

TRUST

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www.infectedbooks.co.uk

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Published by INFECTED BOOKS

www.infectedbooks.co.uk

This edition published 2005

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A catalogue record for the paperback edition of this book is available from the British Library

Paperback ISBN 0-9550051-4-0

3-3-0505-1

Part I

ARRIVAL

1

Once I get outside I'm fine.

All the nervousness, the trepidation and the apprehension disappears in seconds. You just keep putting one foot in front of the other.

People ask me why I run but I never give them a straight answer. I never give them an honest answer. I give them all the usual bullshit about keeping fit and healthy and I might tell them that I run because it's good to get out and find all those places you can't get to by car. When you're running, I sometimes tell them, you're everything and you're nothing. You don't matter to anyone but yourself. You can run past a hundred people and none of them know how far you've run or how much you're hurting. I tell people that I like to run because I like the quiet. I tell them I like to be on my own. I sometimes tell them that I like to think, but I never tell anyone what I think about.

I left home just under half an hour ago. There were a few grey clouds on the horizon. Now the entire sky is almost completely black and I know that in a couple of seconds the sun will disappear. There's a lone pocket of blue sky above me which is about to be swallowed up by dark clouds attacking it from all directions. I've seen this happen before when a storm's been brewing. The clouds suddenly stop following each other and start to criss-cross the sky at different heights and different speeds. Unpredictable and unstoppable.

My legs are aching and my head is pounding. The atmosphere is heavy and oppressive and there's a cold wind suddenly gusting all around me.

Christ, here it comes. I've done almost four miles and I'm soaked with sweat and now here comes the rain to make the last mile and a half home even more difficult. I've run down sheltered streets lined with buildings and footpaths covered by a canopy of trees but it's only now that I'm out here with no protection that the rain is really beginning to pour down. There's nothing I can do but keep on running. The harder I push myself, the sooner I'll be home.

Bloody hell. Now this is the real reason why I run.

I must have followed this dirt track a hundred times but it still takes my breath away. The rain's ice-cold and it's crashing down all around me now but it doesn't seem to matter. The view here is incredible. The muddy path is never more than a couple of feet across even at its widest point and it's hard going - boggy and uneven - but it's worth it when I reach the top of the hill. I'm out on the edge when I reach the top of the hills, following the line of the cliffs. A two hundred foot drop and nothing to see but the ocean.

The rain's so heavy now that it's almost like a mist. There's the first growl of thunder - a low, ominous rumble that I can feel through the ground. I can feel it in my legs and my belly. Exhilarating and humbling. A sudden split-second flash of electric blue light and another crack of thunder and now I'm beginning to wonder whether I'm in trouble here. I'm out on my own with no protection. I'm cold and wet and I feel as exposed as an electricity pylon. I might as well be playing golf as running.

There's another flash of light. This time I'm looking in the right direction, straight out over the ocean. The lightning seemed to hit the water just past the first rocks of the Devil's Peak. If I close my eyes I can still see it in negative. But closing my eyes is the last thing I want to do up here. Shit, almost lost my footing. I've got to concentrate. One slip and I've had it. It was a bloody stupid idea to come up this way today.

I never stop when I'm running. It's hard to get going again once you've slowed down. But something's not right. I can't put my finger on it. The rain's even colder now I'm standing still but that's not important. I can hear something over the noise of the sea and the storm. I can hear a new sound. A different sound.

There's a jet.

No, wait. There's more than one.

They don't usually fly much at this time of day, and certainly not in this weather unless there's a damn good reason. There are five of them flying in an arrowhead formation. When they fly along the valley they're a hundred times faster and nowhere near as loud as this. They're never usually this close to each other.

There are even more of them.

I can see seven jets now, sleek and dark, still flying in formation but they're getting lower. One by one they're emerging from the heavy cloud cover. They're well away from the land now and out over the ocean.

There's something else behind them.

They're leading it out of the clouds.

Jesus Christ.

Whatever this thing is it's huge. It's black and it's fucking enormous. Fucking hell, I've never seen anything like it. It's silent. All I can hear are the jets surrounding it. This thing is immense and it's not making a bloody sound. It seems to be going on forever - hundreds and hundreds of metres of Christ knows what stretching down through the clouds and out over the ocean. It looks and moves like a fucking submarine carving its way through the turbulent air. Its vast belly is black, smooth and featureless but for a few bright pinpricks of light towards the front. I can't even begin to estimate the size of this thing.

There are jets surrounding the entire machine. They look so small that they're like the shadows of scavenging birds against it. I can see the back end of it now - there's a huge brilliant ball of blue-white light behind the ship. That must be what's powering it. How can it be so quiet? Christ, how can something so big move without making a sound? All I can hear are the jets and the storm.

I can't look at the light. It's so bright and powerful. Jesus, I can feel my skin beginning to prickle and tighten with the heat. The rain and sweat is evaporating and there's steam snaking up from my skin.

The distance is deceptive. The whole convoy is moving at speed.

Just a couple of minutes since the first jet appeared and the last one is now disappearing from view. All I can see is the ball of light moving out to sea.

A second of silence, and then the sound of the waves on the rocks below and the driving rain returns a thousand times louder than before.

I've got to get home.

2

Thomas Winter was twenty-seven two weeks ago. He has one brother, Robert, who is three years his junior. There is no other family.

On March 13 last year Mary and Kenneth Winter - the parents of the boys - died in a car accident just outside London. Mrs Winter and the driver of the van that hit their car died instantly. Mr Winter hung on for a further four and a half days before passing away in hospital.

As the sole beneficiaries of their parent's joint will, the two boys received equal shares of a substantial estate. Mr Winter had been practical and had made arrangements well in advance which removed much of the burden from the two shell-shocked brothers. By November last year their parent's properties had been sold, their investments and pensions realised and their bank accounts closed.

Robert continued with his studies at university - there he managed to find an oasis of normality when

the rest of his world had been tipped on its head. Thomas, on the other hand, left his city office job and bought a modest bungalow in Thatcham, a small fishing village some twenty miles from where he had been brought up.

Thomas has a girlfriend, Siobhan, who he genuinely adores. When his parents died most of his friends quickly disappeared. Siobhan stayed by his side throughout and remained strong, dedicated and supportive. Even on the nights when Thomas sat alone and cried himself to sleep in the darkness, when he wouldn't eat or drink and when he'd speak to no-one, she had waited nearby. She knew that he would need her eventually.

The village of Thatcham is on the east coast and is popular with holidaymakers throughout the summer.

It is late August.

