as a matter of fact."

Josie looked out the glass door to the stairs that led to the street. "When I was young, it wasn't all that uncommon for young couples to go to the island for picnics. There's a couple of picnic spots further from the shore, where the view isn't much, unless you like a lot of pink in your view."

"You sound like you know a fair amount about this place. Did you take sandwiches on your picnics to the island?"

"Maybe I just know these things by rumour. How was the view?" She waited a second, watching him. "Ah. Well, then." She smiled. "There are going to be a few disappointed women around Brighton to find you're in a relationship with a passing stranger."

Jag frowned. "Hardly a relationship. Just a casual one-time, er, picnic. At least as far as she's concerned, I think."

"Jag," Josie said. "With a woman, unless she's getting paid for it, it's a relationship."

He tilted his head.

"Trust me. I know. Have you asked her for another date?"

"Day after tomorrow. In Trenton."

"Good news. If she weren't serious, she'd be meeting you at the Dixie Lee."

Jag got up. "You know, a monastery is starting to appeal."

"Yeah, right. No picnics in a monastery. Here, have another cookie before you leave."

This time Jag didn't argue.

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## **Chapter 5: September 17**

*This day is overcast, and windy.*

*Button Day* (The day that the aliens press the button that starts the re-activation of Professor Nothing, their spaceship)

### **Brighton**

*Along Popham Bay*

In the end, it was no more complicated than turning on a cell phone, and could have been done quickly if Jack hadn't insisted that some uninvolved human be present.

"Why?" Jim asked. "We aren't going to be popular afterwards, anyway." He watched the morning sunshine poke through the clouds for a moment and the shadows of the aspen shorten.

"They should know." Jack tried to whistle a righteous note, but the human anus wasn't up to it, in spite of the quantities of beans he consumed each day. "We'll wait. I imagine she'll be up by nine."

They waited as the day settled in, hearing cars rumble by on the dirt road; people going to work for a living.

"I think she's up," Jack said, getting up. "Yes, her kitchen light's on." When she came onto her cottage's small deck, he called over to her, "Laura – have you got a minute? We've got something to ask you."

"Just a minute!" She used her cell phone to call Jag's work number and leave a message that she was going next door to the Daniels'. Then she got a flask of coffee and found her way through the aspens. "Got any of that bourbon and cilantro?" she asked as she came up the steps to the brightly-lit deck.

"Right here," Jack said. There was a bottle and some glasses on the table. She poured a bit of the bourbon into her coffee and added a touch of cilantro.

For a moment, there was silence as they contemplated the morning and a few yellow aspen leaves fell onto the table. "So what can I help you with?" Laura put her feet onto a spare lawn chair. "Oh, wait. I meant to tell you, my cousin Tom's going to move into the cottage for a week or so. He's okay, as long as he's on his meds. If he starts acting strange, let me know."

"He has problems?"

"Schizophrenia, of some form. As long as he takes his pills, he's okay."

"And otherwise?" Jack asked.

"He'll think you're both space aliens or something." She looked at her empty cup, then at Jim. He nodded and brought out more coffee, so she poured herself another drink. "Good stuff," she said.

"As long as he doesn't get too uptight about it and try to hunt us down."

Laura looked puzzled a moment, then said, "Oh, yes. You are space aliens. I remember now – I had a lot to drink the other day." She raised her glass. "This stuff a bit stronger than I'm used to, I guess."

There was a long pause, as Jim brought out some toast and some of Barb's apricot jam. Finally, Jack said. "We'd like to ask you to do a couple of things for us."

"If I can."

"The first thing is, well, we'd like you to be a witness when we start the 'spaceship' again."

"Can I interview you for the book?"

"Actually, that would probably be a good idea. We're anxious to let humans know we don't mean them any harm; we're just going home. So, sure."

"And"

"We've got a boat. In four days or so, we'd like you to take us out into the bay so we can swim down to the ship."

"Sure."

"You seem awfully comfortable with this." Jack said.

Laura shrugged. "If you're both as crazy as.... Well, I'll get a chapter for my book. If you're really aliens, I'll get the scoop of a lifetime. Can't lose." She put the glass down. "Let's get the start-up done, shall we. What do I do?"

Jack looked at Jim. Jim looked away. Both reached for a cookie tin on the table, but Jim got there first. He took out what looked like a brown rock the size of a golf ball, and set it on the table. "We can show you how to do it, if you want," he said.

Laura shook her head. "I'm just the observer. My hands are clean."

"Okay. Whatever works for you, I guess." Jim and Jack looked at each other for a moment, then Jack carefully pressed some points on the device. The device began flashing slowly, three flashes, then a pause, then a few more. Then it went dark.

"That's it?" Laura felt around for a piece of bread and the jam jar.

"Let's see. There! Out in the bay."

Laura turned her head. The bay was dark blue, with waves, except for one place near the middle. That point was calm, and glowing, changing color from red to yellow and back again. They watched it for a few minutes, until the glowing stopped. In the silence, Laura spoke, "This cilantro drink is quite something. I should name it the bug-eyed monster. Impressive," Laura added. "Impressive. Now I can expect my grandmother's ghost?" She got up.

"We never really know," Jack said. "Just don't be surprised. Thank you for being here; you have our thanks."

"And I've still got that boat ride coming in a few days."

"We have a boat." The brothers stood side by side and watched her walk back to her cottage. Then they turned and watched the lake as the sun got higher.

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### **Sparkler Lake**

*A Small, Isolated lake north of Peterborough*

*Button Day*

The canoe slowed among the dense patch of lily pads, the green leaves and yellow flowers making tiny scraping sounds along the hull. Careful not to tilt the canoe, Tom reached over and lifted up a small eastern painted turtle. It was about the diameter of a hockey puck, dark on its back, and yellow on its underside, with a red and white pattern around the edge of the underside. He set it in the bottom of canoe, where the morning sun was already warming the packsack.

The turtle eventually stuck its head back out from its shell.

"Hello, turtle," Tom said loudly.

The turtle raised its head towards the man. In a high, tiny voice, it said, clearly, "Fuck you. You have less than one week to live, if you don't watch out for the man with the green shoes."

Tom nodded as if he expected no better, and put the turtle back into the water. He watched as it sank out of sight, then pushed the canoe on. One week. That was news, if you could believe a turtle.

After, high above the canoe, circling slowly in a clear September sky, a turkey vulture tipped gently.

Tom had noted the bird an hour before. A raven had circled the boat shortly after, then had landed on the other canoe seat. It had croaked in the way that ravens will, then dropped a bit of raven shit onto the floor of the boat. It had eyed Tom directly, but had not spoken to him in human before flying away. But the eye contact had made the lake shimmer for a moment and a cloud had come out of nowhere to dim the sunlight for a moment.

Tom sighed; he would be glad to portage out of this backwoods place in the morning and into the real wilderness – the city. He pointed the canoe towards the portage at the far end of the little lake and a space big enough to camp one more night.

It was a long night, that night; one that Tom could have done without. By ten Tom was sitting beside his little campfire, thinking, and wishing he'd brought a bottle of something warm to drink. He'd taken only cold food, mostly sausage and cheese, and a couple of Pepsis in plastic bottles, so the fire was only for warmth, and maybe to keep the ghosts away.

It was warm, but it hadn't worked for the ghosts. The ghost of his friend, the writer Paul Gottsen, had walked out of the woods and sat on the ground, looking at Tom. In his crazy days Tom had seen as many sights that this didn't rattle him as much as it would have an ordinary man.

"Hi, Paul," Tom had said. "Have a chocolate bar." He'd tossed an Aero at Paul. The ghost hadn't reached for the bar, which had gone right through him.

"Thought so," Tom had said, and the ghost then vanished. Tom had checked his meds and the container they came in, sorted by day and hour. Yes, he'd been taking them. He took the scheduled set of pills. Then he rolled a cannonball-sized rock over, scooped out a small cavity, and poured his meds, one bottle at a time, into the space. Finally, he rolled the rock back and went to sleep.

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## **Toronto**

*The home of a member of The Philip Group*

*Button Day*

"The September meeting of these five members of the Toronto Parapsychological Society will come to order," Pag said. It was her house this time, so she had that privilege.

"What are we doing, again?" Kyle tended to forget things, including the purpose of meetings, especially since his mind was focused on Janet's anatomy rather than the ghost of a chance he figured he had of exploring her body.

"Calling up an historical figure," Hap reminded him. Hap tended to use "an" before "historical," which annoyed Karn no end.

"Gabriel Dumont, the Métis leader, to be precise" Karn snapped. "We decided on a historical figure." He watched a cat come into the room and go under the table. "Did you get another cat?" he asked Pag.

"Oh, no," Pag said. "Max was a friend, but he got to be so much trouble before he died that I thought I'd wait a while before getting another."

"No cat...." Karn looked under the table. There was no cat there. "Any other white cats around here?"

Pag looked at him funny. "I tend to see Max out of the corner of my eye, but that's just imagination, I know."

"Sure," Karn said. "Well, how do we get started?"

Janet said, looking at Pag, "Do we just get the séance going as usual, with a candle and all?"

"That's the plan," Pag said. She lit a large red candle, put it onto the middle of the table, then turned out the room lights. "Ready?" she asked.

Everyone agreed they were ready, although Karn kept an eye out for that cat.

"Shouldn't we put out a chair for this guy to sit on?" Janet asked.

"We're only expecting raps on the table," Hap said. "If he needs a chair, he can sit over there." He pointed to a more comfortable chair in the corner.

"Are you sure he won't break the chair when he shows up?" Kyle asked. He didn't believe in ghosts but he wanted to impress Janet. He just didn't know how, and so was rather inept about it.

Once the five of them were seated around the round table, Pag lit the candle, then remembered to get up and turn the light out. Janet shifted her chair to get closer to Pag when she returned. Her brief fling

with Karn hadn't been all that good, and she was about to try a different form of love. Probably be more convenient, she thought, since her husband would never suspect anything with another woman.

"Greetings, spirit world," Pag said. There was silence.

"We're supposed to hold hands," Hap said, reaching for Janet's hand as Janet reached for Pag's.

"Greetings, spirit world," Pag began again. The table shifted a bit.

"Who did that?" Kyle asked. "That you, Hap, leaning over for a fart again?" Kyle was nowhere near as funny as he thought he was.

"If you can hear us, let us know." It was generally assumed that it would take at least half an hour of badgering the spirit world before they gave up and went to the spirits in Pag's cupboard, so there was a shocked silence when there came three sharp knocks on the table. In the candlelight, they opened their eyes and looked at each other. "Who did that?" Pag demanded. Everybody shook their heads and raised their arms, hands still clutching their neighbours' hands.

"Eyes closed!" Janet sounded annoyed.

"Spirit world, we would like to call up the presence of the famous Métis leader, Gabriel Dumont, if you don't mind." Pag was a polite person.

There was a quick round of rapping on the table, then the table shook, and the candle went out. "Don't let go!" Pag wasn't going to let this end, not while it was in her house. "Grab hands again." For a moment she thought she felt a hand on her breast, but realized that was unlikely, then she had the hand of Kyle and Janet again. The room was dark, but she closed her eyes again.

"Gabriel Dumont!" she said.

"We're calling you," Hap added, redundantly.

"Okay," said a voice from across the room. "I seem to be here. Now what do you want me to do."

Amid the confusion at the table, Kyle lit a match and put it to the candle. Everyone looked at each other, then turned towards the back of the room. There was a bearded man sitting in the chair there. He wore buckskin clothes and a large cowboy hat. He was looking around the room, his eyes narrowed.

"Gabriel Dumont?" Hap choked a bit on it.

"Who wants to know." The man stood up, his face expressionless.

"Well," said Kyle, "I for one want to know who hired you. I'm impressed." He turned to Pag, since this was her home, but she was both pale and speechless. He looked at the four others. "Okay, time to fess up." He got up and walked to the doorway and turned on the light switch. The room seemed blindingly bright. The two standing men stared at each other. There was no other sound in the room.

"I'm Hap," Hap said from his chair. Unlike the others, he was a believer, but he'd been cautious enough to set a small black rubber ball against the closed door before the séance began. It was still there, where he'd put it, so he was pretty sure the door hadn't been opened. And it was the only door to the room. "We asked the spirit world to call up the ghost of Gabriel Dumont, leader of the Métis in the 1885 rebellion." He lowered his head and looked over his glasses.

Dumont shook his head. "Well, you got me, I guess." There was a vanity table in the room. He walked over and peered into it. "I'm younger than when I died. That's odd. But nice; I never liked being old."

"You speak English," Janet noted.



Dumont shook his head. "That too. And it isn't any less stupid-sounding then when I didn't speak it. 'Get off my land, motherfucker!'" He shook his head. "Sounds a lot better in French." Then he straightened up. "Looks like some of those damned priests might have been right after all. Well, I don't know where I was, but I'm here now. Hope you didn't pull me away from heaven." He smiled a bit.

"Was that likely?" Janet asked.

"Not very likely, after following Louis around." He squinted. "Louis Riel – anybody know him?" A couple of people raised their hands, but Dumont went on. "Doesn't matter. Last thing I remember is dying." He surveyed the room. "Well, if this is Hell, it's not as bad as the priests said. If it's Heaven, it's not as good. Must be purgatory. It's a lot better than I expected, so I can't complain." He walked around the room, looking at things.

"This isn't.... I don't think this is purgatory," Pag said. She seemed suddenly less sure about everything.

"Well then, where am I?"

"Toronto." Hap was still trying to figure where the trick was. He looked at the base of the door again; the little black ball was still there.

"Shit." Dumont strode to the door, opened it, and walked out. The group saw him pause at the dining-room table to stuff his pockets with some of the snacks there, then a moment later they could hear the front door open. Pag pulled back the curtain, and watched him stride down the street, looking around.

"Cripes," said Kyle. "Never even got to ask him any questions." He turned back to the group. "So," he said, "who hired this dude?" For a moment, nobody said a thing. Then Janet said, "I just saw a cat!"

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## **Gosport**

*In the boat Serenity, at the marina on Presqu'ile Bay*

*Button Day*

"I guess we'd better let the Boss know." Sammy got out the laptop and entered the security code, then waited for voice contact. He passed the laptop to Lester.

"Problems?" the old fellow who called himself "John" asked.

"Lester here. The place seems quiet, but there's a commercial windfarm boat – looks like it's equipped for sonar – at the town dock. And there's at least one Canadian spook here. Guy I knew in Afghanistan."

"Might be more than one?"

"Another guy, who was in the same business, who seems to be a local cop now."

"Think that's deep cover?" the old voice asked.

Lester shrugged, then realized John couldn't see that. "It would be logical, if you wanted to watch something. A cop can watch things without being questioned."

"Sounds like the Canucks are concerned about something."

"There's a woman, who's just rented a cottage facing Popham Bay."

"Shit. It seems like there's something there, after all."

"In the bay?" Sammy cut in, finally getting it. "What is it?"

"If I told you...."

"Yeah, I know."

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Other than tell us what we're looking for? Well, is there any way we can get some backup ready? Just in case we need it? And a few pounds of C4?"

"I'm going to see if I can get a sonar-equipped boat out your way. Might take a day or two. I'll put some help on it. C4?"

"My training is in demolition and bombs. I could use the practice."

"I'll get you some Play-Doh."

"Thanks, anyway. Not that we can't take on the entire Canadian population with our bare hands, but we might need some buddies to brag to."

"I'll be in contact." The contact was terminated.

Sammy asked, "Play-Doh?"

"The US has few friends, especially friends with oil and water. We have a tradition of not using weapons anywhere near the Canadians. Probably better to keep it that way. Too many assholes in Washington in an election year. Might be able to use your martial arts skills." Lester got up to go to the head, muttering, "My prostate calls again."

Later they took a drive through the hills north and west of town. Sammy wasn't much for scenery, but they got a bag of great chocolate donuts at the Cara Mia Bakery in Warkworth. Sammy had been complaining about Tim Hortons donuts ever since the chain had stopped making them fresh. Sammy, as usual, inspected each one to decide where the first and last bites would be before starting.

Between donuts, Sammy offered opinions on everything, and never positive. It's just as well he's young and tough, Lester thought. Otherwise I'd be tempted to shoot him some days. Accidentally, of course.

Sammy, on the other hand, saw Lester as an uptight asshole with a better-than-thou attitude. But Lester was a brother SEAL, so Sammy cut him a lot of slack.

They drove south, looking at fields and old farms among the hills. "Lots of apple trees," Sammy noted.

"I wanted to see this place in apple blossom time," Lester said, grateful that he could keep the windows open, what with Sammy's flatulence problem. Mind you, he had to stop every half hour to pee behind a bush. Must do something about that prostate, he decided again.

"What's in apple blossom time?" Sammy asked.

Lester handed him a lined paper bag; when Sammy ate too many donuts, he had a tendency to bring up, especially on winding roads. Whatever your feelings, you look out for brother SEALs.

"Song I heard once."

"Andrews Sisters?" Sammy wasn't as slow as he pretended.

Lester shook his head. "I like the one by a guy called Aengus Finnan. I think he lives somewhere around here.

Sammy just grunted, and looked a bit queasy.

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## **Toronto**

### *Button Day*

Gabriel Dumont slept that night in a ravine, beside the tent of a guy named Jake, from Newfoundland. "I'm crazy," Jake told him.

"That's okay," Dumont said, "I'm Gabriel Dumont and I've been dead for years." He handed Jake an apple.

"Sure. Thanks. Sorry to hear about that rebellion. And Riel."

"Thanks. Can I curl up somewhere around here? It's getting dark."

"Sure. I've got a spare blanket, if you don't mind the smell. You can sleep over there."

Dumont said, "You're the first person I've met who smelled like a real human." That seemed to so please Jake that the guy from Bay Roberts shared a can of stew with the guy from the coulees.

The next morning Gabe followed the land downhill – that was the way to go if you didn't know where you were, until he could see towers. Then he headed towards the tallest buildings he could see above the rooflines.

He ended up that day on a park bench on King Street, totally pissed off. Damned if he knew why he was here or even where he was.

Last thing he remembered of his previous life, he'd been dying in North Battleford. Some kind of deaths you can do without, but at least with two religions – neither of which had served him well in life – he'd had some curiosity as his breathing stopped and the blackness rolled in.

If this was heaven, then somebody'd lied to him. Not that that was any sort of surprise.

He sat still, taking it all in. The cars he figured out quickly enough. He'd never seen things like that before he croaked, and judging by appearances a fair amount of time had passed since. That pissed him off even more, since his only dying wishes had been to see Madeleine again and to flatten Sir John A's balls with a hammer. One at a time. But unless the former prime minister was here, too, it looked like that was off.

And there was no sign of Madeleine.

Pedestrians went by steadily, mostly giving only a corner of an eye to his buckskin and cowboy hat, as well as his long beard and hair. Clean and colorful these Toronto people were, which made it even more unusual that nobody gave him a longer look. Sobriety must have overtaken civilization, and short clothes. Two young women, dressed for the heat, went by. He checked his dick; nothing happening there, so this wasn't heaven or he was missing something.

Semi-naked women and a dick that didn't seem interested. This was either purgatory or he'd skipped right to hell. That, he figured, was what he got for hanging around Louis Riel and the religion Riel had invented. Still, it was a better hell than the priests had warned him about.

It was hot, but not as hot as hell should have been, so he slid along the bench to a shady part, then took off the buckskin jacket and set his hat beside him. It was obvious from the looks that he almost got that his shirt wasn't the clean one he'd been buried in. He didn't know it then, but it gave him a look of authenticity that a lot of other homeless men didn't have. A couple of people slowed and dropped some coins into his hat, which surprised him. Somehow he'd got to be a street bum.

He fished a coin out of the hat and looked at it. Golden, but not gold. Must be a lot of fakery going on in this place, or these people weren't all that bright. Canada dollar, it said on one side, around a picture of a loon. That was a useful piece of information. Maybe the country was run by loons. Maybe things hadn't changed all that much.

He turned it over. There was a picture of a queen on the front, and he first assumed it was Victoria, which would have been a bit illogical. Elizabeth second, queen by grace of God, it also said. Victoria must have started a trend.

2004, it told him. Unless the locals had taken to giving away antique coins or they had figured out it wasn't gold after all, this local time had to be 2004 or no more than a few years after. Sometime after 2008, according to a little ten-cent piece with a picture of a sailboat on the back. Loons. Sailboats. Water-loving bastards, obviously.

Another coin dropped into his hat. His first thought was that these people were rich beyond belief; in his day a dollar would get a night in a hotel and a couple of glasses of beer. But somehow he knew people weren't that generous, even in this city.

Another fellow sat down on the bench. "Getting much?" he asked.

"Wasn't intending to beg," Dumont said, still watching the people going by. He did like the bright colors. "I took my damn hat off because it was hot, and some people threw money in it." He shook his head. "That supposed to happen?"

Not to us Injuns," he said. "People think we should be back on the rez. White beggars get all the money in Toronto. You native?"

Dumont turned to look at the guy. He had his dark hair in a long braid. "I'm Métis," Dumont said. "No status?"

"I'm not sure what that means," Gabe told him, "but I'm pretty sure I don't have any, unless you count 'revolutionary traitor'."

The other guy looked at him a bit funny. "Bill Johnson," he said, extending his hand. "Muskrat Dam First Nation."

He shook his hand. "Gabriel Dumont. From somewhere west of Winnipeg."

"Well," Bill said. "If you're going to be Métis, that's a pretty good name to have, I guess."

"You think so? There was a time when Gabriel Dumont was a face the mounties wanted."

"Mounties," Bill said. "They got other problems. You were named after the hero of the Métis. Or did you just take that name?"

"It's my name, alright," Gabe told him. "Any Métis in this place? Toronto, is it?"

"Lots of Métis, or at least mixed bloods, in Toronto. Lots of us Injuns, too. Lots of lost people." He shook his head. "You pick up another dollar and you and I can have a beer this afternoon."

"Best plan I've heard in the last century or so," Gabe said. More young women went by, but only one woman pushing a baby in some sort of wheeled device. He sat and thought about things, but nothing made sense. Lot of people here considering they didn't seem to reproduce much.

On the other hand, nothing had made sense in his last life, either. For the moment, this was at least more relaxing than running a rebellion or working in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. He had a lot of

questions to ask Bill Johnson, but, as usual, he decided to just wait and learn what he could from looking. On the other hand.... "What's a beer cost in this town?" he asked.

"I know a couple of places you can get a glass for three bucks, but the company can get rough. Maybe not for you; you look white enough and tough enough."

That was information.

A young woman with red hair and a bright blue dress stopped in front of the bench, and looked around, as if puzzled. Bill and Gabe kept her in the corner of their eyes in the old fashion, staring at the vehicles going by. She turned towards the two and looked at both of them in turn, stopping with her gaze on Bill. "You," she said, "have a water soul, and swim through the streets like a silver fish in a creek that's gone muddy from last week's rain. You like this other guy, but you don't trust him, which is a pretty reasonable thing, all things considered."

"You consider all things?" Gabe asked.

"All that fate allows." She eyed him. "There's something odd about you being here now. It feels like you don't have a soul. Just a body. That's kind of different. First zombie I've ever met. You eat brains?"

"I've eaten buffalo brains. Does that count? You a witch?" he asked, "Or just crazy?"

"That's not for you to know." She eyed him for a long time, which is a white person's idea of being an asshole, then said, "I am Olnya Light."

"Pleased to meet you," he said. Some people walked over and threw paper money into his hat.

"You'll be seeing me when you need help."

"What about Bill, here," I asked.

"His paths are already set. Any help would just muddy his streams, but if he hangs around you he'll get some anyway." She smiled a really big smile, and walked off.

"This normal?" Gabe asked Bill.

"Not to me. Was going to ask you the same question." He shook his head, looking at the ground. "Crazy bunch, these white people."

"Sure as fuck got that right," Gabe said, looking around some more. "What's that building?" he asked, pointing to a rather large structure behind them.

"City hall."

"Supposed to be a wonderful design?"

Bill laughed. "Everybody said so when they built it. Now most people think it looks old and stupid."

"And that old building?" It looked like something Sir John would have liked. A couple more coins came his way.

"Old city hall. 1889."

"Ah, then. Lets go get a beer."

Bill smiled. "Now you're talking. I'll show you the ropes in this town. Where to get food and a place to sleep."

"I'd appreciate that."

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**Brighton**

*Along Popham Bay*

### *Button Day*

Some time after midnight that night Laura woke. She checked the doors and windows – they were all secure. Restless, she went onto the deck to listen to the waves come in, and to imagine she could see High Bluff Island. The clouds broke and a waning moon came through. She squinted; there was a two-masted sailing ship, moving alike it was driven by a storm. Which was unusual, because it was a calm night under the moonlight. The ship hit the shore, and Laura could hear a faint screaming as people tumbled off it. Then it vanished.

It took Laura more than three hours to fall asleep, and she slept till nine.

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### **Chapter 6: September 18**

*This day is calm and bright.*

*Day after Button Day*

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### **Trenton, Ontario**

*At the Skyline Restaurant.*

*Day after Button Day*

They met in downtown Trenton. Laura was sitting at a table in the Skyline Tavern and Steakhouse when Jag walked in. She seemed genuinely glad to see him.

He smiled broadly when he sat down, but she hesitated before saying, "Good to see you, Jag."

They made small talk until the meals came, a steak for him and a Greek salad for her. Then she said, "There's something wrong, isn't there. Can you tell me about it?"

He hesitated. "Tammy called me this afternoon." When Laura tilted her head, he added. "My ex-wife."

"How long have you been separated?" Laura asked, watching him carefully.

"A year and a half, give or take a bit."

"It's hard," she said. "I know. It's been eight years for me, and it still hurts. What did she want?" A pause as Laura looked at her salad. "If you want to tell me, that is. It's none of my business."

"She said she wanted to see how I was." He put his fork down, then picked it up and finished the piece of meat on the end. "She sounded concerned."

"Have you given her reason to be concerned?"

He shook his head. "I haven't spoken to her since she left me. The kid visits me from time to time, but they don't talk about her when they do."

"So it was sudden." She scanned the dessert menu.

He almost said something. Then he flagged the waiter down. He ordered a coffee and she ordered a slice of chocolate cake. When the waiter had gone, he spoke. "I was with the forces in Afghanistan," he said. She said nothing.

"I met an old friend today, a guy named Cope," he said, "Oscar Copeman. He was with the intelligence people, trying to figure out what the Taliban were doing. We were with a patrol out in some little place on the outskirts of Kabul, checking out the area." He looked at her directly, but his eyes were focused further away.

"A car came down a side street and suddenly turned towards us. I was just raising my gun to warn the driver not to get too close when I saw there was a woman in the passenger seat and three kids in the back. So I hesitated. The people around there generally know the score."

"A mistake?"

"Cope was armed. Even intelligence people carry weapons out there. He was about twenty feet away, and he put a bullet through the driver's head."

She said nothing.

He focused on her as their orders came. "Saved my life. And most of the rest of us, too. The wife and kids were dummies; clothes stuffed with straw. The car coasted towards us and came to a stop against a pole. It contained enough explosives to leave a very big hole, if he'd managed to set them off."

"Impressive. You owe Cope one, I guess. But I was never a soldier."

"Less than two years ago I was a cop in Toronto. Got out of the service after we got out of Afghanistan. It was about midnight in a little industrial park and a couple of cars were there for a burglar alarm. We'd cornered a car with a couple of young men in it, and had them up against the wall. We took guns off them. A guy named Brian and I were just going back to our car when from behind the machine shop this other car comes out. Instead of running for the street, the car suddenly turns and comes right towards us." He paused, and his hand shook a bit. She watched him, stopped eating the cake.

"Maybe he was trying to scare us away," Jag continued, "so his friends could escape. I don't know." A sigh. "I don't even remember drawing my pistol, but I put five shots through the windshield. Killed the little bugger dead." He sipped his coffee. "You understand, they said we could probably have got out of the way. Or fired a warning shot. The kid.... He was sixteen, and very much of a different ethnic group than me."

She nodded. "That's the way things go sometimes. When you need time to think, you don't get it."

"In less than a week I was home, while the media and the brass decided what to do with me. Tammy read the papers for a couple of days, without speaking much to me, then packed her bags and left. The kids were already grown and gone, so the house went quiet real quick. That's the last I heard from her till today."

"Brighton's a refuge?"

"Got a job here through a friend."

"You miss her?"

"I waited for months for the phone to ring. I couldn't think straight. I kept thinking I saw her or her car when I didn't."

"The nights go on forever," Laura said, watching her plate.

"I couldn't listen to love songs," he said, or keep track of where I'd put things. Does it get easier after eight years?"

She nodded. "Some of it does. You learn to like being alone."

"But you're here."

"I am."

"You give me hope," he said.

"And that's a hopeful sign," she said. "Are you going to call Tammy back?"

"I don't think so. Probably not. I don't want to."

"Shall I spend the night at your place?"

"I'd like that," he said.

"Me, too," she said. "I'll leave the Cherokee at the cottage. You can pick me up there."

When she got to the cottage, there was a phone message waiting for her. It was from Tom.