3

I sprinted down from the cold and exposed hillside and then tripped and stumbled through the rain-soaked streets of the village. The holiday season was almost over and the summer crowds had begun to subside. There seemed to have been more tourists than ever this year but now only a determined minority of the annual sun-seeking invasion force remained.

I ran down the main promenade and followed the cobbled street which ran parallel with the curve of the shingle beach. There was a long and irregular line of shuffling figures gathered along the arc of the grey sea wall. They were all stood with their backs to me, every last one of them staring out over the ocean and out towards the dark horizon. Families stood together in bright waterproofs talking, for once, to the normally insular and reticent locals. It was obvious that they'd all seen the same incredible sight that I'd just witnessed. No-one could have missed it. Even though I was only there for a few breathless seconds, I could sense a peculiar unease and uncertainty hanging in the air. The locals, the tourists and myself were united in the fact that none of us had a bloody clue what had just happened.

The heavy black clouds had smothered the afternoon with a murky darkness. I glanced up the hill towards home and could see my cottage. Bright yellow electric light was shining out from the living room and, standing in the window, I could see Robert's silhouette. He too was staring out towards the horizon hoping to catch sight of the awesome thing (whatever it was) that had silently flown by a couple of minutes earlier.

I took another deep breath of damp, electrically-charged air and followed the road round the hairpin bend and then up towards the cottage. The final hill usually hurt more than any other part of my run. I was so preoccupied thinking about what I'd seen that I didn't even notice the pain.

'Fucking hell, Tom!' Rob yelled as I crashed clumsily through the front door. 'Did you see it?'

For a few seconds I couldn't breathe, let alone speak. I swallowed, slowly lifted my head and nodded. Coughing to clear my throat, I stumbled into the kitchen to get a drink.

'I saw it,' I managed to gasp between breaths.

'And?' he pressed, obviously keen for me to expand.

'And what?' I replied, still struggling to force enough oxygen into my body to prevent me from passing out. Now that I'd finished the effort and pace of the final mile of my run was starting to hit home.

'I don't know,' Rob continued, oblivious to my suffering, 'what do you think it was? Where the hell did it come from?'

I shrugged my sweat-soaked shoulders and peeled off my sodden T-shirt. I leant against the nearest unit for support, kicked off my muddy trainers and looked up at my brother and shook my head.

'You tell me,' I mumbled, still finding it difficult to talk. He walked away and I slowly followed him back into the living room.

'I can't believe it,' he babbled excitedly, 'I mean, for bloody years we've been talking and dreaming about something like this happening and now it has. More than that, it's happened here! Christ, the most important event in the history of bloody history itself and we're smack bang in the middle of it!'

I really did want to match Rob's obvious enthusiasm and excitement but at that moment in time it was impossible. I had a thousand and one questions running through my tired brain but I didn't have the energy to even try and answer any of them. My mind was willing, but my body was most definitely still weak.

'I was in the kitchen when I heard the jets,' he continued regardless. 'I heard them fly over and I came in here to see what was going on. I thought we'd gone to war or something and then I saw it. Bloody hell, it flew right over the village! It must have been a couple of miles long...'

Robert didn't stop talking but I stopped listening. I walked across to the wide bay window on the far side of the room and, dressed only in my shorts and muddy socks, I looked out towards the horizon and then down onto the busy village below. The streets which had been relatively empty for much of the day were suddenly teeming with figures and there was still a decent sized crowd gathered by the sea wall. The storm was finally passing and moving out to sea and as the heavy clouds began to creep away the low light of the afternoon gradually began to improve.

'So what was it?' I asked, inadvertently cutting across my brother and repeating his earlier question. I hadn't actually meant to ask it, I was just thinking out loud.

'For Christ's sake,' Rob sighed, 'what do you think it was?'

'I think it was a spaceship,' I muttered, unable to think of a more impressive way of describing the most incredible sight I (or anyone else) had ever witnessed. 'But it can't have been. That's ridiculous.'

'Why is it?'

'What?'

'Why is that ridiculous?'

'A spaceship?! Come on, we don't...'

‘We’ve been sending people out into space for decades, haven’t we? If we can do it then...’

‘Yes, but...’

‘But nothing. Just accept it, Tom, this afternoon we were visited by bloody aliens!’

Regardless of what I knew I’d seen, the reality was too incredible to believe.

‘Aliens? Fucking hell, there’s no way that...’

‘So what was it then?’

‘I don’t know. It could have been a prototype for a new type of plane or an airship or something like that?’

‘Bollocks,’ he snapped.

I knew he was right but I still instinctively tried to find an alternative explanation. It just sounded so damn implausible. I mean, aliens and spaceships for Christ’s sake? And anyway, why would any alien in its right mind choose to make its debut appearance here out in the back-end of nowhere on a miserable Friday afternoon?

‘Thousands of people must have seen it,’ Rob continued. ‘There’s no way the authorities can try and keep this quiet, is there? They’re not going to be able to come up with a good enough story to cover this up. How can they expect...’

‘Bloody hell, be quiet will you?’ I snapped. My brother was getting on my nerves. Whenever he became excited he would talk incessantly, and that really pissed me off because my natural reaction was to do the opposite - I just wanted to shut up and concentrate and try and make some sense of what was happening. I switched on the television and sat on the floor in front of the screen.

‘Jesus...’ Robert whispered as he sat down on the sofa behind me.

‘It doesn’t look like they’re even going to bother trying to hush it up, does it?’ I said.

Virtually every channel carried the same picture - a direct live feed from the bobbing deck of a boat which swayed and rocked with the waves of the sea some fifty miles off the coast. The unsteady camera work revealed the huge ship we had seen in all its dark glory. Enormous and impervious, it hovered silently hundreds of feet above the restless water. A fleet of boats were dotted around the scene. Countless helicopters and planes buzzed and fluttered relentlessly through the swirling skies on all sides of the mighty craft. When one of the helicopters flew towards the camera from close to the hull of the ship its relative insignificance made the massive machine’s vast proportions instantly and incredibly apparent. The camera pulled back again to show more of the ragtag flotilla of cruisers, ferries, tugs and other ships (most obviously military, others apparently more industrial in their design) that had gathered in the shadows of the mysterious titanic.

‘I just don’t believe this,’ Robert mumbled under his breath. ‘They’re here. They’re actually here...’

I had given up trying to shut Robert up and I turned up the sound to try and compensate. The unsure voice of an obviously dumbfounded commentator was speaking.

‘...just to remind you that for the time being we’ll be staying with this live coverage,’ the woman’s voice said, ‘and to repeat once again that these are genuine pictures. This is not a hoax.’

I looked over my shoulder. Robert had a dumb, childish grin plastered across his face. I turned back and continued to stare into the screen, hypnotised by a combination of bewilderment, disbelief, nervousness and utter amazement.

It was one of those life-defining moments.

Like watching the Gulf wars kicking off live on TV.

Like watching the space shuttle explode in the sky.

Like hearing that the princess had died in the tunnel.

Like watching the World Trade Centre collapse after the terrorist strikes.

I knew that nothing was ever going to be the same again.

A stream of information ran across the bottom of the television screen which read; 'Confirmed arrival of alien ship. First official word from the Government due shortly. Downing Street spokesman advises population to remain calm. No evidence of hostility...'

'Can you imagine what Dad would have made of all of this,' Rob whispered. I nodded and smiled. My brother's fervour and wonder would have paled into insignificance next to that of our dad. He had been a keen kitchen-sink scientist and amateur astronomer for as long as I could remember. He'd always seemed to be more interested in what was happening in space than in his own home and I would have given anything to have had him sitting next to me and watching the television now. He would have been so bloody excited. It all would have meant so much to him.

'So what do you think the politicians are going to say?' Rob asked.

'Don't know,' I replied. 'You would have expected them to try and play things down but I don't see how they can now.'

'Why?'

'Because so many people have seen so much, that's why. They've got to come clean and tell us everything they know.'

'Everything?'

'Well they've got to make the population believe that they've been told everything, haven't they? They'll do more harm than good if they don't. The more they tell us, the less there is for people to make up for themselves. And the less people make up the...'

The picture of the ship on the television screen disappeared and was replaced by a news reader's face. The Government's announcement was imminent. The speed of events only served to emphasise the potential gravity and scale of our situation. For me the appearance of the first grey-suited politician on the screen instantly took away the edge of excitement and replaced it with a sobering degree of nervous uncertainty. I sensed that the words I was about to hear would set an important tone. Any hostility or fear in the diplomat's voice would indicate that our safety was not as guaranteed as we might naively have presumed in the bewilderment of the afternoon.

The official walked towards a speaker's plinth and as he did so he was showered with a relentless stream of light from a hundred camera flashes. He paused for a second to collect himself and then cleared his throat before speaking.

‘Earlier this morning,’ he began, his voice initially unsteady, ‘various observatories and scientific outposts around the world and in space were made aware of the presence of an unidentified object on the outskirts of our solar system. As the progress of this object was tracked it changed course several times before finally heading towards Earth.’ He paused for a moment and shuffled awkwardly from foot to foot. ‘Although no direct contact has been made as yet, the ship has broadcast a continual signal which, to all intents and purposes, seems to be a distress transmission.’

A second pause, this time long enough to allow the assembled reporters to fire off a volley of desperate questions at the politician while their associated photographers launched another barrage of flashes. The defenceless spokesman lifted his hands in an attempt to restore some order.

‘The ship has been led away from land and is currently holding a position some fifty miles from the east coast of England. No resistance was offered to the armed air escort which guided it out over the ocean and, despite continual attempts, no contact has been made with whoever, or whatever, is piloting it. There’s really nothing more I can tell you at the present time...’

As the spokesman was hit with another barrage of camera flashes and questions I stood up and walked over to the window again. There were still flurries of activity in the village streets below. It had stopped raining and the crowds around the sea wall remained. They seemed surprisingly happy and relaxed. Even from a distance I could see that there was a surprisingly calm and peaceful atmosphere in Thatcham.

I could identify with the people outside. Strange and pretentious as it might have sounded, each one of them was suddenly a friend and an ally. The unexpected arrival of a new and previously unknown life form to the planet already seemed to have made the indigenous human population subconsciously bond closer together. I could see it happening everywhere I looked. People were standing and talking and laughing with people they wouldn’t have even looked at yesterday. Already there were no longer black people and white people or Muslims and Christians and Jews or men and women or upper class and working class. There were just people.

‘Where do you think Dad would be now?’ Rob asked. I glanced over at him sitting cross-legged on the sofa. He had a deadly combination of concentration, fascination and excitement fixed on his face. If I half-closed my eyes I could see a five year-old Robert watching Star Wars, not a twenty-four year-old watching footage of man’s first confirmed contact with an alien intelligence. I half expected Dad to come into the room.

‘Knowing what he was like,’ I eventually replied, ‘he’d either be out there on a boat trying to get as close as he could or he’d still be up in the attic trying to find his binoculars.’

Rob laughed.

‘I’d go for the boat,’ he smiled. ‘He’d have been first on the scene.’

I’d have given anything for him to have been there watching the world change with us.

Cold and shivering, I forced myself to move and dragged my tired body into the bathroom.

When I moved to Thatcham I made a real and very conscious effort to try and keep myself to myself. It wasn't that I didn't want to be with anyone else, rather I didn't want to be drawn into communal life. I didn't want to become just one of the crowd or part of the fixtures and fittings. I wanted some space and some distance from the rest of the world around me. Unfortunately it didn't work.

Drink was my problem.

I was developing a real taste for beer, and it was fast becoming part of the regular routine that I'd vowed never to have. Siobhan, a few friends and myself had got into the habit of going into The Badger's Sett pub every Friday night for a few drinks. I hadn't realised that it had become so routine until, last Friday, I'd walked in there and found my drink waiting on the bar for me. Ray Mercer - the landlord - had poured it ready.

This Friday most people needed a drink more than usual.

Siobhan called at the house just before eight. I watched her arrive from the bedroom window and followed her every step as she walked up the short garden path and let herself in. There was no getting away from the fact that she was absolutely bloody beautiful. The intense buzz of excitement when I saw her was as strong today as it had always been. A cliché perhaps but true nonetheless - she was an inspiration to me. There had been some dark days recently - perhaps the darkest days - and she'd been the single beacon of light that had guided me safely through it all.

She was standing in front of the TV when I walked into the living room. I didn't say anything. I just crept up behind her, wrapped my arms around her and held her tight.

'You okay?' I asked, whispering softly into her ear.

She pushed herself away slightly and turned around so that she could look into my face. She smiled and nodded and we kissed with the kind of passion normally reserved for lovers who have been separated for days or weeks. It had only been a few hours since we'd last been together.

'I'm fine,' she replied, still close and with her gentle breath ticking my face. 'Are you?'

'I'm okay.'