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## **Brighton**

*Along Popham Bay*

*Day after Button Day*

Lester and Sammy didn't stay long at the boat that evening. "Things are happening," Sammy said, biting carefully into a chocolate donut.

Lester said nothing. He just looked over his glasses at Sammy.

"I mean," Sammy said, "we've been spotted by the Canadians, and we know where they've probably got their headquarters." He opened a can of Pepsi. "At that cottage on the bay," he said into the silence.

"You think?" Lester was making a salmon sandwich to go with a glass of milk.

"Oh, yeah. Whatever we're supposed to watch for is in that bay, and we find a link to a cottage with a good view of the bay. What else would you say?"

"Actually, for a change, I think you're right."

"Well?"

"Let's call the chief." Lester opened the laptop, connected an antenna, and wrote a question about Oscar Copeman and the Brighton branch of the Ontario Provincial Police. He hit Ctrl-B-Enter to send it off in a coded microburst.

The answer came back in fifteen minutes. Oscar Copeman was with CSIS. Jagger Stone, now with the local police, was an intelligence officer and known associate of Copeman. No record of a female intelligence officer at the moment.

"Damn, they're fast," Lester said.

"You old farts," Sammy offered. "I was wondering what took them so long."

Lester pointed at the screen. "They're moving the urgency level up a couple of notches and telling us to be careful." He shook his head. "We're supposed to be careful when we don't know what we're supposed to be doing here."

"And they want us to do it faster." Sammy put his feet onto the table.

"Usual crap."

"Let's go stake out that girl's cottage."

"Hide in the bushes all night? It's getting dark, soon. And cold. Sure."

"Nah. Let's get into the cottage next door."

Lester thought a bit. "Okay. We'll drive by and see if it's possible, anyway."

It took them twenty minutes. The green Jeep was still in the driveway. Lester slowed the car, and Sammy gripped a bag in case he threw up again.

The cottage next door was larger, with a silver Camry parked in the driveway and lights showing through the windows. The two cottages were within shouting distance. Lester slowed a bit, then backed



up and drove in behind the Camry. "C'mon," he told Sammy," and walked up to the front door. He tapped lightly, and waited for it to open.

"Hello?" The middle-aged man who came to the door seemed a bit nervous. Lester couldn't blame him, considering the relative isolation of the cottage, even this close to town. He could see another man in the background.

Lester flashed them a too-quick look at a card in his wallet. "We hate to ask this, but could we come in for a couple of hours to watch the cottage next door?" He waved in the general direction of Laura's cottage.

"Come in. Can we get you some chamomile tea?"

"Thanks." Lester and Sammy walked to the one window that looked at the cottage next door.

"I'm Jim," the man not getting tea said, "and the other guy's my brother Jack."

"Stephen," Lester said, "and this is my co-worker, Steve."

"Stephen and Steve," Jim noted. "I see." Jack returned with plastic cups, a teabag string hanging from each. "Do you think Laura's up to something?"

"Laura. Yes. No. We have a report of illegal aliens here. We're from immigration Canada."

"Illegal aliens. Who would smuggle illegal aliens into Brighton?"

Lester paused to drink some very hot tea, and to think. "Cambodians. They get into Canada and pay someone to take them across the lake at night."

"Wouldn't that be for American Immigration to worry about?"

"We cooperate." He caught Sammy's gesture. "Someone's coming to the cottage." Have you seen anything suspicious lately?"

"Cambodians must be very sneaky people," Jack said. "We haven't noticed anything."

"No boats on the lake? Nothing strange out there?"

"Some boat going back and forth in the day, last week. I hear they're planning on putting a wind farm there. No strange lights at night, other than UFOs landing out there." Jack smiled.

"Right. Do you know those guys?"

Jim turned out the light in the room and peeked through the curtain. "Never seen either of them before in my life." Jack disappeared into another room.

Lester and Sammy drank the tea and watched the two guys next door. Getting no answer from Laura's cottage door, the two strangers sat on the picnic table, doing nothing much.

"I can go into town and get something to eat," Sammy said, abruptly. "I haven't had supper yet."

"They got any take-out in town?"

"We passed a pizza place on the highway the other side of town."

"SquareBoy Pizza," Jim said. "They're good."

"I don't suppose they deliver?"

Jack shook his head. "Not out here. You'll have to go get it."

"Well," said Lester, "if you wouldn't mind, we could get enough for all of us."

"Pepperoni, extra cheese, and ham," Jim said.

"We'll be back in 45 minutes," Lester said.

As they drove away, Sammy said, "One of us could have stayed there."

Lester shook his head. We stay together on this one."

"Christ," Sammy said. "Cambodians."

"I didn't see you coming up with anything better."

"Are you sure we should come back? They might have called the police by now."

"Let's hope not."

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## **Brighton**

*Downtown and Along Popham Bay*

*Day after Button Day*

Clyde Books found a parking spot in downtown Brighton, across from the post office. He tucked a large envelope under his arm and went up the post-office steps. The doors were open, but the post office consisted only of walls of postal boxes with numbers on them. Clyde had suspected this would be the case – Canada Post had long since quit staffing such little places.

Arranging his most puzzled look on his face, he went out to the steps and waited until someone came up the steps. Luckily, the first person he met was a geezer. He liked geezers; they were innately suspicious of everything and everybody, but would unhesitatingly tell you all they knew once they got going.

"Problems?" the geezer said, suspiciously, eyeing the stranger's suit and the ID label that hung from Books' pocket. It read, in letters big enough for an old guy, "Bogart, Meinstein, and Lucy, Law Office." The "Bogart" was so that the old guy could have something false to remember.

Books held up the envelope. "I have a legal package to deliver to the Daniels brothers, but I couldn't get the address, other than 'Brighton'." He managed to look even more worried. "The sale of a house owned by a cousin of theirs has closed, and I need a signature from Jim."

The geezer thought a bit. "Don't know any Daniels in this town, but there's been a lot of new people in the last few years."

"Oh, they're not local people. They own a cottage somewhere out by the park. Owned it for a long time. That's all I know." Books continued staring at the envelope, waiting.

"Well, there's some cottages in the park, and there's a few along the roads facing Popham Bay. Might be there. Ask folks down that way." He pointed. "Go that way, turn left onto Ontario Street." He continued with detailed instructions for getting to Presqu'ile Park, although the route was clearly marked with signs all the way. Books was surprised the guy didn't tell him to "turn left where the old pine used to be."

On Ontario Street, Books found the Cole's TIM-BR Mart lumber store. The guy running the paint section knew the Daniels' place and gave him specific instructions. As soon as Books left, Carl phoned the Daniels and told them about the guy that was looking for them. Carl didn't know the Daniels very well, but he wasn't fond of lawyers since his divorce.

Books found the place easily enough, and drove past without slowing down. A silver Camry was in the lane, with a blue Cobalt parked behind it. After ten minutes, Books came by again, heading back towards Brighton without knowing quite what to do. He figured it wasn't like aliens to get company, so

the Malibu confused him. Then he shook his head; who knew what aliens really did on this planet? Maybe they had barbecue parties every weekend with other aliens, or maybe they joined quilting groups.

He was halfway back to Brighton, just passing the Lake Iroquois Nursery (and considering getting a few tulip bulbs to plant for spring) when he spotted a bearded guy on the other side of the road, hitchhiking. What the heck, he thought, and did a U-turn a bit farther up.

The bearded guy introduced himself. "I'm Tom," he said. "Trying to find a cottage my niece is staying in. It's along the shore of the bay, which I'm told is down this way somewhere."

Clyde shook the offered hand. "I'm Pete," he said. "I'm not from here, but I think I know the place you mean." He consulted a map, then started driving again.

After a couple of minutes, Tom said, "You from the government? Checking up on me?"

"Nope."

"Good. Didn't think you were, but I've been off my meds for a day and sooner or later I'll get thinking everyone is out to get me."

"Okay. How long does it take, and do you usually kill anybody?"

"Nah. Completely harmless when I'm me, but I rant a lot." Tom took a couple of wrapped rice-crispie squares and offered one to Clyde. "Got hooked on these when I was taking all those pills; eases the stomach a bit."

Clyde unwrapped his while driving. As he turned onto Lakeshore, he asked Tom, "Get to see any space aliens in human form when you're crazy?"

Tom turned to him. "You know, the oddest thing is that I met a guy in a park in Toronto who told me he was a space alien controlling a human body. And I was still taking all the pills." He watched the cottages. "I'm looking for number 11341. That's where Laura's staying."

Clyde thought about it. "I suppose an alien could always tell his secret to a person who's supposed to be nutso. Nobody'd believe him anyway."

Tom thought a bit. "That could be it. I was wondering if they gave me a bad batch of pills." He pointed. "That's the place. I recognize the Jeep."

Clyde pulled into the driveway, blessing his luck. The cottage was within a slingshot's stone of the Daniels, separated only by a thin grove of trees and shrubs. "I'll wait till I'm sure you can get in." He watched Tom knock on the door then walk around the cottage. Eventually, Tom returned to Clyde's car.

"I'll see if she answers her phone," Tom said. "I can wait at the picnic table till she gets back in any case." He shook his head. "It's not like I have anywhere else to go, anyway."

"Do you mind if I sit with you for a while? It's nice hearing the waves on the shore."

"Glad to have the company," Tom said. "I'll see if we can locate the Ulysses trees." Seeing Clyde's puzzled look, he added, "I'll explain while we're sitting."

"I brought sandwiches," Clyde said.

"Hey! Good man! Got a beer?"

Clyde shook his head. "A couple of cans of Pepsi."

Tom smiled. "Even better, actually."

They sat at the picnic table, Tom facing the road and Clyde facing the lake. "Good sandwiches," Tom said. "Thanks. I was getting hungry."

"You were going to tell me about the Ulysses trees, I think?"

"Oh, yes. I was a university prof at Trent before my head got messed up. Wrote a major work that nobody ever read. It compared the classical Ulysses with Tennyson's version of the guy as an old man and my version of what he must have been like, as a young guy, using psychological tools."

"Ahhh..."

"Well Laura – that's my niece; she's renting this cottage – liked it. Or said she did. Got a fan club of one." Tom winked at Clyde. "Anyway, she said there were some trees here that she calls the Ulysses trees." He opened a Pepsi. "Don't know what she meant by that, though."

Clyde Books looked around carefully, then pointed. "Maybe those three poplars"

"You're right! One is young, one is older, and one is getting rather old. But they're in a straight row, spaced evenly apart, and each has a similar kink about a third of the way up."

"Looks like the same tree at three different stages of life."

"Good kid, that Laura." Tom finished his sandwich. "Not that I know where she's gone."

"It's getting late. You'll freeze out here." Clyde was watching the Daniels' cottage. Two men came onto the deck of the cottage. Not the Daniels, Clyde thought. Even in the lowering light he could see that there was more difference in ages between them than the brothers were supposed to have. He watched the two men get into the Cobalt, back out of the driveway, and head towards Brighton. Clyde touched Tom's arm, and pointed.

Out onto the deck of the Daniels cottage, two men appeared, dragging some gear. Those, thought Clyde, are the Daniels brothers. "The neighbours, I guess," Tom said. "Do you know them?"

Clyde said nothing. The Daniels brothers walked quickly to the back of their property, flipped over a small aluminum boat with a high bow, and opened a shed. They put oars, and lifejackets into the boat, and attached a rope to the front. Then they began to drag the boat towards the lake. It was slow going, and came to a halt at a mound of gravel that marked the top of the stone beach.

"Let's go lend a hand," Tom said, getting up. Clyde followed.

When they got close, the Daniels stood up, faces impassive.

"We've come to help," Tom said.

"Why?" Jim looked the two over carefully.

"Because you look like you're getting ready to run away from something, and that makes me on your side." Tom smiled broadly.

"I think those guys are from the government," Jack said. "Undercover or something."

"Paranoid nutcases of the world unite!" Tom laughed.

"They said they were going to stay in our cottage to watch your place for some woman who was smuggling illegal aliens in from the States."

"Somehow I can't imagine Laura doing that," Tom said. "But the government's everywhere these days. Let's get this show going; it's time for you guys to blow this popsicle stand before the bad guys get back."

"Good enough." The brothers pulled the rope as Tom and Clyde manhandled the boat over the high spot, around a couple of driftwood stumps, and down to the edge of the water.

In the next fifteen minutes, the four of them put a fifteen horsepower Suzuki outboard onto the boat, then threw in bags of cans and dehydrated camp food. Prepared for something, Clyde thought, although the bags looked old. Camping gear went in last, then Tom turned to the brothers. "You have to do something about the car," he said. "Otherwise they'll know you took the boat. If the car's gone, they'll think you drove away."

Jack shook his head. "You're right," Jack said, but we don't have time. They just went in to town to get some pizza and beer."

"I can hide it for you," Tom said. "Drive it into town somewhere."

Jack pulled a set of keys out of his pocket. "Thanks. If you don't see us again, keep the car."

"I don't think it'll come to that," Tom said. "When we get back, I'll tape the keys under the picnic table."

The four of them got the boat into the water, and Clyde and Tom pushed it out into the waves. The motor started at once, like a good Japanese motor should, and was gone quickly, following the shore towards the park.

"I'll drive their car," Tom said. "You can follow, then drive me back. If you would."

"Sure," Clyde said. "Sure."

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## **Brighton**

*Along Popham Bay*

*Day after Button Day*

It was getting dark when, half an hour later, Sammy and Lester returned. Sammy was driving, and Lester was carrying a box of fried chicken and a bag of chocolate donuts. Their Blue Cobalt came to a stop just outside the Daniels' cottage. Sammy didn't turn into the driveway.

"They're gone," he said.

Lester pointed to where the headlights lit Laura's cottage. "The Buick's gone, too," he noted.

Sammy squinted. Laura's Jeep was still in the driveway, but the white car was no longer in behind it and the cottage was dark. "Now what?"

Lester grunted. "Pull into the driveway. Let's see if one of the Daniels brothers is still inside." No one answered the front door, but the back door, off the deck, was unlocked. Lester went inside, carefully, while Sammy stayed in the car. He came out after a couple of minutes, and got back into the car. "Nobody home. Let's leave for a while."

"Sounds like a plan." Sammy drove them back to the marina. They ate in silence in *Serenity*, Lester poking at the laptop. Eventually, Lester said, "We'll drive back. If there's nobody there, then nobody's called the cops. In that case, we'll set up a base in the cottage and wait till something happens."

"Can we bring the boat around there?"

Lester shook his head. "No good place to anchor. Sand and gravel bottom and no shelter if some winds come up. We could get this close to the shore, but the dinghy might have a hard time in the waves."

Sammy frowned. "I don't really like sitting in someone else's place. How do we explain it if someone calls the cops. Like one of the neighbors, if not the Daniels."

Lester pointed to the laptop screen. "Someone in the homeland just bumped our priority. We can take a few chances. We'll hang around the cottage and see if Copeman or the Laura chick shows up."

"Then what?"

"Then we'll improvise something. Trust me."

"Cambodian refugees.... Sure."

The Daniels cottage was still empty, with only the kitchen light on, and the SEALs left it that way as they settled in, Sammy checking the fridge while Lester watched Laura's dark cottage from the bedroom window.

"Any sign of life over there?" Sammy asked. "I think these guys were vegetarians."

"Probably explains why they didn't wait for the chicken. Nothing over there, but it's pretty dark out. You want to get the night scope?"

"Not really, but I will." Sammy went out by the deck, and around behind the cottage. His night vision was good, but he tripped once over a tree branch. As he was getting up, he thought he heard movement in the trees. Probably a deer, he thought. But when he got the night scope, he also brought in the guns and a bag of ammo.

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## **Brighton**

*From Downtown Brighton*

*Day after Button Day* (Button Day is the day that the aliens pressed the button that started the re-activation of Professor Nothing, their spaceship)

Laura looked around Jag's place. It was only a bit neater than bachelor standard. A large gray cat came out and watched her.

"Laura;" said Jag, "meet Hank. Hank; meet Laura."

"Hank?" asked Laura. The cat turned and walked away.

"Hank Dayton. Named after a friend lost in battle." Laura nodded. Her phone rang.

"Laura here."

"Laura? This is Tom."

"Tom! Where are you?"

"Actually, I'm in downtown Brighton, more or less. Do you know how hard it is to find a pay phone nowadays?"

"Your cell doesn't work?"

"Some conversations are better kept private, I think. Don't want certain ears listening to them, if you know what I mean."

A pause. "Tom, are you off your meds again?"

"As of yesterday, but already people are talking about aliens wherever I go. I didn't think it was going to happen that quickly. Are you coming back to the cottage tonight?"

"Not tonight. The long arms of the law have got me. In the morning for sure. Do you know where the cottage is?"

"Been there already. A guy drove me out and I recognized your car. But I couldn't get in. Interesting neighbors you have there, little cousin."

"The Daniels brothers. They're okay."

"They're gone now."

"Gone? Where?"

"This other guy and I, we helped them get away into the bay half an hour ago, in a little aluminum boat with a motor. Then I drove their car downtown and parked it in the public lot. By request."

"They're gone."

"They are. Are you harboring illegal aliens?"

"You want to give me the story?"

Tom did.

"Okay," Laura said after a moment's thought. "Can you get back to the cottage, or shall we pick you up?"

"Oh, this guy that gave me a lift, Pete, he can take me back. Hold on." A moment later: "Yeah, he will, but I don't have a key to the place."

"The bathroom window doesn't lock properly. Wiggle it up and down a few times, and it'll open."

"Will there be illegal aliens inside?"

"Very funny. I'll be back in the morning. I'll take you out to lunch. It'll be good to see you again."

Laura hung up the phone to find Jag bringing a tray with wine and cheese. "My cousin Tom," she said to the unasked question. "He's going to stay at the cottage for a while."

"You're good friends, I guess." Jag poured a glass of wine.

"He gets a little strange when he's off his meds, but he's got a good heart. He had a strange afternoon, I guess."

"You can tell me about it, if you want. I'm a cop, so I'm always happy to keep track of anything strange in this town."

Laura told him about the flight of the Daniels.

"Bizarre," Jag said. "Let's hope we don't have to send a search party for your neighbours. That bay can get rough." He struggled with the next part. "Is there any way I can phone him?"

Laura looked puzzled. "He's got a cell phone, but when he's in his nutso mood, he thinks the government's spying on him. Probably thinks the guys next door are secret agents." She laughed. "Although that's as good an explanation as any."

"He might be right," Jag said. "You know that guy I was with this afternoon at the harbour?"

"Okay."

"Cope. An old friend. A CSIS agent."

A pause. "And now you have to kill me, I guess."

Jag ignored that. "He was sent to Brighton, supposedly to see if anything unusual was going on around here. They didn't tell him any more than that. Or so he says."

"And is anything unusual going on around here?"

"Well, just before you came, Cope spotted a guy he says is working undercover for the Americans. More strange stuff. Can you phone your cousin for me?"

She gave him a strange look. "I'll try." She got no answer to Tom's cell phone, but the cottage phone was picked up at once. "Tom?" Laura asked, "this is your cousin."

"You were right about the window," Tom said. "Thanks."

"Ah.... Tom, my friend here wants to ask you something."

"Hi, Tom," Jag said.

"They killed a deer with a strange gun and took it inside!" Tom shouted.

"Okay, but can I ask you a question?"

"I guess." But Tom sounded tense.

"My name's Jag. Can you tell me what kind of car's over at the cottage next door. Without getting caught?"

"I already know that. Blue Cobalt. Ohio plates. Don't remember the number." He laughed. "Us nutcases keep track of such things, you know. Secret agents from the states, I'd guess." He laughed again, then turned serious.

"I don't know," Jag said. "For all I know you might just be right. I'll call you back later if I find anything out." Jag disconnected, and thought a bit. Then he called Cope. "Those guys from the harbour," he told Cope. "I think they're in the cottage next to the one Laura's staying at, and watching for her." He told Cope about the escape of the Daniels brothers in a boat.

"This whole thing is getting stranger and stranger," Cope admitted. "Tell Tom I'm coming over."

But there was no answer on the cottage phone. As soon as Jag hung up the phone, Cope called back. "Get an answer?"

"Nope."

"Can I drop by and pick up Laura's key?"

"Sure."

"I won't be long."

"Okay."

"You don't have a dog I could borrow, do you?"

"A dog?"

"A dog."

Jag thought a bit. "Old lady Metcalfe got moved into a retirement home a couple of days ago. She left behind a couple of old dogs that nobody knows what to do with. The neighbour's got them."

"One key; two dogs. I'll be right by."

"This going to be dangerous?"

"I doubt it, but I'll leave a number for you to contact if I disappear."

"Sure."

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## **Brighton**

*Along Popham Bay*

*Day after Button Day*

Tom watched the last shadows of the Ulysses trees lengthen and disappear into the gloom. The Blue Cobalt had returned shortly after he'd got into Laura's cottage. He'd watched the two guys inspect the Daniels cottage for the missing brothers, then go in, carrying a bucket of Dixie Lee chicken.



The kitchen light, which had been on when the Daniels took to their boat, stayed on, but none of the other lights had been turned on.

The guy who called himself Peter had dropped him off, and then gone into town to find a room, declining Tom's offer to spend the night at the cottage. That was fine; Tom had lots of experience being alone. He sat by one window in the darkened cottage, trying to separate truth from fantasy, knowing getting off his prescribed anti-psychotic pills was going to give him some real feelings of persecution. Still, it was getting harder and harder not to get suspicious of the events in the two cottages.

Was there any possibility, he wondered, that Laura had got involved in something governmental and secret? "It's probably not about me. It's probably not about me." He'd memorized the phrase in the last few months, but it didn't take too much psychosis to figure that Laura had joined the police and the government in keeping an eye on him, for reasons that only they knew. After all, the moment he'd showed up in Brighton, she'd joined up with a cop, and left him alone in the cottage. The cottage next to the one from which two normal-looking brothers had just fled, the cottage now inhabited by two guys who walked very carefully and always looked around.

I used to do that, Tom thought. I used to look around and see everything because I didn't trust anything. I'm trying to trust now, but it's hard. For all I know, these guys are CSIS agents who chased the Daniels brothers out because they were space aliens like the guy in the park or ex-Soviet moles. That didn't make sense, he realized. Why then were they keeping tabs on the cottage Laura rented? He slipped out the bathroom window then circled around the Daniels cottage in the dark. On the far side of their cottage, he waited in the deep shadows, sitting on a stump.

He watched as Sammy came out the door in the darkness. He watched as Sammy opened the Cobalt's trunk and the trunk light came on. Sammy had green shoes, and Tom remembered the turtle's warning, so he slid down behind a boulder. He watched Sammy take out both night-vision goggles, which Tom recognized, and two bizarre guns, which he didn't recognize. Sammy put on the night-vision goggles and looked around carefully. He fired twice into the darkness with the gun, then walked into shadow. He came back a minute later dragging a small deer.

After Sammy was safely inside, Tom went carefully back to Laura's cabin. He looked through the cottage till he found a flashlight, then, keeping most of the lens covered, he located a sleeping bag. He stuffed it with supplies and a plastic table cloth to use as a ground sheet or tent, depending on the weather. Then he slipped back out the window. Fifteen minutes later, behind a clump of swamp cedar, on the other side of the road, he made camp. Within an hour he'd eaten half a loaf of bread and a can of tuna, then rolled over and gone to sleep.

He woke once, when he heard someone walking down the road with dogs. There was a moment of panic – no one had ever hunted him with dogs before – but they didn't seem to be interested in him, although one of the dogs sniffed in his direction. Then he went back to sleep, waking briefly to watch Cope and the dogs come back down the road and go into Laura's cottage.

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## **Brighton**

*Along Popham Bay*

*Day after Button Day*

After leaving Tom at the cottage, Clyde Books had left parked his car on the road, then walked down the laneway of a darkened place to the beach. Here, too, it was mostly rocks with some sand, although not as rough as in front of the Daniels' cottage. He walked as far as Laura's cottage, and found the skid marks with his flashlight, where the Daniels had launched their boat. Then he walked back past his start point in the darkness, and found no marks that would indicate the Daniels had dragged a boat onshore. When he got to the fence that marked the limits to the provincial park, he peered into the darkness. The Daniels had either gone ashore along the park beach somewhere, or perhaps had cut across to the island. Clyde couldn't imagine them rounding the island in that small boat and going out into Lake Ontario in the dark.

When he turned to go back, he saw a figure standing not ten feet away, silent and dark.

"Hello," Clyde said. "Nice night for a walk." There was no response, nor movement from the other.

When the silence lengthened, Clyde coughed and said, "I've got to be getting back," but the figure stood there. Clyde figured it might be one of the guys who'd scared the Daniels away, and from the speed of their exit, he didn't like the thought. In the darkness, he eyed a possible getaway through a cottage lot.

"Well," Clyde said, then pointed the flashlight at the figure's head and turned it on.

He looked into the stony face of Casey Szczedziwoj.

It wasn't as if it hit him instantly; there was a complete stoppage of thought. Then he screamed like a little kid, tossed the flashlight at the figure and ran, not concerned that the flashlight had gone right through the dark figure and had fallen onto the beach, shining towards the dark water.

He got to his car, eventually, got out his keys, jammed them into the lock correctly, more by chance than anything else, and kicked a long string of gravel into the bush as he left the area. He was still shaking as he stopped in the empty parking lot of the lumber store, under one of the floodlights. He left almost at once when Szczedziwoj's ghost ambled out of the darkness towards him, the spirit's face still blank.

Half an hour later he stopped outside Trenton at a hotel beside the highway. The clerk at the front desk ignored the scratches on Clyde's face and the torn clothing. and the room was just fine, since not once during the night did the ghost appear. Clyde spent hours wishing Darkh had been there; Darkh's specialty was ghosts and he might have thought up something to say to Szczedziwoj.

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## **Brighton**

*Along Popham Bay*

*Day after Button Day*

Cope decided that the SEALs would probably have night-vision equipment, and probably thermal-vision stuff, too, although he couldn't imagine how they'd explain that at the border, if their car was inspected. But he figured they probably weren't heavily armed, since guns would be too dangerous to bring into Canada.

It was the sort of equipment he'd like himself, but there wasn't a chance he could get any from headquarters in the next day or two, no matter what Ottawa thought of his mission. Not that he knew what he was supposed to do, but his best option was stirring up the local ant's nest and seeing if he could capture Lester or Sammy. Or convince them to talk, at least.

He figured there was a good chance the SEALs would see him go into Laura's cabin, so he prepared as best he could. He had a standing opposition to attacking a place possibly defended by professionals.

Much better, he knew, to let them come to your defended position. He'd see if he could team up with Tom in the wonderful Canadian habit of seal hunting.

Set up your alerts (hence, the dogs), set up your traps, and wait. Win some, lose some, but this gives you the best odds.

Cory, a large yellowish dog, seemed to be the stupid one; Jag said she'd bark at squirrels and grouse, not to mention grasshoppers if she were in the mood, although she seemed quiet enough as they walked along the road in the darkness. Cope left her outside. He'd originally thought of putting her into the cabin with him, but figured her imagination would be more of a handicap than her judgment and she might bark at imaginary sounds when she was inside. In a cabin in the woods, there were always scratching sounds, from branches or squirrels on the roof to mice under the floor.

So Cory had gone outside, tied to a tree between the two cottages.

Potto, according to Jag, was considerably more sensible. He was older, experienced, and, for a Labrador, almost smart, so Cope took him inside after tapping on the door and getting no answer.

Closing the door behind him, Cope did a quick but thorough search of the cabin with a small flashlight. There was no sign of Tom and no one answered Cope's quiet calls. Since the bathroom window was open, he assumed that Tom had done as Laura suggested he would. "He'll hide from suspicious people," she'd said, "and he's comfortable out in the bush. He might walk back into Brighton, or hide in the park for a day or two. I'll leave messages on his phone, so maybe we can find him eventually – if he doesn't decide I'm working for some international conspiracy."

Then he turned, and a stranger was there. He was about to meet Tom, Cope decided.

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### **Brighton: Tom's Diary**

*Along Popham Bay.*

*Day after Button Day*

He's still waiting for me to make the first move. THAT'S NOT HARD TO FIGURE!!!

Ever since Laura left, I've been wondering if they'd send someone to take her place. They thought I'd be fooled by some middle-aged guy who looks harmless. Him and his two dogs. Harmless, noisy dogs and a harmless, quiet man. Who's to figure that one out?

Well it doesn't take much physique to be a spy, I guess. But I can see the way he moves, like his life depends on it. He probably knows I'm here. I learned to move quietly in the woods sneaking up on partridges, but I'm no professional.

It cheers me up, in a way. You can't have a paradise a garden of Eden without a snake. And it's better the one you know where he is than always looking over your shoulder.

I wrote a canku about snakes in paradise.

\*\*

I walked right past his place.

You think I'm nuts for doing that? No way, Jose. They know where I am and they could have killed me a long time ago if they wanted to. So they're just watching me.

Last year I put on a tinfoil shirt under my jacket and tinfoil under my hat. Big deal; probably just amplifies the signal. Or maybe the bug's buried in my neck or teeth; I didn't cover that.