She sat down on the sofa. Like the rest of the population Siobhan was transfixed by the activity out over the ocean and she stared at the television screen in the corner of the room. I, on the other hand, continued to stare at her. Of course I was interested and anxious to know what was happening out at sea, but staring at Siobhan was infinitely preferable. She looked incredible in a short summer dress which left little to the imagination. That wasn't a problem, because there wasn't any aspect of her perfect body which my vivid imagination hadn't already explored a thousand times or more. The clouds had lifted outside and brilliant orange sunlight flooded into the room, blinding her momentarily and obscuring her view of the TV screen. I took advantage of the distraction.

'You look fantastic,' I said as I sat down next to her and pushed my head close to hers. She wrapped her arms (and then her long legs) around me and pulled me close.

'Only fantastic?' she teased, her voice deliberately low and sultry.

‘No,’ I replied, shuffling closer to her (and shuffling to get comfortable because my trousers were tight and were becoming tighter by the second), ‘you look fucking fantastic.’

‘That’s better.’

I wanted her and she knew it. She was playing with me, and she was driving me wild.

‘Fancy me?’ she asked. She knew the obvious answer. Something about the way I was literally drooling over her must have given my less than subtle interest away.

‘You know I do,’ I answered, my breathing suddenly shallow.

‘Want me?’

She stretched her legs further round until they held me tight. She pulled me down until the hard bulge in my jeans was pressed tight against her.

‘That’s a stupid question...’

Robert walked into the room.

‘Christ, give it a rest will you?’ he sighed. I rolled over and sat down next to Siobhan, instantly deflated. Out of my brother’s view she rested her hand on my crotch and squeezed.

‘Later,’ she whispered. ‘I promise.’

‘Can’t you leave each other alone for a few minutes,’ Rob whined sarcastically.

We sat and waited for James Marchant, a friend of ours, to arrive. He eventually turned up at twenty past eight (fifty minutes later than planned - something of an improvement for James) and made no apology. James was a hardworking man (he still worked for the firm I recently resigned from) and, a couple of months ago, his wife had given birth to their forth child. If anyone had a valid excuse for being late, it was James.

The four of us were uncharacteristically quiet as we walked through the village to the pub. With everything that had happened today we had plenty to talk about but I guessed that each of us needed time to individually come to terms with the unexpected events of the day. Once we were ready, I decided, then the alien arrival would no doubt become the mainstay of virtually every conversation for weeks to come.

The Badger’s Sett was packed. Drinkers had overflowed outside and were sitting on the grass in front of the building, on the low stone wall surrounding it, on the bonnets of their cars in the car park - anywhere that they could find a space. Once inside I pushed my way through to the bar while the other three looked for a table. Ray Mercer acknowledged me from a distance. By the time I’d fought my way through to him he was already in the middle of pouring our usual round of drinks.

‘Bloody hell, Ray,’ I yelled, struggling to make myself heard over the dull roar of conversation and thumping music. ‘Busy, aren’t you?’

He nodded.

‘Been like it all afternoon, Tom,’ he shouted as he took my money. ‘Not complaining though. Bloody aliens can come here every Friday if it’s going to do this to me profits!’

‘You must have the whole village in here!’

‘I think everyone needs a drink after today...’

Ray disappeared to serve another customer and I began the precarious journey across the room to find the others.

‘It’s heaving in here,’ Rob said, stating the obvious as I reached the small table they’d found in a hidden corner.

‘We could go back to mine later,’ I suggested. ‘I can hardly hear myself think.’

The atmosphere was hot and dry. I picked up my pint and knocked half of it back with a couple of long, thirsty gulps.

‘So,’ I said, wiping my lips, ‘what are we going to talk about?’ The others laughed - the answer was obvious.

‘The weather?’ offered Siobhan.

‘Football?’ tried James.

‘Alien invasions?’ said Rob, unable to think of anything else to say.

And that was it. For the next two hours we talked about nothing else. Each one of us recounted exactly where we’d been and what we were doing when the alien ship had arrived. We shared our questions, fears, concerns and anything else that came into our minds over far too many pints of beer.

It was a strange night. Nowhere near as strange as the afternoon that had preceded it mind, but still strange nonetheless.

Locked in constant, fierce competition with The Sun (the pub across the road), The Badger’s Sett was a warm, comfortable and welcoming place. The drink was always good, there was always hot and cold food available and there wasn’t a single video game machine in sight. It was a traditional British pub - the traditional heart of a traditional British village - and not really the kind of place where you’d expect to find yourself debating mankind’s position in the universe. But at that moment it seemed as good a place as any.

By ten o’clock our usually relaxing surroundings had become even more crowded and was filled with even more smoke and noise. The day’s events, our long conversation and the effect of copious alcohol combined to leave the four of us sitting round the table feeling suddenly quiet, insular and reflective. For a time the conversation between us was sparse, forced and sporadic.

My eyes were becoming heavy and the smoke hanging in the air was beginning to make them sting. I excused myself and stood up and went outside to get some air. When I returned (only a few minutes later) I noticed that Ray had dragged an old television set out of one of the pub’s back rooms and had set it up at the far end of the bar. Without warning Ken Trentham - by habit one of Thatcham’s most miserable and reclusive inhabitants - grabbed hold of my arm and stopped me as I made my way back to my friends.

‘What’s going on?’ he mumbled. ‘What d’you think they’re doing here?’

‘No idea, Ken,’ I answered abruptly, keen to get away.

'I've never known anything like it,' he whispered dramatically.

'None of us have,' I replied as I tried to push past him and get back to the others.

'Nothing good'll come of this,' he hissed, leaning towards me secretively. 'You mark my words.'

'Whatever,' I mumbled, trying hard not to breathe in. The old man stank - an acute and repugnant combination of stale alcohol and halitosis. He stared into my face with cloudy, bloodshot eyes.

Trentham turned away for a second to pick up his pint and I seized on the chance to get away.

'Bloody hell,' I gasped as I sat down heavily on my hard wooden chair.

'Christ, was that Ken Trentham you were speaking to?' Siobhan asked incredulously.

I nodded.

'Well, it was more a case of him speaking to me,' I smiled, 'but yes, it was Trentham.'

'I didn't know you knew that dirty old bugger,' James said. 'I've lived round here for almost twenty years and I've only ever seen him talk to his dog before now...'

'I don't know him,' I said defensively.

'It's not like him to be so sociable...'

'Fucking hell,' laughed Rob, 'he must be their first victim!'

'What are you talking about?' asked Siobhan, confused.

'The aliens,' he grinned. 'Can't you see what they're doing? They've only been here for a few hours and already they're screwing up the minds of normally upstanding members of the community! Before you know it we'll all...'

'Bullshit!' I snapped.

Rob shrugged his shoulders.

'Of course it is.'

'People are acting differently though,' Siobhan whispered.

'What do you mean?' asked James.

She shrugged her shoulders.

'Well just look at this place,' she said, 'it's packed. It's like a show of unity, isn't it?'

'Is it?'

'Yes. It's the old Dunkirk spirit rearing its head again.' A little uncertain, she paused and looked around the table. 'The rules changed today, didn't they?'

'You're right. There's a new player in the game,' Rob agreed. 'None of us know who they are or what they're going to do and it's making us feel nervous. I don't suppose anyone here knows they're doing it.'

‘Doing what?’ interrupted James who seemed to be missing the point.

‘Bonding together,’ I explained. ‘Like with like, can’t you see it? This ship has arrived and it’s different, and suddenly it doesn’t matter what race you are, what religion you are, we’re all the same.’

‘The same?’

‘Well, less different than we were this morning...’

I stopped speaking. The pub had suddenly become silent.

The jukebox had been switched off.

No-one at the bar was being served.

A brief blast of static and white-noise filled the air as Ray struggled to force an aerial lead into the back of the television set.

More silence.

Then more hissing. More static.

More silence.

A flickering picture appeared on the screen, disappeared and then reappeared seconds later.

‘Got it!’ yelled Ray.

A perfect picture (from where we were sitting) and clear sound.

I struggled for a second or two to focus through the smoky haze. The television showed more pictures of the alien ship hovering over the ocean. The scene was darker, of course, and a hundred dancing spotlights now ran continually along the smooth underbelly of the vast machine, but generally nothing seemed to have changed.

‘Silly beggars,’ Mrs Grayson, the lady who worked in the newsagent’s said. Her voice was so loud and shrill that everyone could hear her. We used to joke that when she spoke her squeal was so high-pitched that it made the dogs in the street stop and run to her whenever she opened her mouth. ‘The whole of the bloody universe to chose from and those daft sods wind up here at the back-end of nowhere!’

‘Bloody hell,’ Rob whispered, ‘can you imagine what the odds against them turning up here must have been?’

He was right. The chances of the aliens finding our planet must have been slim enough, but to have stumbled upon our village? It defied all comprehension.

Rob got up and went to fetch more drinks.

I shuffled my seat round so that I had a better view of the television screen, taking care to stay close to Siobhan. Her hand was resting on my knee. Her touch was more comforting and reassuring than usual tonight.

‘It’s hard to believe that the rest of the world is watching us here,’ she said under her breath. ‘Just think, millions of people round the world are watching the same pictures as we are, and we’re only a few

miles away from where it's all happening.'

'Makes you nervous, doesn't it?' I said, suddenly feeling brave enough to be honest about my emotions. 'I just want to know what they're here for.'

Robert returned to the table and put down another round of drinks. He spilled half of my pint - he couldn't cope with handing round the beers and watching the television at the same time. I tried to mop up the spilt drink with an already soggy beer mat and, as I did so, I became aware that the pub had fallen silent again. I looked up, instantly unnerved.

Every face was angled towards the television set, and every last face bore an expression of bewildered fascination and uncertainty. I rubbed my tired eyes and stared into the flickering screen.

The pictures being broadcast were still coming from a position similar to that from which the footage we had seen earlier in the day had been shot. The dark and featureless alien ship was silhouetted against the clear, star-filled sky and its immense belly was gently illuminated by lights from the countless ships floating on the rolling ocean below. As I watched, a large rectangular section of the vessel's metal skin began to slowly slide back in on itself leaving a wide, black hole in the machine's otherwise featureless undercarriage. I swallowed hard (my mouth was dry) and watched as a soft light began to shine out from the insides of the ship. A sleek, bright and smooth, streamlined object (a missile perhaps?) drifted down into the space between the ship and the surface of the ocean and then stopped. It just hung there, completely motionless.

'What the fucking hell is that?' Robert croaked, his voice also dry with nerves. 'You don't think that...' He stopped himself from completing his half-finished sentence.

The pictures on the television screen continued although I feared that, if it was some kind of alien weapon which had just appeared, the live transmission might be cut at any second. In the dark haze on the screen I could just about make out countless shifting shapes scurrying to and fro on the decks of the cruisers and battleships that had gathered there in the past few hours. Within a minute of the mysterious new object appearing the sky had filled with swarms of jets, helicopters and surveillance aircraft. Every last weapon on the deck of every last one of the floating war machines was primed and trained skywards, all aimed towards the awesome creation hanging soundless and motionless in the turbulent night air.

A brilliant electric-blue light began to shine out from the back of the second, smaller alien ship and then, as I held my breath along with the rest of the planet, it gracefully swooped down towards the surface of the water. Instinctively I squeezed Siobhan's hand and she pulled me closer to her. Like a glider drifting back down to land, the second ship soared silently through the night, eventually stopping perfectly still just a few feet above the rolling waves.

Every single available spotlight was fixed on the new machine. And every face in the room continued to stare at the television set on the bar.

For a long time nothing happened.

There was a long, overpowering and oppressive silence in the pub. A few muffled conversations were taking place but, generally, few people spoke. At twenty-past eleven Ray Mercer cleared his throat and banged a glass on the bar to attract the attention of his customers. Most people didn't react. One or two glanced up at him to see what the disturbance was before turning back to face the television set again.

'Ladies and gents,' Ray shouted, seemingly unconcerned at the lack of attention being paid to him. 'I don't know about the rest of you, but I think we need to keep drinking tonight. To hell with the law, we're going for a late one. We're staying open.'

Had Ray made that announcement on any other night his words would have earned him a round of applause and a standing ovation at the very least. Tonight, however, the reaction of his customers was unusually muted and subdued. A steady stream of drinkers continued to make their way quietly to the bar. The television and the ringing of Ray's till were the loudest sounds to be heard.

And still the two alien ships hung motionless over the ocean.

We had amassed a vast collection of empty glasses on our small table and I was alarmed to see just how much drink we had managed to knock back in our extended evening session. I felt fine - completely sober in fact - and that alarmed me too. The alcohol I'd drunk hadn't had its normal numbing effect on my brain. What was happening out to sea was keeping everyone's emotions firmly in check and our feet on the ground.

The next time anyone spoke (other than when they fetched another round of drinks or disappeared off to the toilet) it was well past midnight. Without any of us noticing Friday night had silently disappeared and become Saturday morning.

'Shit!' James yelled. He had noticed me checking the time and had looked at his own watch. 'Christ, have any of you seen the time? Bloody hell, Steph'll have my balls if I don't get back...'

'What?' Siobhan mumbled, half-listening. Like just about everyone else she was still watching the television screen.