My teeth all look pretty normal, but that doesn't mean anything.

There was a guy named Gopher Jim, back in Omaha. He said they put it into shoulder muscle and scanned it from posts along the highways. I don't know if that's right. I do know he had a bunch of X-rays and tried for years for a CAT scan. And he did a lot of digging and poking with a needle and local anesthetic. All he got was sore arms. He figured it was close to the bone, but I'd have to see one before I'd try poking around like that!

I just wanted him to know I was there. That's why I went to his place.

If I had the money I'd find a way to discourage people from coming around. Just make it uncomfortable for them. Maybe get a bunch more guns and do stupid things to make them think I was crazy and probably going to kill someone and they'd be scared to go into the woods around here.

Got them nervous enough, anyway. Probably think I'm crazy anyway. But I figure it's better to know who's a True Hunter and True Hiker and who's just another goddamn spy for the Big Boys that run the government.

Laura probably told them everything anyway. Goddamn I trusted her. My Paradise, I called the place yesterday. Well, Adam was doing okay until Eve fucked it up, according to that piece of crap bible.

Screw them all; I can live freer being watched than most people can in the city.

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I went to talk to him in the cabin.

I prepared myself by washing myself in the lake. That took me most of an hour. Would have been longer, but a plane came by in the dark and sprayed some Stupid Gas and I had wet my socks and use them as a gas mask.

Anyway, I stood on his little deck for a couple of minutes and then the outside dog he tied to a tree started barking. Another dog inside the house barked a couple of times. I knocked. and saw him watching me from a window. He turned on the outside light, then invited me in. Don't know if he had a gun or not, but if he was going to do anything he didn't have to wait for me to come. Unless he was going to say I was trying to shoot him and fake it so there'd be a reason to kill me, but why cover things up when you have no reason to?

He came to the door and asked if I was Tom, and I said ya, that's the name I've been giving out, so he invited me in for tea.

Christ In A Hammock! He had a dummy hanging from the ceiling with its feet just touching the floor. Just inside the door. He didn't say anything about it and I didn't ask. Let him think what he wants to think about that.

He set two cups on the table and heated some water in a kettle. When it was boiling he poured it into the cups and put a teabag out. I dunked it in my cup till it was strong enough the tea I mean, then I took it out with the spoon and he put it in his cup. He took it out and put in some milk from a can and some sugar, or at least it looked like that, so I did too, in case one was an antidote.

I let him drink first, and figured what the heck, which is unusual for me since I came to Paradise, but it's been a day and nothing seems to have happened to me, although I had a bit of a headache. Maybe I

should have turned down the tea and cookies. He opened a new bag of President's Choice chocolate chip cookies and put a bunch on a plate and let me choose. Russian roulette or just cookies; I'll never know.

I was looking for something to say when a jet came over. You could hear the sound of the engine change as it came over the cabin. So I said, "You hear that? They do that right over top of these woods. I'd like to know what they're doing."

And he said he was told we were on the England to Toronto flight path and the planes were just gearing back for landing in Toronto. Then he said he didn't know if that was true; it was just what he was told and for all he knew they could be dropping boxes of DDT and that could be the sound of the back door opening.

Jesus! That set me back, but some of them are bound to be good, you know, and it's hard to tell. I said, "I've been told when you see contrails in the sky, they're adding some sort of gas to make people stupid." I didn't say I believed it or anything, just told him the story.

And he said he'd been a lot of places that didn't have airplanes going over them and people were just as stupid there. He said to let him think about it a bit, so I just petted Potto for a minute, then he said he'd compared places with lots of planes and places with hardly any and there didn't seem to be much difference in stupidity levels. Just as many stupid people and just as many assholes no matter where you went. Look at the governments they elect, he said, and I had to agree with that.

Don't you think it would be a good idea on their part, I asked him, and he thought no; too hard to control. And besides the surest sign of intelligence was not believing what the government tells you, and most of the people who don't trust the government live in the cities and not out in the country. And I asked him if people who escaped to the bush got stuff sprayed on them.

He said that was more likely, although he'd been out in a place in Montana that the FBI and CIA were watching closely, and he'd never seen a plane overhead. But he said if they didn't like somebody they'd send in a few agents on the ground. Maybe put some Stupid Juice in the well or something. That way you can watch how well it works.

They doing that to you? I asked. He said if so he hadn't found out about it yet. He said Potto and Cory should give him a bit of warning. Then he pointed out the dummy and said if someone burst in they might put a bullet in the dummy first and give him a chance to do something.

I didn't know what to think; he sure sounded like he was on the same side as I am, even if he didn't believe about the gas.

I told him about how the cities can kill you. Then I told him about the guys who took over the cottage next door. He said he knew them and that they were secret agents from the States but I shouldn't do anything but watch them.

I told him that made sense to me the way the people from the cottage left, but I didn't tell him they left by boat because you can't trust any of these guys. I said I was going to spend the night in the woods and he told me to be careful because these guys were pretty good in the woods too and probably had night vision goggles. He said, if I saw people sneaking through the woods it was probably people scouting him out and not after me. I asked if I should bean them, and he said no. Just leave them alone, he said, unless you can warn me and get away with it.

Then we talked about the way the world is in and what happened to democracy and it was nice to talk to someone who talked the same beliefs, even if he was making them up. It was nice to hear a voice that didn't come out of my own head or off the radio.

I asked him if he had a gun and he said no, a gun will get you into trouble in this country, but it won't get you out. In some places, he said, you need a gun, so I asked him where and he said in grizzly country and in polar bear country and in parts of north Toronto. I laughed.

He started asking me if I had enough food and things like that, so I said goodbye and left, but not before I nuzzled Cory and Potto so they'd remember my smell. They're not guard dogs, so I don't know why he has them, really. Dogs generally like me, even if people don't. You always know what a dog's about.

He didn't come out onto the deck and he didn't shoot me in the back, so I figure they're just taking notes. If not, I can't figure out their game.

The moon was still pretty full, so I circled around. He had Cory outside but she didn't smell me because I stayed downwind and I'm quiet when I want to be. I was tired by then, really tired. Or maybe it was something in the tea or cookies. Do they have such a thing? Stupid Beams? I seemed more confused than usual after the visit.

In the morning I did another canku, this one about the beauty of snakes.

This morning I went over to his cottage again. I was careful to make sure I didn't eat or drink anything unless he did first. He was gone, and the two spies in the next cottage were gone. I fed the dogs and opened a couple of cans for me. I didn't see any cameras hidden in the ceiling but that doesn't mean anything. They'll get us all when they want. In a year or two I'll go to Weyburn and be a little harder to find. Now is just preparation for the Great Escape!!!

I've decided to kill him when he comes back. I liked him but that only makes him more dangerous. I looked around the cabin and figured a couple of ways to poison him and I could take him in the night or even right in broad daylight, but I want it to look like an accident.

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**Brighton:**

*Along Popham Bay.*

*Day after Button Day*

For a while after Tom left there was silence, and Cope prepared a few traps from the supplies he'd purchased locally. Potto lay on the floor, watching everything. Cope was sure the dog would raise his head when he heard something outside the cabin but not make a sound unless he was actually concerned. The dog didn't make a sound as Cope rigged up a dummy, standing it just inside the door, wearing one of Jagger's sets of clothes. Then both dog and man closed their eyes and went to sleep, waking only when Cory, tied outside, barked.

When they came for him, well before dawn, somehow he knew it. There was something in Cory's bark that was different. Cope took that to mean a human was near. Cory, he'd been told, liked all people, and her bark was happy when she heard one coming.

Potto, on the other hand, started a deep, almost inaudible growl and stood up, facing the door. Cope was fully awake within seconds. He was sure there was a person out there and so decided not to open the door.

He checked that he had the little flashlight and a knife into one pocket, then grabbed a camouflage cloth and a silver thermal survival cloth that he'd left handy on the table. Pushing open the window in the bathroom, he rolled out and onto the mossy patch beneath. He slid the window closed behind him.

He looked around but could see no movement. That didn't surprise him; these guys were professionals. If there were now more than two of them, it was almost certain that one of them had his image in a some sight. He waited to die or be confronted. But if there were two of them, one would be at the side door and the other would be watching the door to the veranda at the front of the house.

After a few seconds, he crawled into a space beside the wood pile, a couple of yards from the cabin, then pulled the foil cloth around him. He rolled the camouflage cloth over top. The foil, which was surprisingly noiseless, would cut his thermal signature and the outside cloth pattern would make him less visible.

Cope huddled in the darkness, slowly sliding the cloth around until the one hole in it was in front of his right eye. He'd have preferred his left eye, but wasn't willing to do much more shifting. He was right-handed but felt that his left eye was more perceptive, less accepting of things. Some artist had told him that, and, true or not, it seemed to work.

The darkness was complete but both Cory and Potto were barking steadily.

Cory abruptly stopped, then started whining from affection, like she did when Cope was petting her, so Cope was pretty sure now that there were humans around. He waited, willing himself to look like a lump. It was a good sign that they hadn't killed Cory. Or maybe they thought stopping her barking would arouse more suspicion than letting it go on.

He heard the door latch rattle once. Another good sign; they could have tossed a grenade into the cabin through the window. Then there was nothing for a few seconds but Potto's growl.

Cope knew both dogs were unlikely to be adopted because they were old and getting near their trip to the incinerator; so he'd figured the dogs would come out ahead on the deal with a trip and a forest adventure, even if he had to kill them and run. Still, he'd had a couple of dogs when he was a kid, and had learned to like both these dogs.

Through the small eyehole, Cope saw movement in the darkness as a figure came slowly around the cabin then passed out of his line of vision. Cope didn't dare turn his head, but he heard the window open a bit, then close again. The snapping of a twig told him that the dark figure was moving back around towards the door again.

He heard the latch move again, then two muffled pops. Potto's growl stopped with the sound. Cory began to whine and broke into a howl. Cope would have dearly liked to have known if one of the shots was for the dummy; it would have told him how serious these guys were about keeping him alive.

On the other hand, it would have been so simple to have started a fire against the cabin and shot anyone trying to escape.

So the worst he could fear now was to be taken prisoner, tortured a bit for information, then drowned. Another canoeing accident. Or maybe they'd just want to talk about old times in Afghanistan.

There were a few sounds from inside the cabin, then louder sounds.

"Not in here," a voice called from the door.

There was a lot of scurrying through the undergrowth around the cabin, and more than the usual amount of twig-breaking and leaf-shuffling and a figure passed darkly through Cope's vision again. They were probably worried, he thought, that he was somewhere close, with a weapon, waiting to take a good shot. So they'd hide behind all the corners, scanning the area with night-vision equipment and poking their guns in all directions at once. Or maybe that was just his imagination.

A few minutes later they began searching with flashlights. He could hear the outhouse door slamming and the boat and canoe being rolled over. He waited, patiently but aching from not moving. The woods were beginning to lighten with the coming dawn. Cope didn't think his cover would last much longer, but one never knew.

"Copeman!" a man bellowed. "We're not here to harm you. We just want to talk!" The words echoed off the woods across the road.

Cope doubted that "just" word. They could have knocked politely on the door and suggested tea in the evening if they'd wanted nothing more than conversation. They wouldn't even have had to shoot Potto. When he was sure both men were on the far side of the cabin, he shifted, easing the aches a bit. A treacherous jay started a racket above him, but the intruders seemed to pay no attention.

Cory barked and whined happily over near her tree. Bad news, Cope thought as the whining got closer. Cope slowly took the small folded knife out of his pocket and slipped it under his belt and down into his underwear.

Then, of course, there was Cory all over him, pawing the cover off and licking his face. He shoved her away, and looked into a gun barrel, squinting in the light in his face. "You should have shot this damn dog, too," he told the dark figure. The figure laughed but the barrel didn't waver. He could hear the other person coming, crunching the forest debris. The jay got louder.

Cope slowly got up. No-one tripped him and beat the crap out of him, so he figured they were being polite to start with. "Would you like to come in for some coffee?" he asked.

"Sounds good to me," the closest person, who sounded like Lester, said. He backed up a few steps.

Cope stretched his back, which crackled a bit.

"Don't move," said the man with the gun. He gave Cope a quick frisking, and removed the flashlight. Fool, thought Cope, when the folded knife under his balls wasn't discovered. The frisking done, one of the men used Cope's flashlight to lead them back around the cabin to the door.

One figure stepped through the door, over the body of Potto. Cope couldn't tell if the dummy had been shot or knifed. Cope followed, stepping over Potto as if it were perfectly normal to have a dog lying motionless inside a cabin door. The last man followed.

"I'm going to turn the lights on," Cope said. There was no response, so he flicked the switch. The lights came on.

Cope looked at his visitors. Both Lester and Sammy were dressed in jungle camouflage outfits with lots of grease paint on their faces. They looked very much like special forces, except for the guns and Sammy's green shoes.

"Paintball guns?" Cope asked. "You shoot to spatter?"



"Paintball guns," said Sammy. "Special ammo, though."

"Ah," Cope said. That made sense. The SEALs could pretend to be attending a paintball tournament somewhere, and while the guns might be normal, the special ammo was logical. They'd have a couple of cyanide paintballs, and some that put you out like a light. He looked more carefully at Potto and felt better when he saw the dog was still breathing. Maybe, he thought, I won't have to kill these guys. Which was just as well; he couldn't figure out what part of his training would be most suitable to killing special forces with a jackknife busy getting tangled in his pubic hairs.

Both his visitors watched as he lit the propane stove and put a percolator of coffee on. Cope didn't drink coffee, so he didn't care if the coffee was awful.

"I'm going to get some cookies to go with the coffee," he told them. He was far from certain of his future and could still imagine his own lifeless body filling the low point in the ground out behind the outhouse, and covered with leaves.

Cope set an apparently unopened box of mixed Oreos onto the table, then, watched carefully by the SEALs, got out three cups. He filled each one, then brought it to the table. Slowly, conscious of the knife, he sat down in one chair. "Would you like to go to the veranda?" he asked. "I can put the outside light on."

Lester shook his head. "We'd just as soon stay inside," he said. It was a logical call; out on the veranda they'd have been visible in the growing light to a sniper or even a sudden attack from Tom since they probably had no idea whether Tom was an enemy or just a passerby.

"Want to talk?" Cope asked.

"Like you'd tell us anything useful," Sammy said, opening the cookie box.

"Like I would."

There was silence until Sammy bit into an Oreo laced with very hot pepper. Then there was a tense moment until Lester burst into laughter. "Good try," he told Cope, who hadn't been able to take advantage of the situation.

Cope was aware there was some sort of game playing out here, but he wasn't sure which one it was.

It all came back to that damn thing in the bay, he knew. Some people wanted it found, and others seemed to want it to stay lost. Those who wanted it found needed him alive, even if his information came out with his fingernails. Cope would have decided to tell all if he hadn't wondered if he would end up dead very shortly thereafter.

"What would you like from me?" he asked, as pleasantly as he could. "You seem to have the upper hand here, as they say."

"We," said Sammy, setting his coffee down, "don't want to know a fucking thing."

Cope nodded. "I think I can handle that." He walked over and kicked Potto's inert form. "Tell me, Lester," he asked, "why young Sammy here gets to do all the talking. You been second-rate in the organization for a long time?" He didn't look at either of them, but went back to pour himself some coffee. His body parts – the ones that he'd strained hiding – were aching a bit less, but his imagination kept coming back to his fingernails. He tried to ignore the scene in his imagination where a hand-crank generator was connected to his dick.

Lester said nothing, but that wasn't surprising. Cope just hoped that the question had hit home somehow. If so, it might just give him an edge of a tiny fraction of a second. He'd played horseshoes with his neighbors when he was younger and knew the value of interrupting someone's concentration. When the other guy was winding up to throw a horseshoe, Cope had learned to keep quiet, but to keep moving. No rules against that, but it helped distract the fellow.

If they didn't want to know a fucking thing, Cope thought, then maybe they were here to deliver him to someone who did. For a moment he considered telling them everything, just to make things easier.

"How long do we wait here?" he asked, gathering up Potto's heavy body and tossing it at Sammy.

The dog, Sammy, the coffee, and the table, went over sideways and very noisily. It was a fold-up card table, which folded up as it should. In a small cabin, setting the table aside allowed for extra room when one needed.

Cope stood perfectly still, which was just as well, since Lester had a paintball pistol against his nose impressively quickly. Sammy came up from the tangle smoothly and quietly, then reached a hand, curved in some odd way, towards Cope's abdomen.

Cope screamed before being touched, a long, gut-sourced scream that filled the cabin. He figured he'd better start practicing, that he was going to be doing it as soon as delivery took place. Outside, Cory began to howl.

Sammy yanked the door open and fired two shots from the paintball gun and Cory's howl stopped. Then he stuck a kitchen knife into Cope's balls and said, "We just have to deliver you. They never said what condition to keep you in. Or what gender."

Cope doubted that. Normal practice would have been to intimidate him with violence. Just enough pain to make him docile, without leaving a visible mark. Whatever their superiors said, it was easily done and in the nature of the beasts who did this work. On the other hand, they were in a supposedly foreign and friendly country, and they would not want to do anything they'd be caught at. The very fact that SEALs were in Canada playing these games meant something serious was in the works.

"Look," Sammy said after a long pause. He removed the knife from Cope's lower regions and waved it in general directions. "We're actually on your side. You might not believe it but we've been tasked with helping you survive." Cope raised his eyebrows, and Sammy went on. "There are a number of people – actually some groups, who'd like you dead. We're a bodyguard unit."

He tried to look frightfully sincere, and Cope could see Lester nodding in agreement. But Cope didn't for a moment believe them. His mind tried to grasp the concept of any of the groups he was likely to come into contact with actually telling the truth. It didn't work.

"Thanks," he said with his most earnest expression. "I guess it's better you than the bad guys. Where are you supposed to take me?" Cope asked.

"Can't tell you yet," Lester said, and smiled, but his eyes didn't warm up at all.

Cope tried to look like he was relaxing; he had no idea what the SEALs were waiting for. "Can I take the dog outside?" he asked, looking at Lester. Potto was beginning to stir.

"Probably be safer for all of us. Lester nodded to Sammy, and watched as Cope picked up Potto and started for the door. He paused at the door, then pushed it open with his foot, sliding past the dummy hanging from the ceiling. Nobody had mentioned the dummy, but Cope supposed these two were used to

people hanging from the ceiling. He set Potto beside Cory, still tied to a tree and more or less out like a light. There was just enough light to see by.

His back ached and he straightened slowly. "Mind if I use the outhouse? The toilet in the cottage is all backed up." It would be, since Cope had blocked it after using it.

Sammy nodded. "We saw that. Go ahead. Just leave the door open." Lester followed Cope out.

"Not very private," he observed.

Cope shrugged and opened the outhouse door. Lester's gun came up as he did, and he stepped closer for an inspection. Finding no problems, he stepped back again, resting against a tree. Behind him, behind a cedar-covered rock, there was the smallest of movements, a brown-shoed foot being drawn out of sight in the increasing light. Odd, Cope thought. Tom, maybe?

Cope broke off a small leafy branch. "To clean the spiders out of the hole before I sit down," he explained. Lester said nothing.

Inside the outhouse Cope dropped his pants, palming a note that had been stuck behind his belt, pointing his rump at Lester, and swirled the branch around the hole. He dropped it into the hole and reached to the right. His fingers found a flattish spot and he stuck a note there.

When he left the outhouse, Lester had him stand against a tree, back to him, and went in to inspect the place. Cope kept his head straight ahead, but he watched the rock where he'd seen the boot. There was nothing,

"Would you like breakfast?" he asked, as Lester marched him back to the cabin. "I'll cook." He couldn't decide if they were waiting for something or someone, or just hadn't a clue what to do now that they had a captive.

"Breakfast?" Lester asked Sammy. "He says he'll cook."

"Canned stuff," Cope noted. "Nothing with hot sauce." Sammy didn't smile.

"Okay," Lester said, still sitting in the chair, but his eyes watching all the windows. "Just let us inspect the cans first. Set them on the table."

While Cope was getting out a few cans and a pot, Sammy disappeared outside, either to use the toilet or to inspect the area, or both. Lester stood, leaning against the wall by the window so he could see outside without being a good target.

He took his time. The longer he avoided going anywhere, the better off he was. Jagger might drop by, as soon as he got Laura out of bed. And maybe Tom could do something, assuming that was Tom out in the woods. Cope figured Tom was by now as much a nut case as Laura figured, and was probably convinced Cope had been hunting and spying on him. What he'd make of people with the paintball guns on their hips, Cope couldn't imagine.

While a mixture of canned chicken and canned potatoes was frying, Cope did some thinking. He didn't bother to look around but he could feel eyes watching the cabin.

"Anything to tell us?" Lester said, over breakfast. Lester and Sammy took turns eating, with one of them always watching from beside the window.

"About what?"

"Why you're here."

"Nope."

"Bout time we got you out of here, then," Lester said.

Cope felt the sting of the paintball on his chest, then fell sideways out of the chair.

Within ten minutes the SEALs had him tied and into the small trunk of the Cobalt. Tom watched them go, then went inside the cabin, just as the phone rang. He ignored it.

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After Lester had cleaned evidence of their stay out of both cabins (as much as he could – he didn't trust Sammy, for whom tidiness wasn't a virtue), and put the paintball guns into the back seat, he joined Sammy in the Cobalt. "Now what, asshole?" Lester said, as Sammy was backing the car out of the driveway in the morning light and turning it towards Brighton.

"Me asshole; you moron. Now what the hell do we do? Somebody's going to miss the motherfucker sooner or later." Sammy scowled his most famous scowl.

"Well, Sammy, you've got a point there. Let's not get into what we could have done if we'd had more time. But this guy has to be got out of the way."

"Dump him in the woods?"

"Killing him would be a big mistake, I think. Even if we make it look like an accident, they'd be suspicious."

"Not to mention against specific orders."

"There is that," Lester acknowledged. "There is that. And he's supposed to be on our side. More or less, like most Canadians."

"You think? This isn't Afghanistan here."

"Well, yeah, that was always a bit doubtful. Wait till the U.S. needs Canadian water, then we'll see what side they're on. Where we going? Not back to the boat?"

"Where else?" Sammy slowed.

"Anyplace else. The moment they know he's missing, where do you think they'll look first?"

Sammy pulled the car over to the shoulder by a picnic table. "You got any better ideas?"

"Patricia's place. Algonquin Island. Toronto."

Sammy laughed. "Dammit, that's good. Serve her right. Toronto." But after he was out on the 401, dodging trucks, he asked, "How long's our cargo going to be asleep?"

"We'll stop just this side of Toronto and give him a green one. That'll keep him out long enough." Lester directed them into the take-out of a Tim Horton's, so Sammy could get enough chocolate donuts to keep him sentient. For himself, a coffee and a bagel.

"Which of us carries him onto the ferry?" Sammy raised his eyebrows.

"That's a problem. Maybe I'll try one of those purple balls. Should make him woozy enough that we can pretend he's a drunk friend."

"Sounds dicey."

"Easier than fighting Taliban."

"You've got a point there."

At the Courtland interchange, they stopped in the parking lot of an abandoned restaurant. Sammy opened the trunk carefully, but Cope had only got one arm free by that time, and the knife missed Sammy's throat by a bit. "Nasty, nasty," Sammy said, and squeezed a purple paintball under Cope's nose.

He poked Cope in the solar plexus, and after a minute Cope inhaled deeply and passed out again. Sammy took the knife.

“All okay?” Lester asked when Sammy got in. Lester had moved to the driver’s seat.

“No problem. Patricia’s going to like this guy.” Sammy put the knife in the glove compartment. Toronto was a sea of lights as they drove down the Don Valley Parkway, the glow brightening the sky and every lit apartment window having a story almost as unique as having an intelligence agent in one's trunk.

They parked the car in the underground garage in the same building as the Piazza Manna. When they were sure there was no one within view, Lester opened the trunk. Cope opened his eyes, then closed them again. “Fuck,” he whispered, and threw up.

“Think he’s faking it?” Sammy asked, ready to do whatever was necessary to keep them from being taken by surprise.

“Watch,” Lester said, touching a corner of Cope’s eyelid. There was no movement. “An old trick. If there’s no twitch, he’s out of it.”

“You’re sure?”

“Always good to know when the bad guys are faking it. Caught out a couple of Taliban that way. Hoist him out.”

“Why not you?”

“I’m the old and wise one, Grasshopper. You’re the dumb muscle.”

“Is that why you never wanted my help when you were checking out a bomb?”

“It’s because you have a tendency to fart just when I need total silence. I’d be dead if you were around when I was defusing an IED.”

Sammy hauled Cope out, and they got him standing enough to walk him to the elevator, across the street, and onto the ferry. The guy selling tickets seemed to take in stride two guys helping another onto the boat. Perhaps it was because Lester looked so much like a store clerk ready for retirement.

They showed up at Patricia’s place and she let them in without comment, Sammy steered Cope downstairs, tied Cope securely, then went back to join the others in the living room. It was not a happy gathering, so Sammy and Lester caught the first ferry in the morning, and were back in Brighton, at the marina, by ten.

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## **Chapter 7: September 19**

*There's an early morning rain, then mixed clouds and a steady west wind for the rest of the day.*

*Two Days after Button Day*

### **Toronto**

*On the Mainland and on the Islands*

Gabriel Dumont was, if anything, just a little beyond dazed. He’d left the mission alone after breakfast and followed the streets toward the tallest buildings, arriving an hour later at Dundas Square. For a while he just sat on a bench and watched people, but overload was setting in rapidly. He’d crossed the prairies and the ocean, but had no experience with this. He’d figured out traffic lights fairly quickly, and now watched people go by, hoping to make sense of the rest of the city.

A man went by carrying two new mops under one arm. Why would anybody need two mops, Gabe wondered. The question at least gave him a break from trying to make sense of it all. From the bits of conversation he picked up, it was pretty obvious that people were people, even if the topics of their conversation had changed over the years. That relieved him. He determined that if he ever saw another person carrying two brooms, he'd ask that person about it. It gave him an objective, a silly one, but one which he realized was better than having no objective at all, other than avoiding people trying to give him religious pamphlets.

A middle-aged woman walked up to him, and said, "You know you'd look a lot better without a beard. You'd look a lot younger."

Gabe shrugged. "God has a beard. Jesus had a beard." The woman scowled and left. A homeless man eyed Gabe, then shook his head and moved on. All this wealth, Gabe thought, and they let people live under bridges. What a place.

That's when he saw the young woman with red hair and bright blue dress again. She saw him, walked over, and stopped in front of him, as she'd done the day before. This time she didn't hesitate. "You," she said, smiling, "need shade and peace."

"Well, I can't deny that." Gabe said. "But I suspect those things are going to cost more money than I have."

"I'll find you a patron. I am Olnya Light. Come with me." She started to turn, but came back when Gabe didn't move off his bench. "Don't you trust me?"

"I went into a Cheyenne village once. I thought I knew what they were about, but I sat and watched long enough to learn how little I knew. They call me Gabriel Dumont."

"You learning anything?" Olnya tapped her foot.

"They had cars before I died, so I'm not surprised they improved them. And I suspect those little things they talk into are telephones. What's that?" He pointed.

"Guy in a Spiderman outfit."

"Religious thing?"

Not really." She waited. "So how much longer do you want to sit here?"

"I guess I'm about done."

"Don't you care where I'm taking you?"

Gabe shrugged. "Being dead once makes one a bit more casual." He followed her as she turned and walked south, dodging among the people gracefully. Gabe looked up occasionally, but mostly watched the people.

Five blocks later they came to a stop inside the lobby of a large building. "What kind of place is this kind of place," Gabe asked, looking around and ignoring the people staring at a long-haired guy in fringed buckskin.

"A hotel. For visitors to stay in."

"We're... I'm supposed to stay here?"

"Nope. We're waiting for someone."

"You must know some rich people, then." Gabe discovered his feet hurting a bit from walking on concrete, and sat down.

A few minutes later a small, dapper man with a high forehead stepped out of a little door to one side. "Stay here," Olnya said, and walked up to the guy. He gave her a slightly pained look, but didn't try to avoid her. "You looking for a dead guy named Dumont?" she asked.

Darkh Blood, ghost hunter, looked around, a bit stunned to meet someone who didn't want to pour her life story out for him. He spotted Gabe sitting in a dark chair. "Got a call last night," he said. "A, uh, friend of mine, Janet, she said her ghost group conjured up Gabriel Dumont. In the flesh." He looked at Gabe again. "They think it's a hoax, but..." He looked back, but the girl was gone. After a moment, he walked over to Gabe, who stood as he approached. They were the same height, but Gabe was much stockier.

"I suppose you have something to tell me," Darkh said, holding out his hand.

"Not a thing." Gabe shook the stranger's hand. He saw the other guy's eyes brighten a bit.

"That's great. That's fine. I'm Darkh Blood, hunter of ghosts."

"Gabriel Dumont, Métis leader once. Are they still looking for me?"

"Not that I know of. Anyway, you're not as famous as Riel."