'I've got to go,' he said anxiously. 'Jesus, I'm in trouble now...'

'She'll understand,' Robert yawned. 'Just tell her you were watching the television and you got engrossed.'

'Do you really think she'll buy that?'

Rob shrugged his shoulders.

'Why not? She's probably sat there at home watching it herself.'

'No,' James whined, 'she's going to go ballistic. I can't tell her I've been watching telly, can I? Christ, we've got three bloody tellies at home. She'll want to know why I didn't go back and watch one of those, won't she?'

'All right then,' Siobhan sighed. 'Why don't you just go back now and...'

She suddenly stopped speaking. I looked up from my pint to see that something was finally happening on the television screen.

The smaller alien ship (which I'd decided was a shuttle craft of sorts) hadn't moved since it had first drifted down from the belly of the mother ship. Now, without any apparent warning, it had silently raised itself slightly higher into the turbulent air and was being illuminated by the brightest, most brilliant light imaginable. Even more intense than the blinding light which had shone from the other ship's engines, it flooded the entire scene and it was almost as if the sun had suddenly reappeared in the dark night sky. This new light, however, came from deep within the bowels of the massive ship hovering above. As I stared at the shuttle on the screen a small, rectangular opening appeared in its roof. My tired eyes immediately became bright and focussed again.

'I don't believe this...' James said under his breath, instantly forgetting about going home.

A lone figure silently emerged from the shuttle craft. Lifted up into the air by some kind of graceful hovering platform, the figure remained completely motionless until its feet were clear of its ship. It then stepped off the platform and out onto the hull of the vessel.

The first alien that I (or anyone else for that matter) had ever seen was an unnerving and yet strangely exciting and inspiring sight to behold. It stood somewhere between six and seven feet tall (although the distance made it difficult to be certain about the size) and I decided that it was probably male (if there was such a thing as a male or female alien). There was something about its appearance and the way it carried itself which led me to think that way. The creature had smooth, dark pink skin and it looked, to all intents and purposes, as if it had spent too long basking unprotected under the strong summer sun. Its head was unusually disproportionate and looked almost too heavy and cumbersome to be supported upon such a gaunt and wiry frame. There was a light covering of greasy grey - almost silver - hair on top of its head which clung to its skin and which was swept back away from the temples. Dressed in a formal uniform which seemed to be made of a light, cotton-like material, the alien stood proud and motionless for the longest thirty seconds in history.

What thoughts must have been running through its head as it stood there?

The creature seemed content to stand its ground with an almost military authority as it was scanned, scrutinised and inspected by the entire population of our planet.

The first official contact between our two species was about to be made.

'Shit,' Robert whispered. 'Is that what I think it is? Is that thing really an alien?'

'Well what else could it be?' I mumbled with my mouth still hanging open in awe. 'A fucking rabbit?!'

In the hours since the ship had first appeared I had just about managed to come to terms with the implications of its unexpected arrival. Now that I was sitting watching live television pictures of an alien, however, my ability to accept what was happening was suddenly questioned. The nervous disorientation I had felt earlier returned. Everything was back to square one again.

'What do they want?' Rob asked. He had an irritating habit of asking pointless questions that no-one could answer at just the wrong time.

'Bloody hell,' I snapped, irritated, 'how the hell should I know?'

The alien on the screen continued to stand its ground as the fevered activity in the surrounding seas

became even more frenzied and intense. Very slowly it seemed to take a long, deep breath and then tilted its obtuse head back on its slight shoulders until it was looking straight up towards the source of the brilliant white light that continued to pour down from the bowels of the mothership hovering high above. The television picture suddenly changed to a close-up of the creature taken from a nearby boat. I was taken aback by the obvious similarities to a human face. Other than an unusually pronounced forehead (which gave the alien a slightly Neanderthal appearance - totally unjustified considering the obvious technical expertise of the species) the basic facial elements were much the same as our own. It had a wide, thin-lipped mouth, a small button nose, two ears (which were flat and smooth and tilted back at a more acute angle than a human's) and a pair of sharp, crystal-blue eyes.

The alien looked back down from the mothership, took another deep breath of salty sea air (was it nervous?) and then turned to its right where a group of heavily armed soldiers waited on the deck of a small military boat. The shuttle drifted down lower until it was almost touching the waves. The creature then held its arms out wide to indicate, perhaps, that it had nothing to hide, and then carefully walked down the sloping hull of its ship. It stepped out onto the boat which then, in a matter of a few short seconds, disappeared away into the night.

The light from the mothership faded into darkness.

Once again the entire pub was silent.

Another few seconds (which felt like minutes) passed before anyone did or said anything else. Ray Mercer rang the bell for last orders.

'Right then, ladies and gents. Let's have those glasses now please.'

Obediently and without any complaints the pub slowly emptied.

'Ready?' I asked Siobhan. She nodded, yawned and reached out for me.

'I'm tired,' she sighed as she wrapped her arms around my neck.

It was twenty-past one. We walked back home together in silent disbelief.

6

By the time I woke up next morning it was almost the next afternoon. I was more tired than I had been before I'd gone to bed. I also had a chronic (but not totally unexpected) hangover. It was almost as if the beer I'd drunk last night had been on a time delay. I'd felt fine when I'd fallen into bed in the dark but now I felt like death warmed-up. Siobhan had got up and gone to work early and I hoped that she was feeling better than I was. My head was thumping and my stomach was so sickeningly sensitive that for a few minutes the nausea was all that I could think of. It took a while before I remembered anything of

what had happened yesterday.

The heavy curtains were still closed but I could tell from the shadows and the heat in the room that it was a bright day outside. I glanced up at the alarm clock and saw that it was almost midday. I couldn't remember anything much after getting home last night. I remembered getting undressed and falling into bed with Siobhan but that was about it. It had been cold last night. Now the temperature in the room was stifling and the bedclothes were soaked through with sweat.

Suddenly deciding that it was time I made a move, I sat up quickly and swung my feet out over the side of the bed. A big mistake. A tidal wave of sickness washed over me and for a few seconds I thought I was going to pass out or vomit or both. Once the bile and disorientation had settled I pushed myself up off the bed and stumbled naked towards the window. I drew back the curtains and winced as the room was filled with brilliant, warm sunlight. Outside the sky was a deep, clear blue and the sun danced and played on the calm surface of the ocean beyond the land. The village itself was teeming with activity. There were more bodies outside than I'd seen all summer. There were queues of cars and queues of people everywhere. It was as if the entire population of the country was trying to cram itself into Thatcham. It was then that I remembered what had happened.

The door creaked open behind me and I turned round to see Rob shuffling into the room. He looked as bad as I felt. He kicked his way through the piles of discarded clothes on the floor, mumbled something unintelligible, and then handed me a mug of hot black coffee.

'Thanks,' I croaked, my mouth dry. 'How you feeling?'

'Fucking awful,' he muttered before turning round and stumbling back out again. I pulled on my jeans and a T-shirt and followed him out.

'Seen how busy it is out there?' I asked, gesturing back over my shoulder.

'I know,' he replied, 'it's been like that for hours.'

'Has it? How long you been up then?'

He managed half a smile.

'I haven't been to bed yet.'

'Twat. Why not?'

Rob shrugged his shoulders, scratched his unshaven chin and ruffled his already matted hair.

'I dunno. I wasn't tired. When you two went to bed last night I sat and watched television for a bit. I must have fallen asleep for about half an hour, but then I woke up and started watching the news again.'

'Anything happened?'

'What?'

'Any developments?'

He shook his head.

'Not that I know of. Christ, I sat here and watched that bloody ship for hours last night and nothing happened.'

He sat down on the sofa in front of the television and rested his head in his hands.

‘Are you okay?’ I asked, concerned.

‘No,’ he said quietly.

His skin was grey and his face was getting greyer by the second. He suddenly pushed himself up from his seat and rushed towards the bathroom. I heard the door slam and then, after much moaning, groaning and retching, the toilet was flushed.

‘Been sick?’ I asked stupidly as he staggered back into the living room.

‘Well I wasn’t cleaning my fucking teeth, was I?’ he spat.

I switched on the television and the fixed plastic grin of a news reader stared back at me. In a box in the top-right corner of the screen was an image of the huge, dark alien ship.

‘I still can’t get my head round all of this...’ I said, talking to myself.

‘Neither can I,’ Rob replied.

‘Something must have happened since last night.’

‘Oh yeah, there was something.’

‘What?’

‘Just a press conference or something like that.’

‘And what was said?’ I pressed.

‘Don’t remember.’

‘What do you mean, you don’t remember?’ I snapped, irritated by my brother’s nonchalance. ‘Bloody hell, the single most important event in history and you can’t remember what’s happened.’

‘Listen,’ he hissed through clenched teeth, ‘this is the worst fucking hangover in history. How do you expect me to keep you up to date with the news when I can’t even focus on the fucking screen?’

I said nothing. I just waited for the headlines to come on.

It was almost half-past twelve.

By half past one I’d seen everything I needed to see. The press conference gave me all the information that was available, and that was a surprising amount. I supposed that in these days of the Internet, digital television and mobile phones and the like, there wasn’t much that could be kept hidden. With so many means and methods of communicating, how could anyone keep anything quiet anymore?

So these were the facts as I understood them; an observation station in South Australia picked up a distress signal from an unidentified ship of unknown origin on the outskirts of our solar system early yesterday morning. The vessel was tracked, visual contact was made and it was guided towards the planet and, eventually, out over neutral waters off the coast of England. At one o’clock this morning (our time) one of the occupants of the ship voluntarily allowed itself to be taken into custody to explain their

sudden and unexpected arrival here.

That was the point where I'd had to stop and try and get my head around what I was hearing. These really were aliens - that was the hardest thing to accept. Okay, so I'd seen their ship arrive and it was obvious that their intelligence and capacity were far beyond anything we humans had managed to do, but it was still difficult to try and come to terms with the fact that alien contact had finally been made. So how did they communicate with us? How come they could speak English? Apparently they could speak all our major languages. That didn't ring true. It reminded me of the way all aliens in the original Star Trek series were always just humans with different coloured hair, skin, costumes or all three. It seemed a little far-fetched to believe they could speak our language word-perfect but, then again, they were obviously so technically advanced that maybe they really were capable of anything. If we could decipher ancient hieroglyphics when there was no-one left using them, why shouldn't they be able to work out what we're saying to each other when there are billions of us talking, writing and broadcasting all round the planet every minute of every day.

So why were they here?

Again, what I heard was plausible. It seemed that the massive ship was used primarily for mining and that the engines or reactors or something were damaged towards the end of the aliens' present mission. They couldn't get home, it was as simple as that. Our planet, I learned, was the closest with an atmosphere capable of sustaining them temporarily but what was close I wondered? A billion miles? A hundred billion miles? And I found myself wondering why, if these creatures really were so advanced, couldn't they just patch up their ship and limp home?

So they were stuck here. That was the short and the tall of it, they were stuck here with no means of getting back. Apparently they had called for help, but that help would be at least several months in arriving.

When the people on the television started harping on about the scientific importance of the visit and how mankind's destiny had been forever changed I got bored and switched the television off.

7

Just after four o'clock that afternoon the telephone rang. It was Clare Austin, another one of the few close friends that I had made at the office where I used to work who I bothered to keep in touch with and who bothered to keep in touch with me. She made me laugh. In spite of all that had happened in the last twenty-four hours, Clare sounded as down-to-earth as ever. She was the one person I'd spoken to who seemed still firmly anchored to the harsh realities of everyday life and who was unfazed and unconcerned by the alien arrival to the point of ignorance.

Now that I had been freed from the shackles of a regular job and a daily routine, my life had changed and I frequently found myself doing things which, a year ago, I wouldn't even have considered. When it

came to Clare I had become a janitor of sorts. She lived alone with her daughter, Penny and I often helped her out by doing odd-jobs around her home for her. I'd change a plug, cut the hedge, fix a lock or, as she'd asked me this afternoon, put up a shelf. It wasn't that she couldn't do it, it was more just an excuse for us to get together. Today I welcomed the interruption. Sitting at home in front of the television I had nothing much to do except try and get over my lingering hangover. A visit to Clare's house would, I hoped, bring some life and purpose into a strange day that was badly in need of a kick-start.

After taking the call from Clare and getting my tools together I was out of the house in minutes. It was a bright, warm and pleasant late-summer day and I drove slowly along the part of the main street which ran parallel to the grey stone sea wall. Countless holiday makers drifted aimlessly across the road in front of me, dragging behind them their bucket-and-spade carrying, ice-cream licking kids. Although they were a pain in the backside to the locals throughout the summer months, the tourists contributed so much to the economy of the village that Thatcham would struggle to survive without them. They were a nuisance that we had to bear.