"Louis. Nutcase who tried to sell western Canada to the Americans. That's how they know him?"

Darkh shook his head. "Hero of the west. Almost a father of confederation."

Gabe looked at the ceiling. "God, I wish I'd got his press agent." He looked around again for Olnya. "Can we find someplace quieter, Mr. Blood?"

"Ah, yes, of course, Mr. Dumont. Would you like to take the ferry to the islands with me?"

"Sounds just fine. I owned a ferry once. I'll follow you."

It took them twenty minutes to get to the ferry. At the ticket booth, Gabe stood waiting. When Darkh looked up, Gabe said, "I have no money, Mr. Blood."

"That's logical, I suppose." Darkh paid for both of them. "How do you eat and where do you sleep?"

"Spent the first night in a ravine with some guy from Newfoundland, which I gather is now part of Canada. Last night at the mission. Food's not great, but it's better than nothing."

They watched the city. "It's amazing," Gabriel Dumont said. "Who would have thought?"

"You, sir, ran a ferry?"

"For a few years Madeline and I ran a ferry across the South Saskatchewan, when it wasn't too frozen or too fast. We had a store on one side. Madeline taught school at Batoche." He looked at the city and sailboats in the bay. "Little ferry, not like this one. Lots of horses."

"I suppose."

"That's the strangest thing about being in this time. I never pictured a world without horses."

"Or buffalo?"

"The buffalo were pretty well gone before I died. The river never stopped, though. Or the prairie wind."

"Why'd you leave it?"

"Had a war to attend."

"You hungry?" Darkh inspected the man next to him. "Ghosts supposed to eat?"

"There were always stories about windigos. Supposed to eat people who didn't watch themselves. Werewolves. But ghosts – real ghosts don't eat. Everybody knows that. I must be in the zombie category."

Gabe watched as another ferry passed them, going back to Toronto. "I don't know what I am or why. You called yourself a hunter of ghosts. I doubt that they're edible, at least from my experience. Sorry I'm not the right kind of ghost, but easier to hunt, I guess. And yes, I could use a good meal."

When they got to the Rectory Café, Olnya was there at a table on the deck, wearing a purple dress with a wide green belt. The two men sat at her table and ignored her. Gabe puzzled over the menu, so Darkh ordered Ontario Bacon Cheddar Burgers for both of them. Olnya ordered an Organic Baby Leaf Salad for herself.

Gabe inspected the burger, and tasted it. He smiled his thanks. Then he nodded at Olnya. "This your woman?" he asked Darkh.

"Never saw her before today."

"Not your wife, then?"

Darkh shook his head. "Divorced for ten years now. You Métis do much divorcing?"

"Not officially."

"My wife made lists for me. I'd lost my job, so I stayed home with the kids while she worked. She used to draw up lists so I wouldn't forget what to do."

"Sounds organized."

"Lots of lists."

"Did you need them?" Dumont inspected the Potato Scallion Bun.

"No doubt about that. Each morning she'd show me the list and go over the items one by one, to encourage me. She'd phone me later to make sure I'd picked up the kids or cleaned the taps."

"Mmm."

"I never got things done. I guess I should have paid closer attention to the lists..." Darkh looked away. "I needed the lists, but they unmanned me."

"I hid Madeline on an island after the battle at Batoche," Gabe said. "We went to Montana because there was a bounty on my head."

Darkh watched him, without saying anything.

"When the winter came, Madeline would read poetry in English, by the fire. She had the cough then. We both knew what that meant." Gabe tilted his head. "You still have the consumption here?"

"A bit. Mostly cured."

"She read some Shelley, and Wordsworth, trying to translate it into Cree and French for me. It didn't make much sense. I sang her Blackfoot songs sometimes. Our last winter."

"Did you see her in the afterlife?"

Gabriel Dumont shrugged. "One moment I was trying to get my old guy lungs to take another breath; the next I was sitting in a chair in Toronto. Sorry I don't know more." Both men looked at Olnya, but she said nothing.

"That's okay. I finally saw a ghost, a real ghost, last night," Darkh Blood said suddenly. The other two looked at him in silence. "Rademuller," the ghost hunter said. "He's supposed to be the most famous ghost on the islands. A German guy, the first keeper of the lighthouse on Gibraltar Point. Moonshiner; lost his head in 1812."

"And you saw him?" Olnya spoke up at last.



"Well," said Darkh, "I was going to contact my friends at the Toronto Parapsychological Society, but instead I ran into some people from the Halton Paranormal Group. I guess someone told them there were ghosts on the island." He looked around. "They had video cameras and K2 meters – the works."

"Then?"

"We got to the lighthouse at 11:30," Darkh said. "He was on his hands and knees, moving around the grass."

"And it was a ghost for sure?" Gabe asked.

"You believe in ghosts?" Darkh squinted at the Métis.

Gabe shrugged. "Never saw one definitely, but there were a lot of guys I'd trust my life with that told me they did."

"Well, this was a ghost. For one thing, you could see through him if you looked hard enough. And it was missing a head."

The others nodded.

"His head," Darkh said, "was a stone's throw away, moving its mouth but making no noise."

"You couldn't get them together?" Olnya asked.

"Tried. None of us figured out how to do it." The Halton people were really starting to freak out, especially when the meter didn't show a thing and they could see the ghost crawling around. One guy stuck his hand into the ghost's leg. It went right through."

There was a long silence, broken when Darkh's phone rang. It was a woman he didn't know, named Laura Singer, calling from Brighton. "I was researching a UFO story," she began.

"I think you want my friend Clyde Books," Darkh said. "He's supposed to be in Brighton. I do ghosts; he does space aliens."

"He is here. He gave me your name."

"And you want to tell me your life story."

There was a pause. "Actually, not today. I wonder if you'd do a favor for me."

"Depends, I suppose." Darkh put his credit card on the bill to pay for Olnya and Gabe too. "Does it involve ghosts or space aliens?"

"International spies kidnapping Canadian spies. Not sure about the others."

"Well, it's going to be quiet here until sunset, so I'll maybe give it a try."

Which is how the three found themselves walking down the small streets of Ward's Island, singing out loud, "The Shadow of Your Smile." Gabe merely raised his eyebrows when Darkh used his cell phone to call up the lyrics and a sample of the tune. It started to rain, lightly.

They got no response on Ward's Island, and no one even looked at them except a sad-looking group on the lawn of a corner cottage. When they'd passed the group, Gabe turned to Darkh. "There's something unhuman about the people we just passed."

Darkh turned for a quick look. "Ghosts? Zombies like you?"

"No. I'm not sure, but they're different. Out in the prairies, we'd wonder if they were windigos pretending to be humans. Isn't that right, Olnya?"

She smiled. "A lot of people nowadays have devils inside them, or a monkey on their backs."

"In every shining city, there are dark corners?"

"Something like that." She laughed and danced on ahead, spinning and walking backwards for a bit in the rain.

By the time they got to Algonquin Island, Darkh was sure the police were bound have been called to deal with three apparent drunks. But they were only halfway down Dakotah Street when Gabe abruptly raised his hand to call a stop. There was a moment of silence, then he pointed to the closest house.

"You heard something?" Darkh hadn't heard a sound.

Gabe nodded.

"Now what?" Darkh asked. Olnya just smiled.

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Cope, tied up in the basement of the house on Dakotah Street, twisted and kicked over another shelf. Patricia opened the basement door of her CIA safe house and looked to see if he wanted to use the bucket again. It didn't look liked that was his problem, so she just scowled at him, then closed the door as someone began banging on the front door of the house.

Hearing another noise, Cope looked up as a boot came through a basement window, and a bearded man in a buckskin jacket slid, feet-first, into the room.

Patricia was still trying to make sense of what the dapper man with the smiling woman on her step were trying to tell her about earthquakes and squid, when she heard a noise in the kitchen. She looked around as her former hostage, accompanied by a stranger in a cowboy hat, pushed past her.

"Ah," Patricia said, "Hostage rescue!" She finally smiled. "About freakin' time. Have a good day." She closed the door, and went back into her house, still trying to figure out who'd authorized the whole hostage thing in the first place. And what to do next.

Cope and his three rescuers, quite wet from a cold autumn rain, took the next ferry back to the mainland and a taxi back to Darkh's hotel. Somewhere in the lobby, Olnya vanished. In Darkh's hotel room, Cope called Ottawa. He probably should have called Jag, too, and Paula. But he didn't.

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## **Popham Bay**

### *High Bluff Island*

#### *Two Days after Button Day*

The day came to the Daniels with a few gusts of wind and scattering of rain that rattled on the upturned aluminum boat. The two hgkpphtitw (in their shivering hosts) had spent the night under the boat, well back in the little grove of trees and the hull covered with brush. They'd turned the metabolism of their hosts bodies down as far as they dared, and pumped out few shots of serotonin that left both humans with silly grins.

"How was I to know you were celebrating interstellar stupidity day?" Jack asked. He stared out across the bay towards the cottage they'd abandoned the evening before.

"You're the one that had it last, you know," Jim said. His host kept on smiling, his eyes focused on the brush ahead. Two of the herd of small High Bluff Island deer poked their noses through the waving brush, then turned and ran.

"Should we go back and get it?"

"We have a choice? What are we going to tell the others when they get here?"

"We don't need it. Humans might never discover the secret. Especially if we set them back by changing the climate." Jack obviously wasn't going to volunteer.

"They're bound to get past quantum sooner or later."

"That doesn't mean they'll discover the Horf – lots of civilizations never do."

"All it takes is one kid fiddling around with a Passive Thorium Enabler in the area and he'll zero in on the rock. After that...." Jim had always been pessimistic.

"We can be back here before that happens."

"In a cage, if anyone finds out. Then it's game over ten minutes after recovery."

"I suppose. But how? Those two guys spooked me."

"We can wait till this evening, I guess. Humans aren't likely to do anything with it. It looks like a rock to them. As long as they don't throw it away there shouldn't be a problem finding it."

"Assuming our quick exit didn't make anybody suspicious."

"Why would anybody be suspicious? What's the chance that Alien Hunters International is on to us?"

There was a long silence as the squall passed. They waited out the day, eating out of the cans of food they'd brought.

The Daniels couldn't see the near shore of the park, where Clyde Books was standing by the water's edge watching High Bluff Island with binoculars. Eventually, the alien hunter drove into Frankford and borrowed a squareback canoe and a small motor from a cousin. He never mentioned that he planned to take it onto Lake Ontario.

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## **Brighton**

*Jag's Place, on a hill.*

*Two Days after Button Day*

"I'm worried about Tom," Laura said, somewhere about midnight.

"I wonder if I'm still in love with Tammy," Jag said, "or if I'm simply trying to get my life back."

"Your old life? Maybe it's gone. And we should have heard from Cope by now, shouldn't we? Tom may be sleeping in the woods for all I know, but Cope said he'd tell you what he found, and how long would that take?" Laura rolled out of the bed and got a drink of water.

"If your mate dies," Jag said, "there are bittersweet memories. I talked to the widows of guys that got killed in the war. It's like that."

Laura was waking up a bit, although it was way past her bedtime. "But if your mate leaves you? I know about that."

"All the memories are bitter. There's no sweet left. a part of your life just disappears. Just a big pit of pain. Memories of the bad times are better than memories of the good times. The world's upside down."

"Been there, done that, bought the T-shirt. I know Tom won't answer his phone, but can't you phone Cope?" Laura stared at the ceiling.

"What if he's keeping hidden somewhere? Knew a guy in Afghanistan who got it when his cell phone went off while he was sneaking up on the bad guys. Served him right; he shouldn't have had it with him. It's the betrayal. I can see her point but I can't. In war you stand with your buddy and worry about right and wrong after the war's over."

"She didn't stand with you. But if you take her back, if she wants you to take her back, you get all those years back. Sound about right?"

There was a long pause. Jag got up and went to the bathroom, then came back. "Why are you worried about Tom? Just how bonkers will he get without his medication?"

"He gets paranoid. Trusts no-one. Thinks the government's out to get him." Laura shook her head. "Don't know how he'll deal with this?"

"This?"

"Secret agents out in the dark with him." Laura laughed. "He's paranoid, but maybe this time he's right. Imagine that?"

"I've talked to people like that." Jag shook his head. "Next thing you know he'll decide his neighbours are all space aliens."

Laura seemed for a moment like she was about to say something.

"You want me to go out there now?" Jag asked.

"No sense in that. Wait till morning. Tom may be crazy, but he's not stupid when he's off his pills." She thought a minute, then wrote on a piece of paper, "In the woods, the moonlight is cold and every moonshadow is full of wolves."

After he read it, she wrote more. "Have the September winds and shortening days and solitary mornings got you contemplating life, and mortality and the closing of doors?"

He read it, then held up a finger for a moment's writing on his own. He handed her a note with the following: "All that lost its abstraction, and with that, its fascination. I am an old guy waiting in a suit of fallen leaves; no lion, just a chipmunk, watching."

She poured a small glass of white wine for each of them. saying nothing, for a moment. which was exactly the right thing to do.

"Perhaps," he said, "more than one poet per room should be forbidden by law."

She nodded. "There's much to be said for that. I read Exile from the Shadow, you know.

He squinted at her. "Where would you get a copy of that? There were only a dozen copies printed."

"A woman has her ways."

He suspected Josie was involved. "I read The Minor Odyssey, he said."

"Figured that. We'll go look for lost guys in the morning."

"Sounds like the place is full of secret agents and crazy people. I'm more used to that than you are. I'll scout the area, then report back."

She thought about it. "Okay."

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But Jag didn't get out to check on Cope and Tom in the morning. He had been using some of his vacation time, but one of the other cops had called in sick, and there was no way of getting around that. He told Laura he'd be back by noon. "Those two should be okay," he said. "Both of them are careful and used to watching their backs." He put on his hat. "I'm more worried about the dogs," he lied. "At noon we'll go out there, talk to them, and maybe drive around looking for UFOs for your book." He waved goodbye as he drove out.

Laura left him a note on the table. At first she wrote, "I didn't tell you I was researching UFOs for a book – I just told you I was looking for treasure on the island.." Then she tore that one up, and wrote, "Taking a taxi to get my car. See you later."

She walked downtown and phoned for a taxi to take her to the cottage she'd rented.

Laura had the taxi go past the cottage twice before letting her out a bit down the road. She walked quietly along the edge of the road until she was at the Daniels' cottage. There was no car in either driveway except her Jeep. She saw the dogs, tied to trees, about the time they saw her. Potto started to bark, but there was no other movement there. She pulled open the door to the Daniels cottage and walked carefully through it, pausing only to look at the blood stain on the floor.

Cautiously, she walked to her own rental cottage. The door was open, and she jumped when she saw the stuffed dummy Cope had used. There were signs someone had been in there, and a bag of dog food on the floor, but no one else there. She took bowls of food and water out for the dogs.

Again, she walked out towards the road. "Tom!" she shouted. "It's Laura!"

He stepped out from behind a swamp cedar on the other side of the road. "Hi," he said.

"Thank God. I thought you were dead. There's blood in the other cottage."

"A deer." Tom tilted his head to make sure there was no one hiding behind her. "They knocked out a deer with one of their strange guns, then cut it up alive."

"Have you seen Cope? He came with the dogs."

Tom shook his head. "I talked to him. They stuffed him into the trunk of their car and took off."

"Let's get out of here."

For a moment he hesitated, his head down. Then he said, "Okay. You fed the dogs and gave them water which I was going to do, so I'll go with you."

Then she locked the cottage, got into her car with Tom, and drove away.

Sammy and Lester arrived moments later.

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## **Brighton**

*Jag's Place, on a hill.*

*Two Days after Button Day*

Jag got home just after noon with a pizza in hand, only to discover Laura wasn't there. He called Laura's number and it rang several times before it was answered.

"Sorry," Laura said. "I had to find a place to pull off the road."

"Laura. Where are you?"

"Got my car. Got Tom here. The dogs are tied outside the cottage. Nobody else there. Some blood on the floor of the Daniels' cottage; Tom says it's from a deer they killed. No sign of Cope. Tom says they put him into the trunk of the car and drove off."

There was a silence. "They put Cope into the trunk? Are you coming back here? Jag asked."

"Yeah. Cope. Trunk. How'd you know I was researching a UFO book for *Passion Among the Cacti* Press and not hunting for treasure?"

A longer pause. "Why'd you say you were?"

"Jesus Christ," Laura said. "Maybe it's no wonder we're both single." She broke the connection.

## **Brighton**

*Along Popham Bay*

*Two Days after Button Day*

There was blood on the floor of the cabin, by the table, Jag noted. Maybe Tom was right and it was deer blood. Maybe Tom was crazy. Maybe all blood looked the same and there had been more than one animal killed.

The blood at least, wasn't from Cory or Potto. Jag had parked his car a bit down the road, in the laneway of someone he knew was working in Belleville, and had come through the woods. Laura's cabin had been empty, and there was no evidence of activity at the Daniels' cottage, which was just as well, since Cory had greeted him rather noisily.

He put the dogs inside Laura's cottage, with a pan full of water and watched them drink. Then he got food from the fridge and left it for the dogs. He closed the door behind them, so he could move around the yard without anybody being alerted. In retrospect, that was a mistake, since the dogs might have warned Jag of others coming near the cottages.

He'd gone over to the Daniels' place, then, through the aspen trees. The door had been unlocked, and he went inside, moving slowly and watching for traps.

Outside, a sudden wind brought a rattle of rain on the roof and set the trees to banging against each other and the waves to pounding on the pebble beach. The sky got very dark.

Jag looked around more carefully then looked into the fridge. Several pieces of meat were wrapped in newspaper. Unless these guys were cannibals, the meat was likely from a deer. Deer weren't hard to get around the area, but it would be useful to hold these guys for poaching, if nothing else.

Jag searched the rest of the cottage quickly, but found nothing. At the door, Jag listened. Everything seemed peaceful, but there was still the matter of Cope missing. He called the number Cope had left with him, and gave Cope's identifier to the sexless voice that answered. The voice said they'd call back.

For some reason, the whole process landed onto his shoulders like a house. Maybe it was the crap he'd taken in Afghanistan. Maybe it was the SIU hearings after the Toronto incident. Maybe it was Tammy's call. Maybe it was all of it. He'd taken a job that was on a comprehensible scale in Brighton. The OPP office had heroes and assholes and the usual process stupidity. But he could live with that. He had, he realized, simply lost his ability to put up with stupid bureaucracies with incomprehensible motives. He came within an ace of stomping on his phone and deciding to live on the four dollars a year his poetry earned. That's when the phone rang.

Why the hell, he thought, as he contemplated giving answers, would anybody want an umbilical to the world especially through something the size and shape of a flattened turd? Call me Retroman, he thought, or just call me a person who demands that the world and its people be more than they actually were. He said hello.

"Your voice doesn't match that of the person giving the password," a woman giving her name as Ethyl said, just before she started asking questions, interrupted only by the sound of a helicopter passing overhead, leaving a silence behind.

Jag let a long silence get longer then told the woman that he was a friend of Cope's, and had been told to call that number by Cope if and when the aforementioned Oscar Copeman disappeared for some reason.

Can I have your name?" Ethyl asked.

"Only if you marry me," Jag answered. "And then you'd only want the last part; 'Jag' is no name for a woman. And we'd really have to date a couple of times, you know."

There was a long pause. "Are you going to give me your name?"

"Not today; I really need it. But I'd be willing to tell you what it is." He thought about waiting till she answered, but decided against it. "Jag Stone," he said. "Is this being taped?"

"If it wasn't being taped, I might have a few comments about you and your type. Where are you now?"

Jag explained the situation as best he could.

"Okay." A pause. "We've called up your file. Glad to have you there. If you look out into the bay, you'll see a boat this side of the island." Jag looked out the big window facing the water.

"I see it. Is it one of ours?"

"No. It's from across the lake. We don't know why they're here. I'll call you if there's anything else we want you to do."

They'll call me, Jag thought. Thanks, lady; thanks, government, but I don't work for you any more. Send in somebody who does. He edged out the door. The rain had stopped and a sliver of sunlight fell on the trees between the cottages. Odd, he thought, the way those three trees are all bent the same way. He began a tour of the area. Cautiously, he checked out the wood shed by the Daniels' place. Lots of wood; one sharp axe. No bloodstains on the axe.

He decided to check the outhouse, since Cope had mentioned it. When he opened the door, there was a man inside.

"Hi," the guy said. He was tall, blond, and wore a Bob Marley T-shirt under a fringed buckskin jacket.

"Shaman Shaman" Jag said.

"Well," said Shaman, "I'm a man trying to keep dry."

"Wouldn't the cabin have been better? Or the woodshed?"

Shaman got up. "The woodshed's too open, and the cabin's got blood on the floor and I can feel strange things hanging around." He shook his dreadlocks. "I followed the shore looking for chaos, and ended up here."

"Wouldn't you be better off at home with Gina?"

"Oh, mon, that woman's where my chaos begins and ends."

"I'm not going to stand here all day, Shaman" Jag said, as wind shook a volley of water from the trees.

"I guess if we're together, the spirits won't get us." Shaman acknowledged. He stepped outside, closed his eyes, and said, "Wrong on that one. There's something not safe around here." He opened his eyes, said, "Be careful," and walked away into the swamp cedar.

Jag just watched him go, then stepped into the outhouse. After a look around, he reached into the toilet seat and felt around under it. He came up with some spider webs, one with an nasty-looking spider on it, and a small piece of paper. "Captured!" the note read, in shaky handwriting. "Toronto Islands maybe." It was signed, "OC."

With no sign of Cope or the SEALs, Jag decided to do one more circuit of the lots before going back to town. He was just coming around the corner of the Daniels' cottage when someone stuck a cold metal object against his ear and said, "Stop right there, bucko." Jag assumed the object was a gun of some sort, so he stopped right there. Whoever held the weapon had come eerily quietly across the forest floor, hiding himself in clear morning light.

A duck called, out on the bay, and the late summer leaves waggled their faded greens above his head. "I've made my peace with God," Jag said, starting to turn.

"He hasn't made peace with you, I hear," the voice said, quietly, with a bit of a huskiness to it.

Jag continued his turn. The man Cope had identified to Jag as Lester Miller was dressed in "summer-forest" camouflage with half his face covered. He now stood maybe ten feet away, holding a short paintball gun at waist level. He'd managed to back away from Jag as quietly as he'd come. A bluejay started yakking noisily in a tree overhead. "Let's go into the cabin," Lester said. "I don't want to have to kill you," he added when Jag didn't move.

"They'd give you a reprimand," Jag noted, "and maybe a demotion. You're in Canada, you know." He had no doubt the paintball gun wasn't using standard paint ammunition.

"They'd give you a pine box," Lester observed. "I'd come out ahead." He waited. "I'd hate to have to carry you moaning into the cabin." The muzzle of the gun wavered towards the cabin and back towards Jag's crotch.

"Why didn't you say so? Now you're being logical." Jag turned and walked to Laura's cabin, not looking back. He still couldn't hear a thing behind him.

The back door was still unlocked; so Jag just walked in. Sammy, a younger and taller man with longer blond hair sat at the table, sipping from a coffee mug. A cigarette burned in a saucer beside him. He wore jeans and a colorful Hawaiian shirt. And green shoes.

"Peckerhead," Jag noted. "Welcome to someone else's humble home."

Sammy didn't smile. "Flattery will get you nowhere. Have a seat. Can I get you some coffee?"

"That instant stuff you're drinking?"

Sammy took a drag on the cigarette, blew out a cloud of smoke that filled the room. He put a plastic Melitta filter on a plain white cup, then added boiling water from the kettle as Jag sat down.

"You shouldn't leave the other guy out...." Jag stopped when he noted that Lester was now inside the cabin.

"Spooky, isn't he?" Sammy put a third cup on the table, and added more hot water to the filter. There was relative silence, except for the duck on the lake, as coffee was served to all three men. Jag sampled his, closed his eyes a moment, and said, "What the fuck do you want with a local cop?"

Lester turned his chair so he could put his long legs onto the bed next to the other guy. "We need your help on a small matter." There was a pause. "We want you to ignore us for a week. Just pretend we're not here."



“Why would I want to?”

“My superiors asked that question and I couldn’t give them an answer. I said there’s nothing they could offer you or threaten you with that would get your cooperation.”

“And?”

“They’re in a hurry and they’re a bit agitated right now. I was authorized to do whatever it took, within reason.”

“Within reason?”

“They don’t mind my torturing you to death or slaughtering your friends if it comes to that, but there’s an upper limit on the money they’ll offer.”

“Then they’re not agitated enough.”

“They are, but the accounting department scares the shit out of four-star generals.”

Jag sighed. “I’m a poet.”

“And a cop. And probably still an intelligence agent.” Lester chuckled, then reached into a shopping bag and brought out a box of chocolate donuts. Looking around, he found a chipped blue plate and slid the donuts onto it.

“Temptations of the devil,” Jag noted. “The Company’s behind you on this?” He took a donut; he was a cop now, after all.

“Can’t comment on that,” Lester said. Sammy got up, obviously having little patience for talk.

“All of the Company?” Jag asked. He knew intelligence services ground on with bureaucrats and spies and politicians forming wheels within wheels and plans and plots within plans and plots, everybody lying in one way or another and covering his or her ass by not quite agreeing with anything, not quite ruling anything out, and trying to sort of belong to as many in-groups at the same time as could be managed without going insane. It was a wonder anything got done, and it was no wonder any agent was never sure whether he was working for the good of his country, engaged in activities to embarrass some official or somehow recruited by a mole to work against his own side.

Lester sighed, and shook his head. “I fuckin’ hope so. I’ve heard this is sanctioned at the very top. But unless the Big Man kisses my cheek personally, I can’t be sure.” He looked at Jag directly. “It looks legit because of the money they’re offering you. They don’t spend money like that without it going up the chain for authorization.”

“How much money will we end up agreeing on?” Jag had the depressing feeling it wasn’t going to matter if he objected.

“Fifty thousand. American.”

That was big money. The services would spend big if they had to, but usually not unless they had to.” Make it a hundred and fifty thousand, and in a secure account.”

“I’ll have to authorize that.”

“Now what did you say do I have to do for that?”

“Leave us alone for a week.” Lester held out his hands. “We don’t plan to rob a bank or anything; we’re just looking around.”

“What about Cope?”

“We’ll return him, safe and sound.”

Jag nodded, as if he was thinking about it. But he knew that even if he agreed to the bribe, he'd probably never see the money. If they didn't pay him, if they stalled for the week then took off, who could he complain to? And he didn't trust them to return Cope; the CSIS agent could end up being a problem for the Americans. All that for a week's thoughtful negligence on Jag's part.

There was the sound of a couple of cars coming along the dirt road, they were moving slowly from the sound and someone was shouting from one car to another. Lester took a look out the window, and Jag bolted for the door. He hit the barbecue with one hip as he crossed the deck, took the steps in one jump and raced for the driveway. The younger guy beat him to it, popping a shot that caught Jag in the forehead. It stung, and a few seconds later his vision disappeared. He kept running, figuring that as long as he was seen by someone there was a chance of that someone phoning the police. When he felt branches hitting his face, he realized he must have crossed the road into the forest on the other side. He hit a tree, bounced backwards, and went down and the lights went out.

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When he came to, there was the taste of mud in Jag's mouth. It felt like a mixture of slime and grit, with the moldy taste of long decomposed plants and the sharper taste of fresh plant material. He was contemplating this when something moved on his lip. He tried to spit it out, but it crawled towards his right nostril.

He moved his lips and more of the mixture sloshed into his mouth and settled in his cheek. He coughed a bit of it back out into the world again. His throat hurt like he'd recently swallowed a pine cone, however unlikely that seemed.

It appeared that he was lying in mud. A brilliant conclusion, just brilliant.

He was trying to figure out why he was lying in mud when it occurred to him that his nose must be higher than the mud surface or he'd be dead. Mud goes with water. Water goes with drowning.

He could remember running. Obviously he'd been running through some woods. That explained something, at least.

But not the darkness. It was either a) the blackest night he'd known, or b) he was in a mine. Or c) he couldn't see. He liked the first two options best.

He listened. There was the sound of wind in the reeds, and waves breaking somewhere. Scratch option B.

Nearby, startlingly loud, a bird called out "Sweet sweet Canada Canada Canada." That ruled out option A. Them suckers didn't do anything at night but sleep. He'd have preferred the sound of an owl or something.

He moved his head. It hurt like someone had filled it with a couple of broken guitars and mayonnaise and then stepped on it a couple of times. His right ear came free of the mud with a popping sound and the right side of his face suddenly went from cool to cold. It was definitely wet mud.

There was a line of chill across his back just above his waist. His guess was that he'd just become part of some swamp, with the lower half of his body still under water. The cold line was where the water sloshed up.

He couldn't feel his arms and legs. He didn't like that. They should hurt, or something.

More of him felt cold.

Then he remembered running across a road, but whether the memory was recent or out of some summer past he couldn't tell. His neck ached and he really, really wanted to lay his head back into the soft mud. Even with the taste of the mud and the millions of little creatures that called it home; they probably wouldn't be any worse the second time.

Instead he gave his body an order to get up and out of there.

His body got up and crawled forward a foot or two. His hands felt dry rock and his legs found some sort of bottom in the mud.

He gave his body the same order and his eyes the order to see. He got wish number one but no dice on the second. He felt his legs scramble onto the rock, then the right side of his face and forehead burst into a half-dozen points of pain.

He thought for a moment he'd run into a bee's nest and actually considered returning to the water like a salamander that had changed its mind about evolution. But when he jerked his head back, the pain disappeared. He reached forward with his hand and grabbed onto some dead twigs, none of them bigger than a pencil, but most of them just as sharp.

Waving his hand around he found a material softer and cooler. He pulled some off, felt the soft flat needles, and brought them to his face. The sharp odor confirmed what his fingers told me; this was a white cedar. It was a good sign; cedars like to be near water, but not actually in it. A better sign was that he could sense a bit of light in the darkness. His eyes stung, but when he rubbed them with the back of a thumb (after cleaning the thumb on a piece of his shirt) he could see even more.

He reached upward and grabbed some more cedar, then tried to pull himself up. It didn't work; the cedar branches were too flexible and he'd just got onto his knees when a wave of pain and dizziness swept over him and he more or less collapsed on the spot.

His stomach knotted suddenly and heaved. The sharp, sharp smell and taste of vomit filled his mouth and nostrils and left him coughing it out.

When the spasms were done, he wiped his mouth with one hand then pushed himself away. If he was going to crawl, he had better places than in his own vomit.

He inched forward, his knees complaining against wood and rock, until he could touch the cedar again. Carefully, holding the dead lower branches up as he came to them, he slid under the tree. A few feet in he was off the worst of the damp spot, and lying on a carpet of soft and dry cedar mulch casually mixed with small fallen branches. The branches of a cedar are particularly nasty, but eventually he cleared enough to be able to lie on his back without wincing.

"White-throated something or other," he thought, as "Sweet sweet Canada Canada Canada" started up again, just over his head. The world smelled of cedar and warmth, and of the mud his clothes had been treated to. He shivered a bit as his clothes picked up a faint wind but the cedar mulch beside him was warm on his fingertips, so he figured he'd dry sooner or later. He could hear birds further away, and the faint sound of waves. His mouth still tasted of vomit and his throat burned. He thought about crawling back to the water for a drink, but it seemed such a long way in the darkness.

Sometime about there the blackness expanded, and he passed out again for a moment.

Moments later, he woke up cold, shivering, but almost at once aware of his situation. His head still hurt. He felt through his hair and found a crust that was probably dried blood near the front. Sharp needles

walked around his skull when he moved it, so he stopped. But he could make out some branches against a blue sky.

A crow yelled and there was a noise not far away that might have been a rabbit sharing his tree. But there didn't seem to be anything else to do, so he curled up, removed a few more sharp branches, and closed his eyes again.

He woke up sore, but his head hurt a bit less. It was still black in his universe, but it was warm and that crow was back again, so he assumed it was daylight outside the tree. He felt a tickle on his forehead. It moved down over an eyebrow and he brushed it away. A spider, probably.

He was suddenly aware that was lying on some very uncomfortable things. Sticks poked into him and a pointed rock shoved against a rib. And, now that he'd had a spider experience, he could feel various bugs crawling up his pantlegs and under his shirt. All imaginary, most likely, but how is a half-blind man to know?

He tried to stand, but ran into tree branches just above his head, so he crawled backward. When he was in open air again, he stood up and shook his clothes. It still felt like there were insects all over him, but at least he didn't get as dizzy and didn't fall down. A few sowbugs crawling around his underwear seemed like a good trade-off until he got to thinking about it too much and some bird called, "Bugs bugs in your pants in your pants in your pants." So he dropped his pants and shook out his underwear without actually taking them off. He almost toppled but that's normal when you can't see.

With his pants up and the insect population under his clothes down significantly, he listened. There was a light breeze but no feeling of sun on his face, no matter which way he turned, so he figured it must be overcast. There were bird sounds, but no sounds that people make, not even the far-off buzz of a motor. He could see light well now, but the light hurt him and he couldn't make out details.

It didn't look good for Jagger Stone.

He tasted the wind on his tongue. He gave himself a quick, sharp slap on the side of the head to see if it might loosen some optic blockage. When he got off the ground again, dizzy and nauseous, he resolved not to do that again.

Abruptly there was the crack of a branch breaking. It was a sound he recognized immediately, and it was close behind him. He closed his mouth and felt the sudden bitter, sharp taste of blood.

"Jag!" a voice said. "By God you're a difficult motherfucker, aren't you. Looks like I'm going have to do something about you."

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"Now what," Sammy asked Lester. "Figure this one out; you're supposed to be the brains of this outfit."

"Since when? Did you know those chocolate donuts you're hooked on look like assholes? I must get a shrink to look into that for you."

"Since you're older than I am, that's when. We going to release this one into the wild or put him into the lake?" Sammy reached for the donut bag.

"I guess taking him to Toronto's out of the question."

"That Patricia chick would kill us if we brought another one in."

"It's only for a week," Lester said.

"Then she'd only kill us for a week."

"A comforting thought." Lester paused. "I sure didn't figure they'd have another guy here so soon. Sure as hell can't go back to those cottages for a while, can we?"

"You can. I'll just stay away before the Canadian marines show up."

"Canadians don't have marines."

"One of their few good ideas." Sammy looked back, as though he could see into the trunk. An old car passed the cottage. "Hope you got him tied better than the last one."

"Should be. I did it myself this time." The car backed down the driveway towards the road, Lester stopped driving with his arm leaning out the window, looking up the road while Sammy was looking down the road. Neither saw the figure that sprinted from behind the cottage.

Lester took the end of a steel bar right in the side of his head, and Sammy was barely out of the car when the same bar hit him across the back of the neck, knocking him to the ground. Stunned but still mobile, Sammy decided to play dead for the moment. He didn't hear a noise from Lester, so he stayed down, with his eyes closed.

Shaman set the bar down when he was sure neither of the SEALs were moving, and reached into the car to release the trunk, watching Lester all the while. Then he felt Lester's ankle and removed a large knife from an ankle holster. Shaman used the knife to cut various items wrapped around Jag.

"Shaman?" Jag asked, still dizzy and a bit unfocused.

"Damn right." Shaman paused. "Now what do we do?"

Jag checked the SEALs. "Still alive," he said. "But they'll need a hospital, I imagine. Leave them. We can call it in when we're out of the area."

Ten minutes later they were in Jag's SUV, heading for Brighton. Shaman used a phone booth to place an anonymous call to the police, but when the police got to the cottage, the blue Cobalt was gone and there was no sign of the SEALs. By the time someone checked the marina, *Serenity* was gone, too, a dot way out on the lake. Jag tried to get someone from the coast guard or the air force to chase the boat, but he couldn't convince anyone to do it without a committee recommendation and paperwork in triplicate.

That's when Cope called.

"Where are you, for Christ's sake?" Jag had to pull the car over along the street. Shaman stepped out and waved goodbye.

"Loose from the jaws of the enemy and free for the moment." Cope sounded delighted. "I'm in Toronto, in a rental car, heading back your way."

"It'll be good to see you."

"If and when I get there. I'm caught in a traffic jam at the moment."

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## **Toronto**

### *On the Islands*

#### *Two days after Button Day*

"A fair wind," Damon Conch said, "and a following sea."

John Height sighed with relief, happy to hear a quote that wasn't from Jimmy Buffet, although Damon had been using more Tom Lewis lines lately. He watched the edges of Western Gap slide by as

*Malifactor* made the passage into Toronto harbor. To his left, he saw the towers of Toronto; to his right seagulls circled the Billy Bishop Airport. It was like coming through the best possible gate to the city. "Time to take the sails down and start the engine?" he asked, watching a ferry cross the harbour ahead of him.

Damon looked around. "I just want to live happily ever after, every now and then." He looked happy at the moment, watching a Dash-7 take off.

John took that as a "no," and, from the number of sailboats in the harbor, there didn't appear to be any problems ahead. He got out the chart and plotted a course across the bay to RCYC Island. "This place could be a little posh for us," he noted.

Damon laughed. "You know Death will get you in the end, but if you are smart and have a sense of humor, you can thumb your nose at it for awhile." He looked again at the skyline. "Al said we'd have a berth there, and as long as there's a space, we'll take advantage of it. Sailors ashore in Toronto; sounds like a plan to me."

After dodging the island ferry, they turned on the diesel and chugged gently towards the island. John got out the hand-drawn sketch and, after a bit of dithering around, they got *Malifactor* alongside to the correct berth. A middle-aged woman with the RCYC logo and a blond ponytail watched them tie up. "Here's the big moment," John whispered. "Get out the paperwork." The Port Burwell Yacht Club didn't have a "Privilege of Anchorage" reciprocal agreement with the Royal Canadian Yacht Club. Actually, it had a reciprocal agreement only with the Port Dover Yacht Club, and that was strictly because of a common and unwritten drinking and carousing agreement there.

"Welcome...." the woman began. Damon handed her a bunch of papers. She read them. "Ah," she said, then smiled. "Well, as long as the Peterson boat's still at the bottom of the Bay of Quinte, he's not going to need this spot, and we do owe Al a favor. So, welcome to the RCYC." She held out a hand. "I'm Lina."

Both men shook the hand. "About the docking fee..." Damon started.

"I am so freakin' glad to see a gaff-rigged boat," Lina said, that I'm going to skip the docking fee, especially since you're only here for one night." She scowled at them. "No free beer, though."

"Darn," John said.

She squinted at the *Malifactor*. "An odd boat, if you don't mind me saying so. Almost historical. What's the story?"

Damon started to say something, but John interrupted. "You don't want to get him started, unless you have all day. Basic fact is, Damon here badly abused his mast, and was offered the use of this rig if he'd use it in a historical re-enactment in the Thousand Islands next weekend. It looks historical enough to pass, with a few additions we plan to make when we get there."

Lina nodded. "If you've got a cannon on board, try not to fire it at anything but the government buildings."

"We've got a little cannon on board, a three-pounder, and some powder, but we're a little short on balls at the moment."

Lina shook her head. "You sail this thing into the RCYC, you've got all the balls you need. You can buy me a beer if I see you after five in the clubhouse." She waved and went on to other business.

Damon looked around at the other yachts and adjusted his captain's hat. "That turned out well. What now?"

"I'm going to take the ferry into town. Want to come?"

Damon shook his head. "I might do that later, but right now I want to just walk around the islands here. I've seen the city enough."

"Suit yourself."

Which is how Damon found himself strolling along the narrow streets of Ward's Island, warming to the little leased houses that lived from moment to moment with the threat of extinction, should Toronto decide it needed the land to expand the parkland.

At a place with a little sign "Hatches' Corner Cottage," he came across nine people on the lawn of a house, looking like their world had come to an end. "Nice afternoon," he said, when a couple eyed him.

One tall fellow said, obviously noticing Damon's captain's hat, "Got a sailboat we can borrow?" in a rather sarcastic voice.

"Anything for a price, if you're going my way." Damon noticed that conversation came to an end right there. "But I'm going east along the lakeshore, and I'm not sure all of you could fit onto my boat anyway," he added with a laugh.

"Popham Bay, near Presqu'ile point," a woman said.

"Grew up near there. I go right by it. Leaving tomorrow morning." Damon was ready to go; this was starting to get silly. "But, as I said, my boat's a bit small for that sort of thing. You might be better to rent a car and drive to Brighton."

There were looks around. One wrinkled fellow got out of a lawn chair and limped up to Damon. He fiddled in his jacket a couple of moments, and came out with a letter-sized envelope. He stared Damon in the face, and said, "Here are a couple of diamonds. That should pay for the trip. Unless you're too committed to some damn schedule or other."

Damon looked totally flustered. "My voyage was never a well-conceived plan, nor will it ever be. I have made it up as I went along."

"Pardon?"

"I... Well, my schedule's flexible, I guess." Damon looked around to see eight pair of eyes looking at him.

"Take this envelope to Tony's Jewelry on King. Just west of Bay. Ask for Tony. Tell him Kristof sent you. Go. If you change your mind, come back and give the money to me. If there's a bit of pirate in you, then now's your chance."

"Oh, I'm a pirate, just two hundred years too late." There was silence, and Damon backed off, then walked to the ferry terminal.

It was almost an hour later, in the heart of Toronto, that Damon managed to get a clerk to get Tony himself to the jewelry store counter. "Kristof sent me," Damon managed, before Tony could say anything. Damon took out the envelope and pushed it towards Tony.

"Kristof? He sent you instead of coming himself?"

"Actually, he did. He told me to ask for you."

"And you just did it because he said to?"

"If you decide to run the ball, just count on fumbling and getting the shit knocked out of you a lot, but never forget how much fun it is just to be able to run the ball!"

"Pardon?"

Damon shrugged. You're going to have to tell me what to do now, because I haven't got a clue."

Tony opened the envelope and spent five minutes examining the two little stones that rolled out. To Damon they could have been quartz or glass, or any of a number of stones he collected as a kid.

"Cash or cheque?" Tony asked.

"Whichever is better for you."

"We'll go with cash." Tony took the stones into the back room and came back two minutes later with a larger brown envelope. He took a pile of bills from the envelope and counted them in front of Damon.

"Acceptable?" Tony asked.

"Absolutely," Damon croaked, wishing there was some way he could chain the envelope to his private parts.

Three hours later the *Malifactor* sailed out of Toronto Harbour, through the Eastern Gap, around Tommy Thomson Park, and into a light wind. Nine people, most of whom had never been on a sailboat before, broke into Damon's stash of bottled water and Gravol, and watched the shore go by in the late-afternoon sunlight.

"I bet you're figuring you've got yourself into something totally illegal," Kristof said, when Damon handed him a beer.

Damon hesitated. "I'd prefer you assure me that I won't end up in Millhaven, making license plates, but that's probably too much to ask."

"But you did it anyway. It can't just be greed."

"One of the inescapable encumbrances of leading an interesting life is that there have to be moments when you almost lose everything you own. The most likely scenario is you've got a boat waiting in Popham Bay to smuggle you into the States. This not the usual thing I do. Just saying."

Kristoff thought a bit. "That makes sense, but the truth is stranger than that."

"When will I get to know what this is all about?"

"When we get to Popham Bay, I'll tell you everything."

"Not a dangerous mission?"

"Can't see how it can be." Kristof said.

"I'd rather die while I'm living because I can't live while I'm dead. "

They sailed east through the evening, and into the night with a fine following wind.

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Back at the RCYC, a bewildered John Height had a conversation with Lina, over a burger and beer at the yacht club. "Did he say anything? Like where's he'd going, or why?"

"Sort of."

"What did he say?"

"He said..." She looked up and had a sip of beer first, "The right combination of guilt and machismo has sent many a fool out into the jungle when he should have stayed home." She looked at John.

"Something like that."



A sigh. "You got it right. Another Jimmy Buffet quote. I don't think it will help. Now what do I do?"  
"Well...."

"Do I go home? Do I try to get to Kingston and meet him there." John frowned. "Maybe pick up a baseball bat on the way." He ate another bite of what was supposed to be a "Cheeseburger in Paradise," according to the menu. "On the other hand, I'll miss a couple of days of his Buffet quotes."

"You could ask if he left you any written messages."

John stopped eating, and rotated his head to the side a bit. "Did he?"

Lina smiled and brought out a folded brown envelope from her purse. She passed it over to him.

John removed the elastic and took out three things. The first was a check for one thousand dollars. The second was an ownership certificate for a one-year-old van, signed to him from one Katherine Szczedziwoj. The third was a note, in Damon's handwriting: "Sorry I had to leave so suddenly. Got some people to deliver. Meet me in Brighton at the Marina in Gosport. You own this van; now. It's parked at a lot near the ferry dock. If I couldn't laugh I just would go insane. If we couldn't laugh we just would go insane. If we weren't all crazy we would go insane. Damon."

John took his time looking it over. "He's crazy."

"Not as crazy as the nine people he took on that boat, I imagine. They didn't look like sailors."

"Can I buy you anything more?" John asked.

"Not to worry. Damon already tipped me enough to cover a lot of meals." She smiled. "You might want to catch the ferry before it gets dark."

"Yeah. That would be a good idea."

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## **Ottawa and Washington**

*By Phone*

*Two days after Button Day*

"Ian! How's things in the frozen north?"

"Well, Albee, I hear Washington's a little hot these days between your climate and the politics."

"Pretty much as usual, I suppose. By October I may just flee up your way to regain my sanity."

"Still got that place on McEachren Lake?"

"Still there. I wish I were sitting on the dock, fishing and drinking beer right now. Unfortunately, nobody gets to fish this year."

"So, what's on your mind?"

"Well, the military and Homeland Security have a little favor to ask the fine citizens of Canada."

"Shoot. Hm, in this day of predator drones, that term may no longer be appropriate."

Albee laughed, not entirely sincerely. "I've been told – they tell me – that one of our classified, ah, flying, ah, assets went down in Lake Ontario a couple of decades ago. In a, in a, thunderstorm they tell me."

"There's some rough weather over the lake sometimes."

"Yeah, well, they lost track of it. Now they think it might be just offshore on your side of the lake." He hurried on. "It wasn't carrying weapons of any sort even though it was supposed to stay on our side of the water. But had, they think, some things that terrorists could make use of. It's an embarrassment, you

know, in an election year. Homeland Security's uptight on this one, and you know how they've been since 9/11...."

"I suppose...."

Albee went on. "The current administration is friendlier to Canada than our opponents are, you know."

"We know that, and appreciate it."

"It might take only a few hours to get the wreck up from the bottom, once we get a barge in place. It would mean the world to the family of the, ah, two pilots who have been missing all these years. The, ah, kids have grown up, and the grandkids, not knowing where their fathers went."

"How do you know your plane's down there. Have you been snooping?"

"No. We just got some information on the side and a new computer analysis of the flight pattern."

"Well, Albee, you know and I know that computers are only as good as the nerds programming them. We actually have scouted the site, and can put your mind at rest."

"Pardon, Ian?"

"Back in World War Two the area was used as a bombing run. Planes from Trenton Air Base flew over the lake and dropped smoke bombs onto the sands at Weller's Bay. Lost the odd plane."

"Okay..."

"One was a Stirling. That's an early British bomber. Very important in its time. Not a single one left any more; they were all scrapped when the Lancasters came out." Pause. "We've confirmed that that's the wreckage of a Stirling on the bottom of Popham Bay, if that's the area you're talking about."

"Ah, yes, that's the area."

"The historical societies and the current Minister of Defense have a keen interest in getting the hulk up for display." He chuckled. "If we find any of your planes down there, we'll notify you first thing."

"Yeah, thanks. Hey, I'll get back to you."

"Great. I'll keep you informed, then?"

"We'd appreciate that. Do you want to talk to Homeland Security?"

"I don't see why. Thanks for your interest. Goodbye."

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Ian turned to the two people next to him. "I don't know how long that'll hold them off. They're doing the 9/11 thing and threatening us with Homeland Security."

"And we have to try to protect it against the Yanks?"

"Unless it's time to change the rules." Ian pointed to the book beside him. Back in the 50's someone decided that if there were any aliens ever found, it would be idiotic to annoy them. No one's seen fit to change that rule yet."

"You think antagonizing the Yanks would be better?"

"A look at world history tells us that primitive groups that annoy more technologically advanced cultures disappear quickly."

"What if it's not aliens?"

"Then someone up high seems mighty concerned about something else."

"Can we protect the site?"

"We can try. But by the time we get approval, we'll be into the next millennium. Maybe we can think of something."

"How's Oscar Copeman doing? He's supposed to be down that way, keeping an eye on things."

A snort. "Seems to have been kidnapped, by US SEAL team, and taken to a basement in Toronto."

"Really?"

"You gotta wonder. I gather he broke out and is driving back to Brighton, even as we speak."

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Albee shook his head and rolled his eyes. "They've got a historical group against us."

"You don't think it's an old bomber?" one of the others asked.

"Odd shape for a bomber. No magnetic components. Even wooden sailing ships had some iron in them. What does that suggest to you?"

"A Roswell?"

"That's what it suggests to me. We have to at least consider the idea. Or a chameleon."

"Chameleon?"

"If you were going to hide on Earth, you'd want to disguise your ship as something that wouldn't arouse suspicion."

"No wonder people are going apeshit."

"If we don't get to it before the Canadians, we may never know."

"What's the best option, you think?"

"We've got a boat, *Seas the Day*, going there with a sonar rig. Looks like a tourist boat. We can put a couple of SEALs with scuba gear to patrol the site."

"Not too deep?"

"Naw."

"Can we arm them?"

"With spearguns, at best. I'll check the fishing regulations."

"Guess that'll have to do."

"Any word on the team in Brighton."

"Losers. Captured one guy, and he got loose."

"Why would they do that?"

"Beats me. Tried to capture another Canadian agent, and got the crap beat out of them."

"Serves them right. Supposed to be just watching."

"Maybe so, but they've assigned a couple of low-level agents to try to get the one guy back."

"Well, if the Canadians are sending in agents that can escape custody and beat up SEALs, maybe there is something important there, after all."

"Maybe."

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## **Toronto**

*Highway 401*

*Two days after Button Day*

“Great to be back in a civilized country,” Cope thought. It was just past two in the afternoon, muggy and overcast, and he was stuck in a rented Sebring on the expressway in Toronto.

Ontario, when it was settled, spread just north of Lake Ontario in a long line of settlements. The major roads went through the settlements, and that included highway 401, first of the four-lane highways. At the time it was built, in the 1960’s, it had run north of Toronto.

But Toronto had just kept growing, and now the 401, reaching sixteen lanes in width at points, was surrounded by the city.

Locals called it a parking lot, but there wasn’t much choice in using it to get somewhere. A newer road, to the north, quickly became jammed almost as badly. The new road, highway 407, was a toll road, and the tolls were levied by taking pictures of vehicle license plates as the cars entered and exited.

Cope figured that he didn’t want anyone taking a picture of his car’s plates, just in case someone could follow him.

So he’d taken the chance that the 401, in all its multi-lane glory, might be usable after lunch on a workday.

Wrong. Traffic started backing up a few miles west of Toronto’s official border and soon stopped entirely. For an hour he’d been in the car, listening to the CBC and edging forward a little bit at a time, whenever the truck ahead of him moved.

He was grateful that the rental car was an automatic; with a standard it would have been a constant shifting between neutral and first. To be a freelance trucker in this traffic, with your earnings dependent on delivery, would have been maddening, he thought. Especially when traffic made a significant move in one lane, say three car lengths. Then the truck would leave a space in front of it because trucks get going faster than cars and need to leave a bit of space to stop. Then some cowboy would take advantage of the little space in front of the truck, decide that the truck’s lane had a guardian angel, and try to get in front of the truck.

The CBC wasn’t much help. For years the government-run broadcaster had aged right along with its listeners, boomers and folkies. But someone noticed that the audience was dying off, or becoming senile and forgetting how to turn on the radio. So the afternoon show was changed to target a slightly younger audience, say, those in their forties, or even in their thirties. Cope suspected that it didn’t work, that the younger people didn’t want the mix of commentary and music offered.

He didn’t mind the commentary all that much, but he’d never acquired a taste for some of the current music.

So he edged forward, and stopped, edged forward, and stopped. It was like real traffic, only in slow motion. People still switched to any lane that seemed to be moving better, and got scowled at, but it took much longer.

Cope lived in hope, like thousands of others must have, that the traffic was just because of an accident or a ladder dropped onto the highway or something, and that it would clear up in a minute. He passed the time doing a crossword puzzle on the dash and checking the position of a truck with Chinese writing on it in the next lane over. Sometimes the truck edged a few car-lengths ahead of him, and sometimes he got ahead of it.

At the moment, the truck had gained a bit, and a green SUV was slowly stuffing itself behind the truck to his right, coming from a lane even further towards the edge of the highway. Cope's lane moved forward a bit. He followed, stopped, and picked up the crossword again.

Cope filled in "opted" for the clue, "Made a decision," and turned down a soft-rock-country song that had not the faintest pretension of originality, unless it marked a new record in clichés. When he looked up and checked the mirror, the SUV, a Nissan, was almost beside him.

That's when he recognized one of the two men in the Nissan. He'd seen that round face in Paris, France, three years ago. For a second blood drained from Cope's face, and the guy behind him honked when Cope failed to move.

They say seatbelts save lives, but the fact that Cope had undone his – it hadn't seemed like much of a risk at this speed – turned out well for him. He threw himself out of the door just as a passenger from the SUV got out and came around the front.

Jag landed hard, just avoiding falling under the wheels of a beer truck edging forward. The abandoned rental car was the last of his worries, and he didn't give it a thought as he scampered under the beer truck, his knees hurting from the pavement and the heels of both hands with asphalt embedded in them. On the other side of the beer truck was the concrete median separating the eastbound lanes from the westbound lanes, and he went up and over it.

For some reason, the westbound lanes were moving substantially faster than the eastbound lanes he'd left. Actually, he thought, the Sebring would have bumped into the car ahead and if the other guys had left their Nissan to come after him, traffic would come to a complete halt for a few hours.

Traffic cameras on top of the light-masts would spot the problem eventually, and doubtless a dozen people were phoning other people, including the police, to report some funny business on the 401. Not that the police could do much in a hurry. Not that they weren't used to car thieves abandoning their prizes on a regular basis.

He hesitated, figuring his chances of crossing eight lanes of traffic were pretty small, when someone in a small van saw him, swerved a bit, and hit the back fender of a Honda Accord with eight people in it. Both came to a halt pretty quickly, and the cars behind them slowed and stopped, blocking three lanes. Like magic, the other lanes slowed and filled with almost-stopped cars. Cope ran for it.

He went between a couple of cars, and when that looked too dangerous, slid up and over an older white Ford. On the other side of the Ford he looked back to see a determined man coming after him through the traffic. The other guy wasn't waving a gun, but Cope simply assumed it was in a shoulder holster. Cope crawled under another 18-wheeler and ran for the edge of the highway.

The 401 is separated from the real world by a very high cement fence, so Cope had to follow an exit lane a way before spotting a gap. The city provides access to the freeway for firemen to connect a hose to the nearest hydrant, and that was good enough for Cope. Red-faced and puffing, he reached a city street and, out of breath, ducked into a Tim Horton's coffee shop.

There were a couple of dozen people in the shop, five of them lined up to buy coffee, donuts, or lunch. The chain started by the now-dead hockey player had branched into lunches and seemed to be doing very well in the business. Cope looked behind him, hoping his pursuer would turn back rather than do anything rash in a place full of potential witnesses.

On the other hand, this was north Toronto, and a shooting in a coffee shop wasn't going to turn the city upside down.

Cope didn't really know what he was going to do. He thought of locking himself in the washroom but there were three men already in the line for that facility. A cell phone; he thought. I'll borrow someone's cell phone. He made a mental note to get another cell phone and join the twenty-first century again.

"Can I use your cell phone?" he asked the man ahead of him in the line. He wasn't sure why he was standing in line, since buying any fluids that might subsequently leak out of him through bullet holes didn't seem like that hot an idea. And, in line, it was harder to watch the street. Maybe it was just such a normal, Canadian thing to do; there was a comfort level to consider.

The man ahead of him struggled with a Canadian politeness and willingness to help, then said, "I don't have a cell phone."

Cope looked around; there were four teens, who should probably have been in school, talking on cell phones, maybe to each other. He tried to decide which would put up the least resistance. The line edged forward and the guy ahead of him put in an order for fifteen jelly donuts. Part of Cope's mind pegged the guy as someone who worked in an engineering office; engineers are powered by donuts.

But Cope's eye fell on the man in the light-brown suit who appeared at the corner of the coffee shop outside, looked inside at Cope, and headed for the door, one hand reaching into his pocket.

There was only one door, not counting the door to the kitchen. There were now four guys waiting for someone to unlock the men's washroom. Tim Horton's places always needed more washrooms, he thought. For God's sake, they serve coffee, don't they. Coffee always stimulated Cope's digestive system.

As the man came through the door, still moving quickly like he had something to do in a hurry, Cope reached forward and grabbed the box of jelly donuts from the counter. He dumped them into the space between himself and the door. The guy in the suit came in, began a long slide towards the counter, and spun his arms like windmills.

Cope sidestepped the man, slid like a skateboarding pro to the door, and yanked it open. He bowled two people over, one of which yelled after him, "Don't dis me man!"

But there was no more shooting as Cope turned a corner and then entered a convenience store. Cope stopped, took a twenty out of his pocket and held it towards the Korean fellow behind the counter. "Twenty to use the back door?" Cope offered. Without speaking, or showing any sort of surprise, the man took the bill and pointed to the back. "Thanks," Cope said and ran past cases of pop and out the back door.

He followed the alley, past smelly bins of garbage, until he got to another street, then walked slowly into a department store. He was in the washroom, in a stall, sitting on the toilet, for maybe half an hour before checking that the washroom was empty and leaving. On the main floor he found a phone and called his office.

"Cope here," was all he could say when a woman with a kid's voice picked up the phone on the other end.

"Mr. Copeman," the voice said at once. "Problems?"

Cope explained, not completely coherently, about the events of the last hour.

"No problem," the voice said when he finished. "We'll take care of it. We'll have a car for you at the nearest corner in twenty minutes. It'll be a blue van with "Personal Health Care" on the side. We suggest you have a coffee and not be there too early."

Cope had a coffee at the store's restaurant. It wasn't as good as Tim Horton's coffee, but, he noted, he was more likely to survive it. So he had a salad to go with it. He called Paula. After she'd expressed her dismay at their daughter's recovery and listed a few things that had gone wrong at the home. Then she actually asked how he was doing in Brighton. "Pretty dull," he assured her.

At the table, watching the door, he wondered just which group had decided he'd be better off away from Brighton for a while at least. Did that mean that someone was after whatever object was in the bay? In that case, why kill him? No, he thought, this is someone who wasn't expecting to get the object and wanted to make sure no-one else did.

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### **High Bluff Island**

*Out in Popham Bay*

*Two days after Button Day*

Laura and Tom drove through the park and around to the section of beach nearest to High Bluff Island, Tom making notes on every car they passed and watching the road for something, possibly improvised explosive devices. When they got to the shore, Clyde Books was attaching a small old motor to the back of a square-end canoe. He looked up, surprised.

"I'm Laura Singer."

"Ah, yes. We talked by phone. Hi, Tom; good to see you. I'm glad to see the bad guys didn't get you."

Tom looked at Clyde. "How many around?"

Clyde shrugged. "Looks like the whole place is full of spies and other government agents, not to mention our friends the aliens over there." He waved in the direction of High Bluff Island. "Assuming they're hiding out in the bush there."

"Seems likely," Laura said. "Are you going out there? Can we come?"

"Ah..." Clyde pointed at the boat. "Are you sure you want to? This is a pretty small boat for three people, and the waves are getting up."

"You've got a motor. I went out there in a canoe without one, and the canoe wasn't this big."

"Sure." Clyde scratched an ear. "But you probably went when in the morning when it's calmer, and this motor's a three-horse Johnson, vintage 1967. Besides, you don't have lifejackets. Even an extra paddle would help, if a wind comes up or the motor quits." He smiled. "It's no fun being known as the guy with the smallest Johnson on the lake."

Laura didn't seem to get the joke. She looked into the boat. There were several packages, one paddle, one cane, and one lifejacket. And a small can of gasoline. "Hang on." She got her long-handled shovel from the Jeep. "I can paddle with this if I have to." She faced Clyde. "And I want to go out there. I want to talk to these guys." She turned to Tom. "Will you wait here, or do you want to drive back to the cottage?"

"I'm too easily ambushed at the cottage," Tom said. "I'll go with you two."

Clyde rolled his eyes. "Help me get this thing into the water." They slid the canoe down the grass, over the rocky beach, and into the waves slopping against the rocks. Laura and Tom pushed away from shore until the water was deep enough for Clyde to get the motor going. They moved towards the islands, leaving a faint trail of blue smoke behind them.

It took almost ten minutes to get close to the island. As they neared the shore and cormorants rose from a dead tree, Clyde stopped the motor and Tom and Laura paddled the boat inshore. Tom leaped out into the shallow water to get the boat onto the beach.

Together, they dragged it up far enough to be out of wind and waves. Laura pointed ahead. "There's where the Daniels' boat came in," she said. There was a trail of crushed vegetation ahead of them.

They found the Daniels boat, turned over and propped up. Underneath, the two men looked out at their visitors. Jack looked a bit dazed. "Welcome," Jim said. He looked around. "I recognize the two men who helped us escape the cottage, and Laura, of course. Why are you here?"

Tom looked around carefully. "I was hoping to hide a while."

"Why?"

"In case they're out to get me?"

Jim shook his head. "Considering the fact that some people might be after us, you might be in the wrong place."

Tom merely said, "Shit."

In the silence that followed, Clyde spoke up. My name is Clyde Books."

Jim and Jack stared. Jack said, "Shit."

"What's the problem?" Laura asked.

"Clyde's a member of Alien Hunters International," Jack said. "They try to find aliens like us hiding on this planet and kill them."

"Shit," Laura said.

"Maybe we can talk," Clyde suggested. "I brought some sandwiches."

"Food?" Jim seemed interested. "We brought nothing but condensed soup in cans and a can opener."

"I'll be back." Clyde walked towards his boat.

"Funny," Laura said, "that line doesn't make me any more confident."

But Clyde came back with a couple of big bags, which he opened. He put a small tablecloth on the ground and put out a bunch of sandwiches. "Some are just vegetable sandwiches," Clyde said, looking around. "I wasn't sure if you were vegetarians or not. The rest are salmon and ham."

The Daniels took the food closest to them, unwrapped them and started eating. Clyde joined them, and said to Tom and Laura. "Go ahead. I brought lots, in case I was going to be here a while. And bottled water." He turned to the Daniels again. "Why should I be on your side? Is there any reason I should help you?"

"We're leaving." Jack took another sandwich and a bottle of water.

"Leaving?"

"There are eleven of us on Earth. If all goes well, we're getting into our ship and getting the hell out of here as soon as we can, probably in the next day or so. Sounds like that should be one of your objectives."



Clyde paused in his eating. "It is. Can I trust you on this?"

Jim shrugged. "Just wait a couple of days. Watch the bay."

"It's out there?" Clyde looked out over the bay towards the cottages.

"It's out there. The truth is out there."

"And people are trying to stop you from getting there."

Jim nodded. "Other than Alien Hunters International? We think so. We don't know for sure."

"What happens to the bodies you're in? The Daniels brothers."

"We leave them behind. They'll be healthy, and glad to get rid of us."

"Not traumatized?"

"But that can't be helped, can it? Oh, we expect they'll be pissed off and shook up. We've kept the hosts in pretty good condition, but..."

"So if I help you...."

"You'll be known as the guy who helped get an alien infestation off the planet."

Clyde turned to Laura. "You trust them?"

She shrugged. "If they're lying, I don't think anything we can do would be to the good of the planet."

"Maybe if we kill them we save the planet."

"Only if they're alone. And the others don't find out about it. Otherwise...."

"That's what I was thinking." Clyde broke out a package of cookies and passed them around. "Jack. You're not saying much."

Jim spoke up. "Jack broke his right arm yesterday."

"What?" Laura took a closer look at Jack.

"We've immobilized the arm," Jim said, "and given him a sedative. We're fixing it from the inside."

"How long will that take?" Clyde backed off a bit, and Tom stood up.

"Human bone's not the quickest stuff to heal. We figure it'll take at least four days to be usable, and another week to heal completely." Jim picked up a carrot stick.

"Will that be a problem?"

"Well, we can probably get to our – spaceship, I guess you'd call it – right from shore, but we'd prefer not to. We'd rather start from right above it."

"Can't swim that far once you've left your host behind?" Clyde asked.

"Can. We're not speedy, but we can go long distances."

"Then?"

"You've got some big fish out there." Jim nodded towards the water. "I don't trust them not to take a bite or two out of me. I remember one of the bigger channel catfish scaring us as we came out. Straight down is the shortest route."

"Can't carry a weapon?" Laura wanted to know.

"We're symbiots on most planets. We get our partner to carry for us. We're only good for schlepping little loads, and not for any great distance."

"You're not parasites?"

"Symbiosis is easier. We're welcomed in many places, for the benefits. Got me inside you, you'll live longer and healthier. And have a friend you can talk to."

"Doesn't seem to work as well, here on Earth." Clyde shifted to sit on a less-knobby part of the ground.

"Humans are a little wild yet for such a partnership. It's just rider and unwelcome host. Maybe after humans have had social networking hardware embedded into their bodies for a generation, they'll see the advantages. But now, well, there are some primitive fears still in play."

"You've got that right," Laura said, taking a cookie. "I would have thought most cultures would have evolved to avoid parasites."

"True, but eventually they realize parasites are normal. You, for example, carry thousands of mites in your follicles and under flakes of your skin. And symbiots – without the bacteria in your system, you'd die."

"People still don't like to think about it."

"They don't. Yet. When they get a phone the size of an earring, millions will wear them in style. When it can project images in front of your eyes so you can surf the web, people will gladly have an implant behind the ear. It'll have a personality and answer your questions."

"That's still not an internal intelligent life form."

"Not a big step, though," Jim said. "Offer someone a rider that will do all those things and make life better for you.... Control PMS and hangovers, prevent zits, shorten recovery time for tennis elbow, cure insomnia, remember where you parked your car.... And be your friend."

"But you require something of the host, of course."

"Of course, but negotiation is possible – except in emergencies. Eventually most beings have to decide between electronic implants, or us."

Laura shook her head. "But you're ready to leave Jim's body now, I gather."

Jim/alien said, "Well, Jim here is going to be glad to get his body back. I'll be glad to get off your, er, wonderful planet."

"What can we do?" Clyde stood up to ease his aching backside.

"There are a couple of problems," Jim said.

"What problems?" Laura looked around for Tom, and spotted him skulking behind the stone ruins of an old barn.

"The rest of us bug-eyed space aliens won't get here till early tomorrow morning, for one thing."

"And?"

Jim looked at Laura. "Remember the night we pushed the button on that rock?"

Laura nodded.

Jim rolled his eyes. "We forgot to bring the rock." He had another drink of water. "In the cottage. We need it."

There was a long silence.

"I can go get it," Laura said hesitantly.

"Do you remember what it looked like?"

"Like a common stone. Of course I was into the bourbon and cilantro at the time, so I don't remember more than that."

"If the cottage got ransacked or the rock got moved, you might not find it."

"How do you guys find it," Clyde wanted to know.

"We smell it."

"Even with a human nose?"

"We pick the scent up when it's in the host's lungs. 'Smell' isn't the perfect word, but we evolved to be supersensitive to identifying molecules."

"Which means...." Laura said.

Clyde knew what that meant. "One of the aliens should go there. By the way," he asked Jim, "what do you call yourselves?"

"You couldn't pronounce it without more control of your anuses," Jim said. "The term 'alien' is just fine in this context. You're right; one of us aliens has to go."

"Which means you, Jim, since Jack can't go."

"I could, but it's dangerous. The others in our group are coming and getting caught now would be a major disaster. I'll do it if it's necessary, but the thought doesn't thrill me much. Of course," he noted, "symbiots aren't noted for their bravery anywhere in the universe."

Into a long pause, Laura said, "Jack doesn't need to go. Just his rider. The human body can stay."

Clyde looked uncomfortable. "I'm not sure...."

"Not you, Clyde." She turned and waved to Tom. "Tom! We need your help over here."

While Tom was approaching, Laura asked, "How long does a transfer take?"

"Eight seconds," Jim said, "Skin to skin."

"Like riding a bull in the rodeo," Laura noted. "Much pain?"

"Pain free. We spent a long time evolving."

When Tom arrived, Laura told him, "Tom, Jack there needs help getting up, and you're the only one strong enough to do it carefully; he's got a broken right arm. Can you do it?"

"I think so" Tom walked over, inspected Jack, then picked him up slowly. Jack stayed up, swaying a bit. He put the hand on his good arm onto Tom's neck. Tom went down, rolled onto his back, and closed his eyes.

"Problems?" Laura asked.

A voice came from Tom's mouth. "Give me half an hour. This dude's got some brain chemistry problems I want to start correcting."

Clyde said, "You're a conniving woman, Laura Singer."

Jack spoke up. "You wouldn't happen to have a taser and a shotgun handy, would you, Mr. Books?"

"Pardon?"

"I've been waiting twenty-three years for the chance to kill one of these alien sons of bitches."

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## **Popham Bay**

### *The Cottages*

#### *Two days after Button Day*

Sitting by the window, Lester looked out the window of the Daniels' cottage again. He was not in a good mood. The bandages on the side of his head had been put on with decent care, but his head still hurt something awful. Occasionally, his head swam or his vision split into two distinct images. His balls hurt,

which meant either that he'd been kicked when he was down or he had the need to do something. Like vengeance, in spite of what his instructions were.

Cory barked again. Lester had grown to hate that dog. Every time Lester had opened the rear door Cory had broken into barking. Lester had to go out the front door, and even then, if Cory could spot him, Cory would bark. Lester had taken to feeding the dogs, first dog food, then cooked steak, but Cory had just taken to barking out of affection. Everything about it hurt Lester's head.

A couple of hours ago he'd tried throwing things at the dog, first a rock he found on the table, then some cups and glasses. Most missed; none had had any more effect on the barking than the food had. Lester sighed; at least Cory should give him warning if someone else approached. Assuming he could still tell the difference in Cory's barking between "people coming" and "squirrel in the trees" after the damage to his left ear.

He called Sammy, who was out in Serenity, off the tip of Presqu'ile Point. They agreed that the lake was not the best place for the boat. "Can you anchor in Popham Bay?" Lester wanted to know.

Sammy checked the charts. "If the wind doesn't come up too much. Otherwise the anchor will drag, and I'll be on the beach.

"What's the weather forecast?" Lester hated to mention the obvious, but right then he hated a lot of things.

"Ah...." Sammy consulted the laptop. "Wind 20 knots, coming in from the south."

"Then," Lester pointed out, "you'll get some shelter from High Bluff Island. Shouldn't be a problem." How Sammy had passed some of his SEAL courses, Lester would never know.

"Okay."

"How's the neck brace?"

"Do me a favor. Find that motherfucker who did this, and wring his scrawny neck. Slowly. And the goddamn cop while you're at it."

"Roger that."

It was getting late in the afternoon. Lester looked out the window as Cory started barking, to see Jag's blue FJ Cruiser pulled into the laneway next door. Lester was glad the Blue Cobalt was well hidden a mile away. He watched Jag and Shaman Shaman get out of the car, look carefully around, and go into the cottage. "Thank you, Lord," Lester whispered. "Thank you." He made sure of the ammunition in the paintball gun, and wished again he had a real rifle.

Since Cory was already barking, Lester went out a window on the far side of the Daniels' place and into the bushes. There he saw Shaman come out with food for the dogs, who were still tied to the trees. He watched Shaman inspect the already-full dishes available to the dogs, and inspect a cup that Lester had thrown at the dog. Shaman abruptly went behind Laura's cottage and came back carrying a plastic garbage-can lid like a shield and watching around.

Right now, Lester figured, there were three issues. The first was Jag. Was he still in the cottage and was he armed? As a policeman Jag might have a pistol, and his experience in Afghanistan would have made him wary. The second was Shaman and his garbage-lid shield, which just might be a defense against paintball ammo loaded with knockout chemicals, if Shaman could hold his breath long enough.

The last issue was Lester's health. Those guys weren't SEALs, and Lester could have taken both of them, had he been in better condition. As it was, he might be a bit slow.

While Lester was still moving around to get into a better ambush position, there was a new factor; he could hear a motorboat coming across the bay, getting closer.

What annoyed him more than anything else was that he still didn't have a clue what they were supposed to be finding here, which meant he couldn't figure out why he'd had the crap beat out of him. For all he knew, he and the opposition were just hammering away at each other because each assumed the other had an objective. He'd seen that happen before, more than once. He contemplated retirement, starting immediately, then decided he'd just stay hidden behind the woodshed, aching, till he had a clearer idea what was going on.

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## **Popham Bay**

### *The Cottages*

#### *Two days after Button Day*

"To be honest," Laura said from the front of the boat, "we're not sure where the cottage is. It's getting pretty choppy out here, and we're starting to get wet." She looked behind her where Tom was running the motor. The Daniels' aluminum boat was kicking up spray and Tom was getting the worst of it. Laura, in the front, got a bit less. "You'll have to speak up," she said into the phone. "It's kind of noisy out here."

Jag, still in the cottage, sighed. He had no desire to be loud enough to give away his position, but there wasn't much to be done. "I'll come down to the beach," he said into his phone. Got that?"

"Take care." Laura huddled down a bit and watched the shore ahead grow closer.

Onshore, Shaman shook his blond dreadlocks. "How's it looking, mon?" As far as anyone knew, he'd never been to Jamaica, but there were people in Brighton willing to take up a collection and send him there.

"Laura and Tom are coming in across the bay in a little boat. We know that much. We know that there's an American team here, but haven't a clue why. That's assuming either of them survived your beating, of course. We don't see anyone around, but someone's been feeding the dogs and someone's been throwing things at them. Cope thinks there's something out in the bay, so it may up and swallow Laura and her crazy cousin any moment. Meanwhile, one of us has to go down to the beach to wave them in. They can't tell where the cottage is from out on the bay."

Shaman nodded. "Makes as much sense as anything in life. I'll go." And he was off, garbage-can lid held out like a shield and a leaf rake tucked under the other arm. The only thing he didn't have was a helmet, but Jag figured a pot would just fall off his head anyway. Once Shaman got over the mound of rock and dead trees thrown up by previous storms, he could see the boat, still well offshore. He waved the lid and the rake, then watched the boat turn towards him.

At the last moment, Tom cut power to the outboard and tilted it up. As the boat ground into the pebble beach, Shaman grabbed the rope Laura tossed, and between the three of them, they managed to drag the boat up far enough to be reasonably safe. "Thanks, Shaman," Laura said.

"Pleased to meet you." Shaman shook her hand. "Jag's back at the cottage. "How are things on the island?"

"Clyde Books is out there with the Daniels brothers. One of them's got a space alien inside him. Tom, here, has a space alien inside him, too. There's a spaceship on the bottom of the bay and we have to find a stone to open it up so all the space aliens in the planet can go home." She shook her head. "How's that sound to you?"

"Didn't you forget the part about American special agents kidnapping people?" Shaman started to laugh, and Laura joined him. "This is nuts," she said. "Take me to Jag. How are the dogs?"

Inside the cottage, the four of them held a conference. Laura described her mission, to get an object that looked like a rock from the Daniels' cottage next door. Jag listened carefully as she told him about space aliens inside people. He refrained from saying anything, but decided the most likely possibility was that the Yanks had lost a nuclear bomb over the bay a while back and that he'd been sleeping with a nutbar woman. You never know in these small towns, he thought, you never know.

With a straight face, he said, "We have the advantage in numbers. Those paintball guns shouldn't be fast enough to get all of us. They don't know if I have a gun." He turned to Laura. "I don't. I don't like guns much any more and shooting a US citizen armed only with a paintball gun isn't a good idea."

"What do we do?" Tom asked. He sounded completely sane to Jag.

"Objective one," Jag said. "Get the rock from the Daniels' cottage." Objective two, get the rock to High Bluff Island. That means an expedition to the place next door."

"I'll go first," Laura offered.

"Nope. You wouldn't recognize an improvised dogturd-throwing device until it was too late."

They went cautiously, armed with garden tools and using fold-up TV tray tops as shields. They entered the front door, which was still unlocked. They came finally to the kitchen at the back, having not been interrupted in any way.

Then they spent half an hour looking for the rock, without success.

Eventually, all of them were looking out the window, watching for an ambush that seemed unlikely to happen. Abruptly, Shaman said, "Somebody threw a lot of crockery at Cory. Do you suppose they might have thrown a rock, too?"

The rest of the group considered this. Jag shrugged. "Worth a try."

They crossed the deck, Cory barking happily in the Ulysses trees to see them again, Shaman going as point man, and Jag walking backward at the end. There were a lot of rocks around Cory, many of them roughly the size of the one they were looking for. "Maybe I can get a bucket," Jag said, "and you can take them all."

"I don't think so." This from Tom, who bent over and picked up one rock. He touched it in three places and it flashed blue, briefly. For a moment the attention of all four people was concentrated on the rock. Jag took it from Tom and inspected it. Cory started barking.

"I'll take that." Four pairs of eyes turned around in shock, to see Lester, paintball gun held at his hip, standing by the old outhouse.

The four of them spread out at once, watching Lester. That had been a suggestion from Jag. Cory lay down, panting happily to see so many people.

"Whatever it is, toss it here." Lester swung the gun back and forth slowly, fixing on Jag, who held the rock. "Now."

Jag gave the rock a very high toss towards Lester, who reached for it with one hand. Before Lester could get it, Shaman went into the air, grabbed the rock, and threw it over his shoulder towards Tom, who got it as it rolled into the Ulysses trees. At that point Shaman landed on his feet, and a paintball caught him beside his nose. Shaman ran forward and wrapped his arms around the SEAL, planting a kiss on his lips. They both went down and didn't get up.

In the silence that followed, Cory walked to the end of her leash and licked the faces of the two men on the ground. Then she rolled her eyes and went out like a light on top of them.

"That Shaman guy play basketball or something?" Laura asked.

Jag scratched his head. "Seems to me I heard something about that. Not sure." He turned to Laura. "Now what?"

Laura turned to Tom. "Now what?"

"Well," Tom said. "I have to get this thing to the middle of the bay by tomorrow morning." He looked at the bay. Looks a little dicey at the moment. Let's wait till morning."

They spent the night in Laura's cabin. After supper Cory woke up, followed, an hour later, by Lester, then Shaman.

Darkness came about seven, and Laura turned on the electric fireplace. They watched TV for a while, catching up on the news, drinking beer, and sharing a bag of chips. Lester, tied to a chair, shared Afghanistan stories and memories with Jag. There seemed to be a lot of ways to laugh about people being blown up and shot.

Potto, just outside the door, didn't bark all evening. Jag said there was no point in anyone standing guard; if Sammy or another SEAL came, he'd just take out the guard anyway. Around nine, Laura and Jag changed the dressing on Lester's head wound, and gave him some aspirin from the medicine cabinet.

Around eight, Jag went into town and got his handcuffs, some chain, and a lock, to make sure Lester couldn't move further than the bucket beside the bed he was confined to.

But they took turns staying awake in the darkened cabin, in two-hour shifts.

Eventually, morning came.

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## **Chapter 8: September 20**

*This day is sunny, the winds calm.*

*Three Days after Button Day*

### **Toronto**

*On the Islands*

In the early morning Gabriel Dumont, resurrected leader of the Métis, and Darkh Blood, ghost hunter, took the 6:35 a.m. ferry to Ward's Island. Olnya, in a green dress, blue shoes, and blue hair, met them on the ferry without saying a word. The two men ignored her.

"Feeling better, now, Mr. Dumont?"

"Well, sir, I'm starting to relax, finally."

"The hotel room was a bit much, I presume. I figured after I showed you how the toilet worked, you could handle most of the rest. Did you get any sleep?"

"Slept a hundred years. Learned to do without at times back in the buffalo days. I'll survive."

"Liked the hot and cold running water?"

"Oh, they had that at one place I stayed in Paris, back then. A bit more trouble, but the same idea."

"Learn much from the TV?" Darkh watched Dumont's reaction.

"The culture's changed a lot; people haven't. Learned a lot, even if I didn't understand all of it."

"You seemed to like the breakfast."

"Bacon, eggs, toast. I suspect it's popular anywhere." Dumont sighed. "I'm going to have to learn to live again. That's going to be the hard thing." He stared away. "You're taking me to the islands so my head stops spinning?"

"I would, but I've got another reason, too."

"More ghosts?"

"You know, Mr. Dumont," Darkh said as they joined the people leaving the boat, "it turns out I really only needed to see one. Just one."

"Personally, I don't even know why one was necessary, but what did one ghost teach you?"

"That there was more to the universe than what I knew. That there seems to be something outside life. That it follows that God isn't an impossibility."

Gabe smiled. "I may have had a few problems with the church, but I knew that since I was a child."

They walked past Hatches' Corner Cottage and along the narrow roads to Barb's Jams. At the door, Darkh knocked.

"You again," Barb said.

"I lied to you," Darkh said.

"Figured that much, myself."

"I've got word from the Daniels brothers in Brighton."

A pause. "Come in. I'll make tea." Olnya went in, followed by Darkh and Gabe. Barb waved them to the kitchen table and put on a kettle. The water must have been hot already because she had a teapot on the table, with bread and some jams. Gabe read the labels, discovered saskatoonberry jam, and smiled broadly for the first time in more than a century.

"So tell me," Barb said, "how you can have word from the Daniels when they've made a policy for more than twenty years never to make a phone call?"

"First," said Darkh, "my name is Darkh Blood. I live in Kitchener and my life's ambition has always been to find a ghost. Thanks to you and the late Rademuller I'm a happy man. These two," he indicated Gabe and Olnya, "are Mr. Gabriel Dumont and Ms Olnya Light. I know little about them, and they know little about each other, it seems."

Barb put her finger up to stop the conversation and went into the next room. In a minute she came back with a book called Gabriel Dumont Speaks. She looked at the picture on the cover then set the book onto the table. "Remarkable resemblance," she noted. "Now tell me what you know about the Daniels."

"The guy that was with me last time we were here had a life's ambition to rid the world of space aliens he thought were hiding in humans on Earth." Darkh rolled his eyes. "Clyde Books. Certifiable nutcase."

"You think so?"



"Well, I did. He was trying to find out if those Daniels brothers were harboring space aliens. Personally, I find ghosts a bit more likely, but us nutcases like to hang out together sometimes, if only to have someone to talk to who won't laugh at them."

"Go on." Barb crossed her arms.

"I got a call from Clyde early this morning. It appears he and the Daniels brothers are camped on an island near Brighton, and they're hiding from somebody or other."

"I'd think they'd be hiding from him."

"Apparently, he's helping them, right now." Darkh shrugged. "Beats me." He reached into his jacket pocket and brought out his phone. "I'll call him; I think he wants to talk to you." He made the call, then put the phone onto the middle of the table. Clyde's face appeared. "Hi, Clyde," Darkh said, "What's up?" Everyone except Olnya stared at the phone.

"I'm on High Bluff Island in Lake Ontario with the Daniels brothers, sort of, and there are boats gathering in the bay. I don't know why, but today's the day Jim wants to get away to his spaceship, so he's getting nervous."

"What about Jack?" Barb wanted to know.

"Jack's got a broken arm, and his space-alien rider got transferred to another guy, who left. He's sulking right now."

"Who's sulking? The other guy?"

"No. Jack Daniels. He's not fond of the thing he had inside him all those years."

"I can understand that," Darkh said. "Any idea why the boats are there?"

"Not a clue, but, holy crap, I just saw a American Cobra helicopter go over!"

\*\*\*\*

## **Popham Bay**

### *Three days after Button Day*

Clyde and Jim watched Jack, who was cradling his broken arm, sitting apart from them, looking moodily out over the water. "Is he likely to be dangerous?" Clyde asked.

Jim shrugged. "Probably not; he'll be hurting too much from the arm to do anything. If he had a rider in him, he'd be in no pain, but that's the price you pay for not sharing your body."

"Any idea what all those boats are doing out there?" Clyde had assembled his rifle and was watching the bay through the scope. "The one by the shore is flying a Canadian flag, but the other two are American."

"Beats me," Jim said. "The plan was simply to get the eleven of us aliens together and get the hell out of here and never come back. Makes me nervous seeing boats out there. This bay is normally deserted except on a good sailing day, and even then most sailboats are on the other side of the peninsula."

"That's a sailboat down by the park beach. Might be Tom and Laura coming back?"

"Seems unlikely, unless the motor they took didn't work. Probably just someone taking advantage of the calm morning to get some sailing in."

Clyde focused the scope. "The boat by the shore, the Canadian one, has a 'WTF' logo on it. That's the wind farm people, isn't it? They planning on putting a bunch of windmills around here."

"I think I read something about it."

"Can I ask a few questions?"

"As long as you don't let that human over there get hold of your taser. You did bring a taser, I presume?"

"Brought the cattle prod. Can't see as I'll need it, now. Okay, here's question number one. The wind turbine people probably used sonar to check the bottom. Is there any chance they found your ship?"

Jim pondered the question. "They didn't have sonar that good when we landed. And we buried it in mud at the bottom. Although that could have changed over the years."

"So they might have seen the ship." Clyde waved at the boats. "Wouldn't that bring a crowd?"

Jim shook his head. "We disguised it."

"Disguised it?"

"After a couple of years here, we... shapeshifted it, you might call it. We can shift the outside pretty much as we want."

"So it looks like a sunken ship or something?"

"We thought that might get scuba divers coming down, if the mud blew off it. We saw a few items about the right size, nice and flat so it wouldn't snag fishing nets. Over on the other side of the lake. We just imitated those." Jim drew a shape in the air. "Figured they were water-quality monitors or industrial surplus. Seemed like a safe choice."

Clyde tilted his head at Jim's description. "Means nothing to me. So we're waiting for Tom and Laura and that gizmo that looks like a stone. A key or something."

"Well, we want to take it home, but we don't really need it to get out of here. We just don't want it found by humans."

"Would give us a technological edge?"

"No doubt, but mostly it'll be too dangerous for you."

"Think we can't be trusted?"

"The principles in that thing would give any religious nut the potential to end your civilization. If, for example, he wanted to bring on some end-times Valhalla. Would you want that posted on the Web?"

"You've got a point." Clyde scoped to the west. Here comes another boat."

"Bigger sailboat?"

"Looks like it."

"Probably the rest of us alien monsters coming to catch a ride home."

"Getting crowded out here. Let me know if I can do anything. Here comes that Cobra gunship again."

"Can you tell anything more about it?"

Clyde gave him a look. "You think I'm going to point a rifle at a gunship?"

"Now you got a point there."

Clyde scanned the far shore. "I think I see Tom and Laura coming off from the shore."

"Any chance I can use your boat? I can meet them out there."

Clyde pondered this. "I sort of promised not to let other people handle it."

"Did the guy who loaned it to you mention space aliens?"

You've got a point there."

Together they dragged the canoe over the island. Clyde showed Jim how to start the motor and helped him push off.

\*\*\*

The smaller sailboat that Clyde saw wasn't just out for a pleasant sail on a quiet morning. John Height had been following the *Malifactor* from along the shore. He'd planned to watch it round Presqu'ile Point, but when he'd seen it coming into Popham Bay, he'd gone down to the beach. There he'd found a bald guy with a beard dragging a small aluminum sailboat, apparently named *Poem*, over the sand. The fellow had got only halfway there and was red-faced and puffing.

"Tell you what," Height said. "I'll help you launch this sucker if you'll take me out to meet a friend of mine. See that sailboat in the distance? That's him, coming in."

"I'll take you up on that," the bald guy said. "You can handle the jib; I'm still trying to figure out how to do that by myself." He held out his hand. "I'm Lenny Everson."

"John Height," John Height said. "Let's get this puppy down to the water. I've got a boat to meet."

\*\*\*

*Malifactor* had sailed all night. Damon had eventually locked himself into his cabin and got a couple of hours sleep. He'd lowered the mainsail and put Kristof, who didn't seem tired, onto the rudder. "Just keep any lights on the shore the same distance away from us. If you see any lights on the water coming your way, it's a lake freighter; wake me up."

At dawn, Damon, happy that no one had chucked him overboard in the night, had checked the GPS; they were going to make Popham Bay in an hour or so. After that, he assumed they'd be met by a fast boat full of guys with automatic weapons who would shoot him full of holes and drink the six bottles of Pusser's rum he had stashed away. He hoped his last words would be "Some of it's magic, some of it's - tragic...but I had a good life all the way" before sinking to the bottom. He wondered where his former first mate, John Height was. Probably in Kingston having a party, he figured.

A nasty-looking helicopter went overhead. He took out his binoculars and followed it to the bay. There seemed to be a number of boats already there. That was odd, he thought. Popham Bay's usually pretty quiet.

\*\*\*

Aboard *Serenity*, Sammy greeted the dawn with a breakfast of coffee, goat cheese, cold sausage, and a couple of chocolate donuts. He didn't drink coffee, because it hurt his stomach. There was a slow swell to the water, coming from the lake, but Sammy got sick only in cars, so he enjoyed it.

There were a couple of sailboats on the water, another cabin cruiser, apparently belonging to some corporation, closer to shore, and, next to *Serenity*, a slightly larger boat that Sammy had been told had a sonar unit and a couple of divers, among other crew. The *Seas the Day* had the outward appearance of a rich man's pleasure boat, but there was something about it that Sammy recognized and serious business about it. In a moment or two, the *Seas the Day* edged over until it was close. Side thrusters, Sammy guessed. A muscular man leaned towards Sammy. He was wearing Maui Jim sunglasses, so Sammy knew he was a fellow SEAL.

"You're Sammy," the guy noted. Sammy just nodded. He'd seen the guy a couple of times before, but couldn't remember his name.

"I am. What's the plan?"

"Well, we're supposed to find some equipment the air force lost, and get pictures. That's what we were told, so we know that's absolute bullshit. But that's why we're here."

"Problems?" Sammy offered a chocolate donut, which the other guy accepted.

"We're trying to get a sonar picture of the bottom."

"But?"

"Someone – presumably that boat over there – is swamping our signals with their own. Can't do a thing."

"Wish I could help." Sammy went below and called up the old guy named, "John Smith" on the encrypted line. Nothing like ship-to-ship communications, Sammy thought. "Good morning, sir," he said.

"Ah, Sammy! Good to hear from you. How are things going?"

"Interesting, anyway. Right now I'm on the boat close to the area you were interested in. There's a sonar boat from our side next to me, with a couple of SEALs ready to dive. Across the way there's a Canadian sonar boat. It's got a corporate logo from Canada, but who knows?" Sammy paused. "A cobra went over a couple of minutes ago, and I can see a Canadian Coast Guard helicopter coming in from Trenton."

"Where's Lester?"

"He was checking out the cottages on the north side last night when I lost contact with him. The Canadians might have neutralized him."

"Hell in a handbasket, Sammy. The whole point of this thing was to find out what's down there without causing a fuss. Well, we still don't know what that thing is, and now we might have Canadians all over it."

"You're right, sir."

"You can stop calling me 'sir', Sammy. It's not like we're in the service any more. Well, yesterday, I got a complete copy of the report from the Canadian company. It looks like they did more than a sonar check. There's a note that there's no magnetic signature to the object."

"What does that mean, sir."

"It can't be one of ours. Can't be. We never got rid of all the steel in those things."

"A coincidence?"

"Can't be. There are some things that positively identify it. It's gotta be a copy, made out of wood or plastic or something. Or a legendary UFO chameleon."

"Why would anyone do that?" Sammy reached for another donut, then changed his mind.

"Your guess is as good as mine. Maybe the whole thing was a Canadian set up to see what we'd do in the event of a crisis in the lake. Or maybe it was a joke. Canadians have a bizarre sense of humor. I wonder if there's anything down there at all."

"What would you like me to do, sir?"

"Put your feet up. Pretend you're fishing or something. And just watch. Get the boat over to Rochester if there's any more trouble. I just hope if we started something we can keep our asses covered. This is starting to look like a big mistake just getting worse."

Sammy scratched his head; he knew a hint when he heard one. "Right now there's a – let me see – a motorized canoe coming off the island. And, ah, a small motorboat coming from the north shore. Maybe they've got Lester tied to an anchor to sacrifice to the waves." Pause. "Just a joke, sir."

"Figured that. Call me if anything happens in the next day or so."

\*\*\*

On *Seas the Day*, two SEAL divers and three tight-lipped men were holding a conference. "Any word from higher up?" one man asked.

Another guy shook his head. "They've left us on our own. Deniable, disposable, deletable."

One of the SEAL divers looked concerned. "I don't like the thought of going down there without anything to defend myself with."

"Sorry," said another man. "but the Canadian fishing laws don't allow spearguns, and we can't take a chance on you two ending up in jail on a fishing violation." He started to laugh, when another man poked his head in. "What's up?"

"Boats heading for the target area."

"Canadian navy?"

"A canoe, a fishing boat, a little sailboat, a bigger sailboat."

"Okay. Half the Canadian navy."

"What do we do?"

"Intercept to keep the target area clear. Make it look accidental."

"How the hell do we do that?"

"We'll figure something out."

"And there's adventure in the air."

"What now?"

"A helicopter's coming in from Trenton. And a drone's spotted a guy with a rifle on the island."

"That's news, now."

"Judging by the parachutes, I think somebody's sending in a couple of HALO guys to take care of the guy with the rifle."

"Sounds like a promisingly stupid idea."

"Got that one right."

\*\*\*

Cope got onto the CH-146 Griffon helicopter at 8 Wing/CFB Trenton, with a scowl. He hadn't liked the Griffon in Afghanistan, which troops had derided as "just a civilian helicopter with a coat of green paint." Even a gatling gun, kludged onto it, at least in battle zones, didn't help it a lot.

But Cope climbed on. Politics was politics. The pilot kept a straight face for what he assumed was another Ottawa bigwig wanting to look at his cottage on the taxpayer's ticket. At least it would be a short trip to Brighton and the pilot hoped no real search and rescue call came in while he was flying this dude around.

Cope watched out the window as the copter followed the Bay of Quinte, circled out over Weller's Bay, and came over Lake Ontario. As they approached High Bluff Island, Cope spotted another helicopter passing through. "What's a Cobra doing here?" he asked the pilot.

"Rumor says it's coming in for a meeting at the base. Probably just a beerfest tonight for Afghan vets."

"Could be," Cope said. "I didn't get invited. Of course, maybe they found out I shot at them a few times."

"Don't approve of shooting at helicopters," the pilot said.

"When you're in a compound with a couple of Taliban shooting at you, you don't really want to see a Cobra. They're more likely to kill you than the enemy are. Can you do a loop around Popham Bay?"

"No problem."

Cope noted three cabin cruisers parked there, and four boats heading for the middle of the bay. These, he thought, were standing by for some reason. It was the four little boats moving towards the centre of the bay that were probably where the action was. And maybe the larger sailboat resolutely tacking towards the same area. That's when he spotted a couple of parachutes opening just above High Bluff Island. He tapped the pilot and pointed. The pilot tipped the Griffon over a bit to circle around again.

\*\*\*

The crew on the Wind Turbines Foundation sonar ship *Trantor* were tired. They should have been, after a night of partying. The limnologist with the pony tail was running the sonar, mostly by herself. She'd had an hour's sleep before dawn, and with the help of two cups of coffee was more or less awake. She needed to go pee, but there was work to do. Every time she got the sonar signal from the boat across the way, she'd flood the area with her own sonar signals. The other boat changed frequencies a couple of times, but she followed that pretty quickly.

Not that she knew why this was happening, but she suspected someone in the provincial or federal governments was leaning on the WTF to do this little chore. With all the permits the WTF needed, it was a good idea to do governments as many favors as you could.

\*\*\*

Damon Conch watched his nine passengers as they entered Popham Bay. He'd figured out that these people – six women and five men – were going somewhere, and the collection of boats in the bay seemed to clinch the argument. The flyby of the Cobra helicopter gunship made him wonder if the Americans were planning on heading off any attempt by the passengers to get to the U.S. by boat. Or, he suddenly thought, maybe the gunship is protecting them from something.

Then he realized that the helicopter had a clear view of *Malifactor* and was ignoring it. For a moment he felt a bit miffed.

Each passenger had a small suitcase or bag. Damon would have liked to know what was in those, but finally decided that at least he could plead ignorance if asked later.

\*\*\*

Clyde was getting uncomfortable, lying in the ruins of the old farm, his scope following Jim and the canoe puttering steadily out towards the centre of the bay. He turned the scope to follow a motorboat coming from the far shore. It was obvious that even as the motorboat moved across the bay, probably with Tom and Laura, headed at a higher speed, Jim would be first to the middle of the bay.

Or would have been, if one of the American boats hadn't started up, with what looked like an attempt to keep Jim away from the center of the bay. The bigger boat accelerated quickly and turned from facing into the wind to facing an intersection point for the canoe.

"What the hell?" said a voice beside Clyde. Clyde looked up to see Jack. "That canoe's too damn small for that bay as it is. Jim could be swamped and drown." Jack added.

Clyde followed the American boat, apparently called *Seas the Day*, with the scope, and jacked a cartridge into the barrel of the gun. Leading the boat a bit, and making a guess as to distance and wind drift, he started firing at the one window of the American boat that had nobody showing in it.

He had finished five shots when several things happened, almost at once. The first thing was that the American boat did a quick turn, heading straight towards High Bluff Island. The second thing that happened was that the wake of the boat rolled the canoe over.

And the third thing was that a foot kicked the rifle away from Clyde and a knee was placed against his back. He was called some unkind names by the individual who was on him and was slapped, hard, several times across his head. Then he was rolled over, to find himself looking at a guy in full camouflage dress, face paint and all. A similar guy was holding Jack to the ground. "Hey," Clyde yelled, "careful with that guy; he's got a broken arm!"

How much difference it made, Clyde couldn't figure out. The soldier holding him down took the time to toss Clyde's rifle well out into the bay. Then he searched the canvas bag Clyde had brought, found the cattle prod, and tested it on Clyde. Several times. It was much like Clyde expected it would be, unfortunately for him. He was still gasping for breath as the *Seas the Day* cut its engines and slid to shore.

\*\*\*

The Griffon was just coming back over the bay as Cope and the pilot saw the canoe swamp and the American boat turn towards High Bluff Island. "Now we do have a rescue to do," Cope said, pointing at the man floundering in the water. Only the tip of the canoe was visible above the water line, the motor apparently holding the back end down.

"I'll call for a rescue," the pilot said, reaching for the microphone switch.

Cope looked back behind him. "I can do the rescue. I've used a similar rig before."

"Like where, and when?"

"Afghanistan. Took a wounded guy out off a hilltop a bit north of Kandahar."

The pilot called in that there was a man in the water in Popham Bay and they were going to try a rescue. Then he looked at Cope. "You'll probably drown, but I figure anybody that shoots at helicopters deserves to drown. Go for it."

Cope put himself into the harness and grabbed the remote control for the winch. He let himself down well below the helicopter, then called the pilot. The pilot must have been good, because Cope managed to get a harness around Jim in a couple of minutes, after Cope had been dunked a couple of times on both sides. Strapped together, the pilot took them over to the beach and put them onto the sand until Cope could get both of them out of the harness. The helicopter lifted away and set down on the sand not far away. The pilot shut off the engine, then turned to reeling in the rescue cable.

"Thanks," Jim said. He looked at Cope. "Aren't you a bit old for this?"

"That's for sure." Cope and Jim were both shivering.

"Are you okay? Do you want to go to the hospital?" Cope asked. Cope looked at the man carefully; he seemed fine, other than wet. The pilot walked over. "You guys ready for a trip to the hospital or back to the base?"

Jim shook the pilot's hand, then shook Cope's hand. "My brother's on the island there. I'd like to go see him, if I can."

"And, since your boat's floating in the bay, how do you hope to get back to land? That other boat over at the island isn't yours, is it?"

"Don't know it," Jim said. "My brother, by the way, broke his arm. Could you, er, get my brother and drop us off on the beach, here?"

"Tell you what," the pilot said. "I'll take you and your brother off the island and back to the base, so a medic can look at you." He turned to Cope. "You going to come back, too, I presume. There's something going on in the middle of the bay. Don't know what, but you might want to have a look at it."

Cope smiled. "Gotta get my car. I can give these guys a lift if they need one."

"Let's go. I better call in that canoe out in the bay so people don't run into it." The pilot walked back to the Griffon without looking back.

\*\*\*

Jag wasn't sure what was going on. He'd located a set of binoculars in the Daniels cabin, but they weren't nearly good enough. He heard the faint noise of the shots, and saw the one American boat run for the island. But by that time, Laura and Tom were already well out in the bay in the aluminum boat and she wasn't answering her phone. Jag cursed a bit.

That's when Jag took the handcuffs and chains off Lester. They found some hats and three lawn chairs and went down to the beach to watch, putting their feet up on the trunk of a half-buried tree. A moment later Shaman Shaman came galloping from the Daniels' cottage with a bottle and three plastic cups. "Bourbon," said Shaman, huffing a bit from the running. "It's got some herb stuffed in the bottle," he said. He tasted it, "It'll do."

The three passed the whiskey and binoculars back and forth, watching the events in the bay. They saw the rescue of the guy in the swamped motor canoe. "I'd swear that's Oscar Copeman on the end of the line," said Jag.

Lester took a look. "Bald enough to be Copeman. The other guy might be one of the Daniels, but I don't know for sure."

"You know Cope?"

"Gassed him just like I did to you. Took him to Toronto in the trunk. He escaped somehow." Lester wasn't one long on detail.

Jag nodded. "That's before Shaman here beat you with an iron bar."

Lester looked over. "Just doing his duty, I guess. Protecting the secret and rescuing secret agents. I might be getting a little old for this."

"What secret would that be?" Jag took the bottle for another sip. He wondered if the Daniels had more in their cottage. There was a pause in the action, then the Canadian helicopter landed on High Bluff Island, near the lighthouse.



"No idea. We got orders from a bigwig – retired like I should be – to see if the Canadians were nosing about something in the bay. Didn't tell us what." He held out his glass for another drink. "So what was the secret?"

"Don't know either, Jag said. "I think that someone in Ottawa heard the Americans might be interested in the bay for reasons unknown, and sent Cope to check it out. He's not popular in some circles there."

Lester sighed. "You think they'd lie to us? Tell us ten percent of what we need to know?"

"We're lucky to get five percent here, and most of that's made up."

"Politics!" Jag said, and the others grunted.

A silence while they contemplated. The sky clouded over. The Cobra went over once, and disappeared towards Trenton. Cope, still wet from his dunking, pointed and handed the binoculars around. That big sailboat's got a bunch of people on board. The little sailboat's heading on an intercept for the big sailboat. They're all going to meet Laura and Tom in the middle, close to where the canoe went down."

"Don't see any movement from *Serenity*," Lester noted.

"Sammy on there?"

Lester nodded. "Probably confused. All alone with nothing but a paintball gun and a few empty bottles of beer to throw at the enemy."

"Who's the enemy?" Shaman spoke up.

"Well, seeing as you and your fucking iron bar aren't out there, I doubt that he's got a clue. He was one of Karzai's bodyguards for a while, but he was too trigger-happy even for Afghanistan."

"Unarmed?"

"The people I work with seemed concerned that we didn't shoot any Canadians. Got the paintball guns and that special ammo, but that's all." He shook his head, winced, then added. "Politics. Like we grunts every get told the truth about anything."

Shaman pointed and passed the binoculars. "Serenity's moving. Looks like Sammy's going to head off the big sailboat."

Jag took the binoculars, but he focused on Laura and Tom instead. "Why do you call yourself 'Shaman Shaman', and do the Bob Marley thing?" Jag asked the guy with the blond dreadlocks.

Shaman laughed. "Especially since I'm white, haven't ever been to Jamaica, and have never been seen to do a shamanistic ritual of any cultural sort?"

"Well, yeah."

"I pin myself to confusion and chaos to hold my wife in check."

Lester leaned over. "What?"

"I have a doctorate in geological chemistry," Shaman said. "Gina, my wife, has a very good management job here in Brighton at the Ministry of Agriculture." He let that sink in, then added, "There are no good jobs for me within commuting distance."

"And you can't just pack up and go somewhere else?" Lester asked.

"Gina's happy with her job, and she makes really good money here. We're really fond of each other, so I stay here, too. The only jobs here are minimum wage with odd hours."

"And you don't need the money," Jag said.

"So I wander a lot, and write poems, or at least think about it."

"That still doesn't explain the rest." Jag watched Laura's boat bounce on the waves.

"Chaos and confusion," Shaman said. "I try to leave a trail of confusion, to emulate the universal rule of chaos."

"Got me confused," Lester admitted. He poured everybody another drink.

"My wife respects my choices, but never really feels right about them. She'd probably be happier if I stayed home and baked bread and did handicrafts in the basement and took night courses in gardening."

The other two men grunted.

"My son's in college. Maybe someday he'll understand. My in-laws think I'm a loser going around like this." Shaman shook his dreadlocks.

"But your wife's happy with it."

"Drives her nuts, but she loves me, so what can she do? If I become a househubby, she'll lose respect for me without knowing it. Out here, I'm a wild man, and in chaos is my freedom."

"I can see why you hit me so hard," Lester muttered, then added. "Women don't care much for chaos."

"They live with chaos in them," Shaman said. "Chaos and order, like a yin yang of the brain. It terrifies and fascinates them."

"You know a lot about women?" Jag closed his eyes and took another sip of bourbon.

"I'm up to the ten percent understanding level already," Shaman said. "How much of Laura do you understand?"

Way less than that."

"Women!" Lester said, and the others grunted.

"I'm publishing some online books about the dead trees in the old dunes in the park," Shaman said. "*Dragons of the Park* and *Spirit of the Park*. The dead trees have character, you know."

"Do much ganja?" Lester asked. "Plan to actually go to Jamaica? Going to set up a sweat lodge and do some shaman work?"

Shaman shook his head. "Then I'd be what I look like. It would be the ultimate capitulation and all my chaos would become comedy. So no smoke. Not much drink."

"Want another?" Jag asked.

"Damn right. Any idea what the hell's out in the bay? Harvey the invisible rabbit?"

"Well," Jag said, "I've been given to understand that there's an interstellar spaceship on the bottom." He smiled.

Lester nodded. "Makes as much sense as any other theory. Do you think there are any weird creatures running around trying to get to it before us Earth people do?"

"If there are, we probably wouldn't understand them any better than we understand women. Or politics, I imagine."

"Women!" Shaman said.

"Politics!" Lester added.

"Space aliens!" Jag tossed in. The three men had a toast and passed the binoculars around.

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Laura shouted to Tom, over the noise of the 15-horse Honda outboard, "Do you know where you're going?"

Tom smiled and nodded. Then he stopped the engine, stood up, and dropped his pants. The boat swayed a little. Tom said, in a high voice, "On behalf of us hgkpphtitrw refugees from out there, may I thank you for your help. There's some diamonds in the ice-cube tray for you." Tom took the "rock" from his pocket, and dropped it into the water. The boat, swaying a bit from the growing swell in the bay, tipped further as Tom positioned his back end over the side. Laura watched in shock as a silvery thing, as long as her forearm and glowing a bit, slipped from Tom's butt and disappeared into the clear water. She could follow it only for a few minutes before the diamonds of sunlight on the water obscured it.

Tom pulled up his pants, his face red. "Glad to get rid of that thing," he said, sitting down before a sudden wave could slop into the boat. "To the shore?"

"To the shore. For sure, to the shore. Let's get Clyde."

\*\*\*

Damon Conch watched the bay clear a bit. One American boat was near High Bluff Island. The motorized canoe had gone down and its occupant rescued by a helicopter. The motorboat with two people in it had turned for the north shore of the island. As far as he could tell, two guys in parachutes and that American boat had invaded High Bluff Island to take down somebody who was shooting. None of it made much sense.

That left only two other boats on the bay, a small sailboat coming his way and the other American boat, with the name *Serenity* on it. Damon snorted in derision. That was just about the most common name for boats in North America. Had no one any imagination any more?

He watched as *Serenity* stared up and turned to get between *Malifactor* and the centre of the bay, where the canoe had gone over. Kristof and a redheaded woman came back. Neither were quite used to the slanted deck of a sailboat tacking into the wind, but they got to the back without falling over.

"That boat is trying to stop us!" Kristoff said. The woman burst into tears.

Damon frowned; there was no way Americans, by boat or by sky, should be invading a Canadian island and stopping Canadian boats in Canadian waters. He turned the boat until it was facing into the wind. Forward motion soon stopped and *Malifactor* was rolling gently in the swells. "Who are you?" he asked the woman.

More sobbing. "Katherine Szczedziwoj. My friends call me Casey."

"Well, Casey, you are about to take part in a naval battle. Watch this." Damon opened a wooden locker and rolled out a small cannon. He stuffed three little bags into the mouth of the cannon, then pushed them to the back with a ramrod. Then he removed the cover from the air vent and inserted a fuse. "Ready to fire," he said. He looked around. Anybody got anything I can put into this puppy?"

He was still trying to think of something suitable as *Serenity* slowed, just upwind.

"You need a cannon ball?" Kristoff asked.

"A bag of stones or gravel would be better. It's more like a shotgun, and I don't think we'll get time for more than one shot. Maybe we can use our loose change." He could see a figure on the other boat come onto the deck holding what looked like a paintball gun with a long barrel. The sailboat was drifting

downwind faster than the motorboat, so the distance was closing slowly. Damon ran below as Kristoff had the passengers open their bags and suitcases on the deck.

When Damon came up with nothing better than some dried peas, Kristoff handed him a little bag. "What's this," Damon asked.

"You asked for gravel, we got gravel for you." Into Damon's puzzled look, he added, "Some of us were hanging on to this in case we needed it."

"Thanks!" Damon squeezed the bag into an appropriate shape and used the ramrod to push it home. He adjusted the angle and elevation as best he could, then took out his lighter. He looked up to see the guy in the other boat watching him through binoculars. The guy fired off one round from the paintball gun, then ran for the cabin. His shot passed between Damon and Kristoff. Damon shouted, "Up yours, Oliver Hazard Perry," and lit the fuse. When he cupped his hands over his ears, most of his passengers did the same.

The smoke cleared fairly quickly in the breeze. Damon leaned forward; it looked like his shot had taken out every window in *Serenity*. He began cleaning out the cannon. "You have another shot?" Katherine asked.

"Nope. But that guy doesn't know that. Prepare to fake!"

With a kick of her motor, *Serenity* moved well away from *Malifactor*. Well out of paintball range, Damon estimated. Something bothered him; he turned to Kristoff. "Tell me that was just gravel. Souvenirs, or something like that."

Kristoff laughed. "You are a hero; you saved us with your little cannon." Damon said nothing, so eventually Kristoff added, "Diamonds. We used them on Earth to get currency."

Damon noted, "You could have given me a lot more diamonds in Toronto. Just saying."

"But then you might not have come back to the boat for us. We didn't know you were going to be a hero, then."

"And where did you guys get all these diamonds?"

"We've often told people they're common in space. But actually, we just make them on the ship. Got a gizmo sort of like a 3-D printer."

"I could use one of those printers. Or a large bottle of rum."

"Your technology is very close to printing diamonds. Don't put your future in diamond stocks. Just saying."

Damon sighed a long, long sigh. "Now where to."

"A bit that way." Kristoff pointed.

"Downwind? My pleasure."

Five minutes later, with the two boats keeping parallel, Kristoff said, "This'll do. So long and thanks for all the cilantro." Damon had no idea what that meant, but he hauled the sailboat into the "safety position" and waited. He figured the passengers must be a cult who wanted to commit suicide in Popham Bay. Instead, the passengers began dropping their pants, and pointing their butts over the rail at the American boat. A few dropped items into the water. Then Damon watched nine silver things slide from nine bare butts, fall into the water, and disappear under the surface of the bay. "Holy crap," he said.

"Didn't Jimmy Buffet have a line for that?" a voice said. Damon looked around as the *Poem* pulled alongside. John Height was reaching up. Damon hauled him aboard, just as the boats touched.

"Welcome aboard, John."

John waved goodbye to the guy who owned the *Poem*. He was already drifting away, his feet tangled in the main sheet, and the boom swinging to clip him again on the head. John inspected the other nine people on the *Malifactor*. "A little overcrowded on this boat. Think we can get around Presqu'ile Point and into Gosport?"

Damon turned the tiller. "Shells sink; dreams float. Life's good on our boat."

\*\*\*

Over on the *Trantor*, the crew turned off their sonar, broke out another case of beer and some cans of Red Bull, and sat on the deck to see what would happen next. "You gotta love this job," someone commented. Then they picked up a sonar signal again from the Americans.

\*\*\*

Tom and Laura were most of the way back to the shore when the motorboat rose up on a large swell, and a large dark object, trailing bubbles, passed under them. She nodded to Tom. "They're leaving."

\*\*\*

As the Griffon landed on High Bluff Island, the American boat pushed off from the shore. A couple of guys in yachting clothes waved from the deck. Jack and Clyde walked up to meet Jim, who got off to meet them.

"Hello, brother," Jim said.

"Thought you were gonna drown out there," Jack said. He looked at his brother. "Free," he said. "Twenty three years and four months, and we're free."

"We can go home."

"We can try. But if I get nightmares, we're selling the damn place and moving to Kingston."

\*\*\*

In the Pentagon, five people watched a satellite view of dark object leaving Popham Bay and disappearing into the deep waters of Lake Ontario.

They subsequently agreed that, just in case, it might be appropriate to, have a few specialized military planes in the air over the American half of the lake for observational purposes. Just for observation and future analysis.

\*\*\*

Sammy had seen a lot in his time, but nothing like what he saw when he brought his head around the corner of the cabin on *Serenity*. He called his boss and described the exit of the aliens into the water and the events on the bay.

"You're not shitting me?" the husky voice asked.

"That a pun?"

"Ha; I guess it was. Anyway, your job is done. Nothing more you can do. Find Lester and you both get back here; you've earned your pay. All I'm after now is keeping my name and yours out of it."

Sammy called Lester's phone, got no answer, and left a message.

John Smith called a number in Seattle. He told the woman who answered about what Sammy had seen. "Could be a Roswell Event?" John asked.

"Sounds like it. I'll pass the message on. Thanks."

"No problem." But it ruined the day's fishing for the old guy.

\*\*\*

On *Seas the Day*, two SEAL divers, two HALO special forces, and three tight-lipped men were holding a conference. "Any word from higher up?" one man asked.

"Fat chance."

"Well..."

One of the divers shrugged and said, "Barring a change of orders from the idiots back home, we keep on trying to do what we're supposed to do." He looked around but found no disagreement.

"Do we have to take out that other sonar?"

"Maybe not; they've stopped broadcasting."

"Let's do it. Scan the damned bay."

But a fast survey of the bay, with divers waiting, found nothing but normal debris on the bottom, except for an area in the mud that vaguely looked like the original object, but was clearly just mud.

*Seas the Day* turned for the open water, heading for Rochester with a hold full of grumpy men. The Cobra gunship passed them a few miles south of High Bluff Island, circled once, and disappeared ahead of them.

\*\*\*

*Serenity*, with Sammy in the captain's chair, stayed in the bay until Lester called. Sammy had some wood splinters in one arm to add to the damage he'd had inflicted since he entered Canada. He wasn't in a much better mood than the other Americans, but was cheered up a bit when Lester called.

"Sammy?"

"Lester! How's the prostate?"

"A wonderfully engineered piece of machinery. How's the flatulence?"

"Always handy when I'm feeling antisocial."

"Going to take the boat back to Patricia?"

"Hey, I'm no boat thief. I'll tell her that we ran into that submarine she told us to look for."

"See you in Cobourg, then."

"For sure."

\*\*\*

## **Lake Ontario**

### *Three Days after Button Day*

Popham Bay cleared out pretty quickly after that. Laura and Tom landed the boat on High Bluff Island, collected Clyde, pattered over to the nearest shore, and managed to horse the Daniels aluminum boat onto a trailer designed for a motorized canoe. Laura and Tom followed Clyde's car back to the Daniels' cottage, where Laura got to supervise Tom, Clyde, Shaman, and Jag as they got the boat back behind the cottage.

"Guess I'll be leaving, now," Jag said, to no one in particular.

"I should think so," Laura said. "Someone's gotta bring back a few cases of beer and some stuff for the barbecue."

Jag blinked. "Too many boys here; not enough girls. Can I bring a guest?"

"Of course," Laura said, after a pause. "Are you sober enough to drive?"

"I think so,"

Jag was back in less than an hour, with lots of beer, frozen hamburgs, and buns (all whole-wheat). And, in the passenger seat, an older woman. Jag introduced her as she stepped out. "This is Josie. She heard there was a party here."

\*\*\*

At the air base, Cope waited until he was sure the medic had seen Jack Daniels' broken arm. It puzzled the medic, who thought it had broken a couple of weeks before and partially set, but the medic shrugged and put the arm into an inflatable cast.

Cope thanked the helicopter pilot, who said, "No problem." Then Cope drove the Daniels back to their cottage. The brothers curtly refused an invitation to stay for the party, so Tom collected their car keys from where he'd stashed them under their picnic table. Cope drove them back into town, left them by their car, gathered the parking tickets on the car, and watched them leave for Toronto.

Then he stuffed a chocolate cigarette into his mouth and went to Popham Bay to join the party.

\*\*\*

When the men had the barbecue going, and Josie was getting to know the others, Laura excused herself to get ice cubes from the Daniels cottage. Inside the freezer there were four trays. One was almost empty, two were full, and the bottom one was frozen with a few scraps of vegetable matter caught inside and slightly yellowish in color. She emptied the ice from the bottom tray into a coffee filter and ran warm water until there was nothing in the paper filter but a few strands of broccoli and a few clear stones. She pocketed the stones and took the two trays of ice cubes back over to the others. For the rest of the evening she watched as people used the cubes, but no one seemed to run across anything in their beer but beer and plain ice.

"Cheers," she said every time someone poured beer into a glass and added ice cubes.

\*\*\*

Damon and John and nine humans who used to host aliens put into Presqu'ile harbor, while John took a cab to get the van, which he'd left in the Provincial Park. When he got back, he offered to drive the nine rather shell-shocked humans back to Toronto.

"Or," he said, "whoever is Katherine Szczedziwoj can drive, and get her van back at the same time. I haven't transferred ownership, yet."

Katherine shook her head. "You can have the van. I intend to get rid of everything associated with that bastard I carried around for most of my good years. Just drive us to Toronto to get the rest of our cars. I'll find a ride to North Tonawanda with Brenda."

"You sure?"

"Oh yeah, I'm sure. We're all sure."

"How can I lose?" John turned to Damon. "See you in Kingston, then."

"Let's hope." Damon seemed at a loss for words. "But if you can get back here before morning, I'll still be here at the marina. Maybe you can get a room."

"Now that sounds like a plan I can endorse."

\*\*\*\*

## **Washington**

### *Three Days after Button Day*

In the Pentagon, there were now eight people gathered around a set of monitors. "Is that it?" one guy asked, pointing at a screen displaying a section of Lake Ontario.

"That's it," a gray-haired woman said.

"Are you sure?" a uniformed man asked her. "I thought there was no thermal or magnetic signature to the thing."

"There isn't," a man in plain clothes said. "But the sonar on *Seas the Day* picked up a reading at the limits of their range, and we're getting thermal stir from the lake.

"Pardon?"

"In shallow waters – water not as deep as oceans – movement stirs the cold deep water a bit, and some of that comes up to the surface. We can follow that as a trail."

"We're still just planning to observe?"

"That's the plan, but now that we know it's something special, we plan to do a lot of observing if it takes off."

"And if it just sits in a deep hole? I see it's heading for the deeper parts of the lake."

"Then we'll have lots of time to think of things to do."

The conversation went around the table. "Just how many aircraft are we sending in?"

"Yeah. We could scare the crap out of that ship."

"A dozen planes and helicopters, maximum. We assume whoever's down there knows the difference between observational planes and warcraft – which we're not using, anyway."

"We assume...."

"What do we tell the Canadians?"

"We tell them that the boat *Seas the Day* is lost and in trouble and we're trying to find her."

"That's a lot of planes to find a boat. Will they buy it?"

"Will we buy more of their softwood lumber?"

\*\*\*\*

## **Ward's Island**

### *Three Days after Button Day*

"Now what do you do?" Barb asked Darkh.

"Well. I guess I'll have to get another hobby." Darkh inspected his beer at the table on the deck of the Rectory Café as the sun went down. Then he smiled. "I'll think of something."

"There are more ghosts," Barb noted.

"Well, I guess. But I was just trying to find out if basic physics covered everything in the universe. I wanted to know if there was a supernatural as well as a natural." He paused. "Done that now. Like climbing Mount Everest; there's not much point in doing it twice. Although some people do, anyway."



"When a person opens a great door," Olnya said, "and finds a fog, then that person should wait. Another door will soon appear."

Darkh smiled. "You know that?"

Gabriel Dumont spoke. "She knows that." He looked at Olnya. "I don't know how I know that, but I know that."

"And you," Darkh asked Gabe. "What do you do now?"

"I have no idea." Gabe shook his head. "I get a bit nervous about it if I think about it, but then I realize that...."

"Dying once has its benefits," Barb laughed.

Then Darkh said, "Can I believe any of this, other than the ghost? Space aliens? Guys claiming to be reincarnated buffalo hunters?"

About that time, as the twilight was settling in and the lights of Toronto were going from bright to mystical, Olnya said, "It's time."

"Time for what?" Barb wanted to know.

"Time to follow me to the water," Olnya said, walking off down the path to the harbor. "I have to leave now."

She walked quickly, so it wasn't until they got to the dock that the other three caught up to her. There were shouts echoing across the bay, and some background noise. The ferry, docked at the wharf, was making grating sounds and tilting.

"Is it sinking?" Darkh asked, watching people scramble off the boat.

"A water monster is drinking," Olnya said, taking off her clothes. "The noise is the water draining out of the bay." She unhooked a dinghy attached to the far side of the wharf and got in. "Goodbye!" she waved as it was pulled into the bay by the retreating water. By this time the front end of the ferry was well below the wharf level, its front end grating on rocks. A flash of light caught Olnya standing in the dinghy for a moment against the lights of the city.

"Tsunami?" Barb asked, sounding panicked.

"If it is," Darkh said, "there's nothing we can do on an island like this. But I don't think so; on a lake as small as Ontario, we'd have felt the earthquake first."

"What's that sound?"

"Probably the noise of the bay waters draining out into the lake past the narrows. And people yelling."

"Now what?"

"Well," said Darkh, "we might want to go over to the lake side and watch to see what happens there."

\*\*\*\*

## **Lake Ontario**

### *Three Days after Button Day*

Late in the afternoon there were fifteen American aircraft cruising just south of the international boundary in Lake Ontario. A search-and-rescue helicopter from Rochester was facing a search-and-rescue helicopter from Trenton. Both of them were more or less over the *Seas the Day*, which seemed to be neither lost nor in trouble, and since the boat was still in Canadian waters for another few minutes, a short

helicopter duel ensued, each trying to get higher than the other and chuck non-essential equipment down onto the other.

About then the waters boiled and a gleaming blue-and-pink egg-shaped blob emerged from the surface of the lake. For a moment it hung there, then splashed back into the water and disappeared from sight. All the aircraft pulled back immediately, but nothing happened for a couple of hours except that the sun set and the helicopters and a few planes returned to base. And the water in Rochester Harbor drained into the lake. Some of the boats that hadn't been properly tied jammed together at the entrance before a few sank and the rest went into the lake.

\*\*\*

Sammy almost made it to Cobourg before the water started running away. He was in no hurry – this was a solo vacation with a case of beer, a carton of donuts, and an autumn afternoon. He didn't even monitor events until he got a priority call on his cell phone.

"Sammy?"

"Ahoy, Lester!"

"Stop drinking beer and eating donuts."

"I wouldn't do that."

"Great. Then you'll be perfectly able to handle an emergency nautical situation that's come up."

"No problem. Who's in trouble?"

"You, for one?"

"Pardon? Storm coming?"

"We wish. It looks like the lake's draining away."

Sammy sat up. It was getting dark and he could see the lights of Cobourg harbor ahead. "Pardon?"

"That's the information I'm getting. You're about to be caught in a riptide – a current – heading into the middle of the lake. I don't know what happens when you get there, but you might not want to find out."

"For real?"

"For real. Get onto land as quick as you can, if it's not too late."

"Got it."

Sammy put the engines on full and pointed *Serenity* at the harbor lights. He almost made it; he was within half a mile when the GPS showed him he wasn't getting anywhere and the motor started kicking up rocks and mud. He left the motor running, and chucked the anchor overboard. After a moment the motor shuddered to a stop. The anchor held, and Sammy turned on the radio to catch up on the news. Then he called Lester to say he was okay for the moment. Finally, he opened a beer, took a donut, and tried to decide whether to try walking through the mud in the dark to the shore. It looked like a bad idea, unless the water was going to come back fast enough to overwhelm the boat. After a minute, Sammy raised the anchor. The boat stayed where it was, tilted a bit and deep in mud. Sammy sat back to think.

\*\*\*

John Height got back to Gosport shortly after ten, traffic having been good for a change. He'd left the ten people close to the various parking spots where they'd left their cars, then, after being assured that the

van was still his – "the starter's probably not going to last," Katherine had said – he'd driven back listening to the collection of Tom Russell CDs that had come with the car.

When he pulled the van into the marina parking lot, Damon came to meet him. Apparently, Damon was with a group of other people down at the dock.

"Problems"? John asked.

Damon beckoned John to the docks. "You gotta see this." There were men and women standing on the docks, some with flashlights, most with beer. All the boats were sitting in the mud on the bottom of the Presqu'ile Bay. Back in the bulrushes a few fish, probably carp, thrashed around. "What do you think?" Damon asked.

John looked at it for a long time. "Just this bay, or more?"

"All of Lake Ontario's gone," a tall woman said. "That's what the radio says."

"Tsunami?"

"Not likely," Damon told him. "If it were, it would have been here by now. Nobody really knows how it happened."

"I know," John said. A crowd of people turned towards him. He pointed at Damon and said, "This son-of-a-bitch fired a cannon at an American boat this afternoon!" Into the silence that followed, he shouted, "and now the Damn Yanks have taken all our water in revenge!" He turned to Damon. "You still got those bottles of Pusser's Rum in the boat? Any excuse for a party, as Jimmy Buffet would probably tell us."

Damon nodded. "Finally, someone with a bit of common sense."

\*\*\*

Jag got the call while he was checking to see if the Daniels had left a bit of cilantro anywhere. He found lots of baked beans, lentils, sprouts, broccoli, cabbage, asparagus, sauerkraut and cauliflower instead. "Those guys must really have been popular in an elevator," he said. "These things cause a lot of gas. I know. What's that?"

"Someone want you," Shaman, who had gone with Jag, said.

"Phone call," Josie shouted. "Police department looking for Jagger R. Stone!"

"Cripes," Jag said to Shaman. "Why now? You guys almost had me convinced about these space aliens. Another couple of beers and I'd have been figuring it was possible."

Jag listened and nodded, and explained that he was in no shape to drive. A few more hmms, and he said he'd be waiting.

"They need me," he explained, "drunk or sober, as long as I can get the uniform on. Something about all the water draining from the lake and people taking to the hills in case there's a tsunami." He looked around. "Shall we walk to the lake while we're waiting?"

Which meant that they were standing on what used to be the edge of Popham Bay when a black-and-white pulled up to get Jag. He gave Laura a surprise hug, then left.

\*\*\*\*

Just before dawn the planes keeping watch saw the blue-and-pink egg-shaped blob rise suddenly above the water, flash brightly, then disappear with a bang. At the same time, those planes found themselves back a few miles, still flying normally.

At dawn there were many aircraft, military and civilian, over the lake, assessing the situation and searching for people who'd been on boats dragged away. They found a shallow remnant lake no more than twenty miles across, slowly rotating. Later reports confirmed that there had, apparently, been no boat-sucking whirlpool on the surface, just the disappearance of most of Lake Ontario's water.

There were, however, lots of boats, including the *Seas the Day* and *Trantor*, as well as a couple of lake freighters and an ocean-going cargo ship, floating among the debris. Anyone who had stayed on their boat, and had not been snagged by something as they were pulled away from shore, was fine. A fair number of the people who had fallen into the water or tried to escape their boats had survived as well. Helicopters shuttled people back to shore all day.

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### **Chapter 9: In the Days and Weeks After**

There was intense speculation in the media and social media, but then, there's always intense speculation there. Some quoted the few scientists who talked about a miniature black hole striking the planet. Most generally ignored the many scientists who claimed the event met none of the characteristics of any black hole in their mathematics, since they couldn't offer an alternate view. Scientists came in droves to the shores, many hiring farmers with tractors, and some succeeded in getting partway into the lake. The rest of surface exploration was done by pontoon-equipped helicopters, at least until one or two got stuck in the mud. Most scientists tried to get onto the abandoned boats still afloat, but there were plenty of military people there first.

A lot of people blamed American secret-weapons developments gone wrong. The CIA got more credit than it deserved, but it always did. There were a number of "senior military men" who came forward to explain that they'd worked for some years on a project, given various code names, to deprive the Soviets of waters in areas like the Black Sea in case of war. They generally sounded confident, anyway.

Scientists eventually came to a rough estimate of just a bit under twenty-five years to refill Lake Ontario. Waters were lowered on some lakes upstream to provide water. They let out as much as they could from Superior, but this didn't make much difference what with the bottleneck going into Erie. A plan to leave the Welland canal locks open at night was cancelled when engineers made an estimate of the erosion that would ensue to the canal.

Cope interviewed most everybody on the Canadian side except Lester and Sammy, to get information to Ottawa. A long conversation with Barb and Darkh left him more skeptical than before, but at least he arranged to get Gabriel Dumont a valid passport in the name of Gary E. Dumont, born in 1971 in Lampman, Saskatchewan. Tom Barrents got him a job as part of the groundskeeping crew at Trent University.

After a couple of months, Cope's daughter collected her sons. Cope and Paula took a cruise vacation in the Caribbean, but she never asked why Lake Ontario had gone dry while he was there, maybe because she thought he was involved somehow. Cope figured he'd tell her eventually.

Tom started lecturing again in Philosophy at Trent on an occasional basis, then worked his way back into a more or less regular job there. He's now working on a revision to his earlier work, *The Ulysses Trees*.

Darkh took up badminton and formed a team with a redhead who liked him and never put anything on a list.

Damon, like many others, eventually had his boat lifted by crane onto the shore, but so many boat owners wanted to find space on the other lakes that Damon didn't bother to move it for a year. He did buy a newer boat on Lake Huron.

Sammy left Patricia's boat, *Serenity*, and walked to shore in the morning, not bothering to wait for a helicopter rescue; he was a SEAL, after all. He arrived in Cobourg harbor after a couple of hours, covered in mud to his chest. Lester, once he'd stopped laughing, washed him in the creek and gave him new clothes. They were back in the States the next day.

Patricia paid someone with an Argo to take her to *Serenity* for the afternoon. When she looked at it, she almost decided to abandon it. Then she discovered the nature of the gravel bits that had taken out the windows of the boat and were embedded in much of the superstructure. She came back the next day with a chisel and a bag. After that, she did abandon *Serenity*. She also retired and bought a ranch in central Utah.

Barb still sells jams. After opening a small package the Daniels had mailed her before leaving for Brighton, she opened a couple of branch outlets in the Toronto area. She still lives on Ward's Island, which is quieter, now.

The Daniels' brothers leased out the house on Ward's Island and moved to Vancouver. They did not try to communicate with Barb, Laura, or anyone else in Ontario.

Clyde Books still hunts for aliens occasionally, in case there are more on the planet, but he's only trying to write a book about it, and is just looking for conversation. He's also taken up genealogy. He relaxed a lot after Jag got him a copy of the coroner's report, showing Casey Szczedziwoj was certainly dead after he hit the tree.

The Philip Group switched to playing euchre, among other things.

Nobody knows what happened to Olnya.

Jag now owns two old dogs. He never quite got back with his wife, and he and Laura write each other a lot.

Laura gave up trying to write consumer books about UFOs and went back to poetry. She became the New Hamburg area representative for The Ontario Poetry Society, and now meets with several other poets in the area, and has almost finished her next book, *The Tavern of Lost Souls*.

The eleven hgkpphtitrw got home safely, and are working for the new government. They were instrumental in extending the legislation that confirmed Earth as an area to be protected as a Potential Entertainment Zone. Only seven other planets in the explored area of the galaxy were considered weird enough to get that protection. It was noted in the legislation that up to fifty alien species were still hiding on the planet, and plans were made to see if they could be found.

\*\*\* END OF NARRATIVE \*\*\*

## **Chapter 10: Day-By-Day Summary of Sections**

### **B minus 4**

- Wind Turbines Foundation sonar sees a mystery object in Popham Bay, near Brighton .Both a branch of the CIA and CSIS are quietly notified.
- Cope (CSIS agent) is assigned to Brighton to investigate.
- Cope phones Jag, an old friend and current policeman, and asks to meet him
- Two space aliens, having taken over human bodies (the Daniels brothers), are depressed after 23 years hiding on earth.
- The Philips Group in Toronto decides to call up a ghost. named Gabriel Dumont.
- Darkh Blood, hunter of ghosts, learns of a possible alien. He calls up Clyde Books, hunter of aliens.

### **B minus 3**

- The Galactic Emperor is assassinated. The aliens hiding on Earth can go home.
- Clyde Books prepares to check out possible space aliens
- Laura Singer arrives in Brighton, buys a shovel in the hardware store, meets Jag, stays at the marina.
- Tom Barrents ("Mad Tom") talks to a man who claims to harbor a space alien
- On Chesapeake Bay, the SEAL team (Lester and Sammy)is promised to look into the mystery of Popham Bay

### **B minus 2**

- Laura meets Jag at the marina
- Clyde and another guy follow Casey (suspected to harbor a space alien) but Casey dies.
- Sammy and Lester, ex-SEALs, get to Toronto, are assigned to Brighton to find out whatever about the mystery object.
- The aliens get the "return home" signal, drive to their cottage on the shore of Popham Bay.
- Laura meets Jag at the Dixie Lee. They make an appointment to go by canoe to High Bluff Island. She claims to be looking for treasure.
- Tom meets alien in park
- Jasna writes letter to Laura
- Cope meets Jag at Carrying Place
- Cope arrives in Brighton. He and Jag see the SEALs arrive at the harbor. Laura goes to her rental cottage on the shores of Popham Bay.

### **B minus 1**

- Tom goes by canoe to Pine Lake
- Laura and Jag picnic on High Bluff Island
- }Seals find Laura's cottage The SEALs think Laura's an agent and decide to spy on her.
- Darkh and Clyde visit Wards Island in Toronto looking for aliens. They talk to one Barb; she tells them nothing useful, then phones the aliens/Daniels to warn them.
- Sam calls the White House for backup.
- Cope notifies Ottawa, asks Jag for dogs

- John Smith contacts White House
- Barb calls to warn the Daniels and Tom calls Laura (his cousin), to tell her he's coming to

Brighton

- Laura talks to aliens
- Jag reads Laura's poetry

### **Button Day**

• Laura watches as the aliens press the button that will activate the spaceship. She's warned that activation will cause some supernatural events in the area.

- Tom talks to a turtle
- The Philip Group calls up Gabriel Dumont ("Gabe").
- Seals order a sonar boat
- Gabe leaves and spends the night in a ravine.
- Laura sees ghost ship

### **B plus 1**

• Jag and Laura go to restaurant, then to Jag's house

• The SEALs invade Daniels' cottage, because it's next to Laura's cottage

• Mad Tom and Clyde arrive Brighton. They help the aliens/Daniels escape to High Bluff Island, on the other side of Popham Bay.

- SEALs return from getting a pizza
- Tom phones Laura, Jag calls Cope.
- Tom suspect the SEALs, and decides to hide in the woods
- Clyde is followed by Casey's ghost on beach
- Cope arrives at Laura's cottage with dogs, meets Tom
- Tom meets Cope; his diary
- Cope is captured by the SEALs and taken to Algonquin Island in Toronto. The SEALs then drive

back to the Daniels's cottage

- Gabe spends the night in a mission shelter in Toronto
- That night Darkh sees Rademuller's ghost on the island. (reported later only)

### **B plus 2**

- Darkh and Dumont tour the islands, meet aliens, find and free Cope
- The aliens discover they forgot "the rock"
- Jag and Laura worry about Cope. Laura gets her car and Tom.
- A short phone call between Jag and Laura
- Jag goes to cottage. SEALs capture him, but Shaman rescues him.
- Conch arrives Wards, meets aliens waiting at Daniels cottage; they leave for Brighton
- Ottawa and Washington consult by phone
- Cope calls HQ, Jag, gets rental car, is tracked on 401
- Laura goes to High Bluff Island with Books & Tom
- Lester, at the cottages, hears Tom and Laura's boat coming.

- Tom and Laura arrive at cottage by boat. With Jag and Shaman they find the rock but briefly lose it to Lester.

### **B plus 3**

- Darkh confesses to Barb
- Jim departs for spacecraft. Mailfactor arrives. Sammy, on *Serenity*, meets with fellow SEALs on *Seas the Day*. Cope arrives by helicopter, rescues Jim. The WTF boats blocks sonar signals. HALO team grabs Clyde. Tom and Laura head for the middle of the bay. Alien leaves Tom. Conch, in *Malifactor*, fires cannon. Aliens leave *Malifactor*. UFO escapes into lake. Americans send in observation planes.
- All boats and helicopters leave Popham Bay. Many gather at Laura's cottage for a party.
- The Americans send in more boats and planes for observation.
- On Ward's Island, Barb, Darkh, Gabe, and Olnya talk. As the bay drains leaves, Olnya leaves by boat.
- Air stand-off. UFO retreats to bottom. Lake drains. Spaceship leaves

## **Chapter 11: Characters and Places**

**hgkpphtitrw** : Slug-like space aliens. A dozen of them, seeking refuge, have taken over humans such as Jack and Jim Daniels.

**Al Lamson**: Human occupied by an alien. The alien claims to be on Earth doing a study of people.

**Albee and Ian**: High-level government contacts in Washington and Ottawa

**Alien Hunters International**: An internet-based group of people who believe there are space aliens on Earth, hiding in the bodies of humans.

**Barb**: runs Barb's Jams on Ward's Island. Friend to the Daniels

**BEM**: Bug-Eyed Monster

**Brighton**: A small town in Ontario near Lake Ontario.

**Button Day**: The day that the aliens press the button that starts the re-activation of Professor Nothing, their spaceship

**Cancu**: 3-line, seventeen-syllable poem – like a haiku but the arrangement of the syllables is free, and there is a title of up to 10 words.

**Casey Szczedziwoj**" Chehgeevoy, more or less Cheh-Gee-Voy', "although adding an "sh" at the front makes it a bit more accurate. He dies in a car crash, and his ghost haunts Clyde.

**Clyde Books**: Dedicated hunter of aliens from space. Tells Tom his name is "Pete." A member of "Alien Hunters International."

**Cope**: Oscar Copeman. Age 50. CSIS agent assigned to check out the WTF find. He contacts Jag, an old friend and Special Forces comrade.

**Cory and Potto**: Two dogs

**Darkh Blood**: A ghost hunter. People insist on telling him their troubles.

**Ethyl**. Name for someone in Canada's Security Intelligence Service. One of Cope's contacts in the organization.

**Gabriel Dumont**: reincorporated Métis leader of the 1885 rebellion.

**Gosport**: A suburb of Brighton. It has a marina with a café and motel.



**HALO Team** A military procedure involving free falling from high-altitude aircraft, then opening a parachute at a low altitude.

**High Bluff Island.** An island in Lake Ontario, near Brighton. It separates Popham Bay from the lake.

**Jack and Jim Daniels:** Humans currently under the control of alien (hgkpphtitrw) riders. They own cottages on Ward's Island in Toronto and on Popham Bay, near Brighton. Their spaceship has been sitting on the bottom of Popham Bay near Presqu'ile Park for the last 23 years.

**Jag** (Jagger Stone): Brighton cop, formerly of Toronto. Once a CSIS agent. Gets to know Laura. His ex-wife Tammy is ready to take him back. Friend of Cope

**Jasna Jones:** Social worker for Tom.

**John Altman:** A member of Alien Hunters International.

**John Height:** Damon Conch's sailing companion.

**John Smith:** Ex-CIA honcho. Retired, but with influence.

**Josephine Bryne:** Town archivist in Brighton.

**Kristof.** Alien who pays Damon for a ride to Popham Bay for himself and ten others.

**Laura Singer:** Poet and would-be documentary writer. She's using a story of treasure on High Bluff Island as a cover; she's more interested in the old UFO stories. Cousin to Mad Tom. Staying by Popham Bay in the cottage next to the Daniels cottage.

**Malifactor:** Damon Conch's sailboat.

**Mickey:** a Canadianism for a 13-oz bottle of liquor.

**Olnya Light:** Mystery girl.

**Paula:** Oscar Copeman's wife.

**Patricia:** runs a CIA safe house on Algonquin Island

**Philip Group.** A group of Toronto ghost-callers. They knew Tom, who used to talk about ghosts, and Darkh. They decide to call up Gabriel Dumont. Members of the group aren't listed here because they're basically irrelevant to the story.

**Popham Bay.** A bay of Lake Ontario near Brighton. High Bluff Island separates the bay from the lake and is across the bay from the cottages where the Daniels and Laura hang out.

**Professor Nothing:** the spaceship/UFO.

**Seas the Day:** Sonar boat used by U.S.

**Serenity:** Boat used by SEALs Sammy and Lester.

**Shaman Shaman:** Modern Caribbean shaman in Brighton.

**Damon Conch:** Sailor and re-enactor. His boat is *Malifactor*. He quotes Jimmy Buffet a lot.

**SEALs Sammy and Lester:** Two SEALs. Sammy is younger and less tolerant. Lester is older and wiser.

**Spooks:** Spies

**The Company:** CIA

**Tom:** Tom Barrents. Cousin to Laura Singer. Required to stay on his medications to prevent delusions.

**Trantor;** The Wind Turbines Foundation sonar boat.

**WTF:** Wind Turbine Foundation, a corporation planning to build a wind turbine farm in the waters off Presqu'ile Park. Their sonar scan discovers the alien spacecraft.

**Ward's Island**, Algonquin Island: Islands in Toronto Harbour.  
Other terms may have explanations on Google.

## Chapter 12: Maps and Location Notes

This is an approximation of the object on the bottom of Popham Bay.



Toronto Islands



Popham Bay



Approximate GPS coordinates of

- Popham Bay: 43° 59' N, 77° 45' W
- Ward's Island: 43° 37' 43" N, 79° 21' 20" W

### **Chapter 13: Notes from the Author**

Some of the decisions I made were purely arbitrary. For instance, I decided to make Toronto a magnificent, magical city. I decided that I wouldn't tell the thoughts or motives of any of the women in the book, leaving you to interpret those from actions, words, and body language.

I've mentioned a number of real products and establishments. I did that to give an air of reality to a fantasy book. I have received nothing from the people associated with the products and establishments; in most cases I don't even know them. I'd like to especially thank Barb, of Barb's Jams on Ward's Island: I liked the name when I went past it, and Barb has offered to let her name stand as a character in the book.

I apologize to Gosport. Fifty years ago it may have been a poor place, where people were suspicious of authority in any form. It's changed now, but I needed it the way it may have been back there.

Some of the characters have come from my other writings. Tom Barrents, for example, is a major figure in *Last Exit to Pine Lake*. Laura is from *The Minor Odyssey of Lollie Heronfeathers Singer*. Both Cope and the aliens have precursors in *Mount Moriah*.

The title to the book was provided by Casey Jozwiakowski.

I'd like to thank my wife, Dianne, for her help and encouragement.

Thanks to Eileen Crouch for pointing out the difference between cilantro and coriander (coriander's a seed).

\*\*\* END OF BOOK \*\*\*

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