Today felt somehow different to most other days. There was a light and happy, almost carnival atmosphere in town and it felt more like the start of the summer season than the end. Everything felt almost, but not quite, normal and it was only when I glanced to my left and looked out over the sea wall that thoughts of yesterday's bizarre encounter returned. The ocean was calm, cool, deep, blue-grey and as reassuringly familiar as ever and yet, somewhere out there, an immense alien ship was hovering over the water. The road slowly curved away to the right and entered the centre of the village proper and I concentrated on driving again.

Clare's house was only a few miles away and I was there in no time. I knocked at the door and it was quickly answered by Penny. Her mum appeared in the hallway behind her.

'Hello,' I smiled. 'All right?'

Clare nodded and walked towards me.

'You were quick,' she said.

I went into the house and pulled the door closed behind me.

'I know. I had nothing else to do so I thought that...'

'Haven't you got a life anymore?' she laughed, interrupting me. 'It's a sad state of affairs when all you've got to do on a Saturday afternoon is come round here and put shelves up for me!'

'Siobhan's at work and Rob's still half-drunk from last night,' I explained.

Clare said nothing. She just shook her head and walked towards the kitchen.

Penny hovered at my side. I looked down and she flashed a toothy smile back at me.

'How are you, mate?' I asked, ruffling her already untidy hair.

'All right,' she mumbled before turning and running away from me as quickly as she could. I didn't take it personally. She was often awkward and embarrassed for the first few minutes whenever I visited. Once she'd got used to me being around I couldn't get rid of her.

I followed Clare deeper into the house.

'Want a drink?' she asked.

I stood in the kitchen doorway and watched her.

‘Something cold, please,’ I replied.

‘Juice or a beer?’

‘Juice.’

Clare glanced across at me and then took a glass from the draining board and poured my drink. She looked tired but relaxed, a million miles from the smartly-dressed professional career-minded woman I’d first worked with at the office. Although we had worked well together from day one, it was only recently (since I’d actually left work) that our friendship had blossomed. She and James were the only two people from the company that I’d bothered to keep in touch with since leaving. Coincidentally, they were the only two people who had bothered to keep in touch with me.

I took my drink from Clare and followed her into the living room.

‘How’s work?’ I asked for no real reason as I sat down on the sofa.

She looked at me with an expression that spoke volumes. She knew that I wasn’t really interested and that I had asked more out of courtesy than for any other reason.

‘Shit,’ she replied bluntly. ‘Remember how it was when you left?’ I nodded. ‘Well it’s worse now. A damn site worse.’

I said nothing. For a few long seconds I remembered my time at the office and then immediately did my best to blank them from my mind. The months and years that I had spent there had without doubt been the most unrewarding period of my life so far.

Penny distracted me from my daydreams by slamming the door of a nearby cabinet shut. She stomped heavily across the room (with all the grace of someone fifty times her weight) and slammed a video cassette into the machine beneath the television. She sat cross-legged in front of the screen and waited impatiently for her film to start.

‘So how are you two getting on?’ I asked.

Clare was sitting on the arm at the other end of the sofa to me. She sighed and shrugged her shoulders and I noticed that her face had dropped slightly. She was obviously trying to keep her change in expression hidden from me but it wasn’t working.

‘We’re okay,’ she replied softly.

‘Sure?’ I pressed. I knew her well enough to be able to risk probing a little further. She shrugged her shoulders again.

‘Honestly, we’re fine.’

I wasn’t convinced, but I could tell that she didn’t want to talk. Times had been tough for Clare recently and I knew that she would confide in me if and when she needed to. Until then I knew that I should just back-off and give her space. Upsetting or offending my friend was the last thing I wanted to do and I didn’t want her to misread my intentions. She was in the middle of a messy divorce from her husband and it didn’t take much to upset her at the moment. He had walked out on her just before last Christmas and although he continued to support Penny financially, he had no other interest in the daughter he had abandoned. Sitting there watching her sitting in front of the TV I found it hard to believe that

anyone could be so hard and callous. A perfect, innocent and helpless little girl whose life had been turned upside down by the adults she had trusted more than anyone else in the world. Clare's husband had casually announced that he was leaving over dinner. As they had eaten their evening meal together one night he had told her that he'd met someone else and that he was leaving. And that was it. By the morning he had gone with no explanation and no more discussion. He'd left without looking back.

I was conscious that there was suddenly a heavy, almost oppressive silence in the room.

'Shall I show you where I want the shelf?' Clare asked.

I nodded and got up to fetch my tools from the car.

The shelf (which was in Penny's room) took less than half an hour to put up. The job had been so quick and easy that I'd even had time to sand down the woodwork and give it a coat of varnish. Once I'd finished and tidied up I went outside to the back garden where Penny was playing and Clare was relaxing in the warm orange rays of the late afternoon sun.

'All done,' I announced as I stepped out of the shadows of the house and into the sunlight.

'Brilliant,' Clare said, shielding her eyes.

'You'll need to give it another coat of varnish in a couple of hours. I've slapped some on but...'

'Do I owe you anything? Did you have to buy anything to...'

I shook my head.

'Don't be stupid,' I sighed. 'It was a pleasure. And anyway, you wouldn't be able to afford me if I charged!'

'Cheeky sod!' she snapped, hurling a discarded teddy bear at me. 'I feel terrible though, you've given up your Saturday afternoon and...'

'Doesn't matter,' I interrupted. 'Saturday afternoons are the same as Monday afternoons these days. There's no difference to me anymore.'

'Yes, but...'

'But nothing,' I insisted. 'I really don't mind. But if you're insisting on giving me something for my trouble then make it another drink will you?'

Clare smiled and brushed past me as she disappeared into the house.

Back in the cool of the living room I found myself drawn to the incredible pictures that were still being broadcast from out over the ocean. Penny's half-watched video had finished and the tape had automatically stopped, rewound and ejected itself from the player.

'So what do you think about all of this?' I asked Clare as she passed me my drink and sat down.

'Not a lot,' she replied abruptly. It was clear that her nonchalance was honest and heartfelt.

'You've got to be excited by it?'

‘Have I?’

‘Christ, yes. Bloody hell, for the first time we’ve made contact with another intelligent life form. This could open up so many possibilities for us...’

‘What do you mean, another intelligent life form? You think mankind’s intelligent? Jesus.’

‘But there’s going to be so much we can learn from them, Clare. We don’t know what kind of advances they might be able to...’

‘The only advances I’m interested in,’ she interrupted, ‘are advances on my salary so that I can afford to pay the mortgage and keep a roof over our heads. What’s it matter to me if they show us how to build spaceships or...?’

‘It might not matter now, but what about the future?’

‘What about the future?’ she sighed. ‘Look, I don’t want to rain on your parade, Tom, but I’ll be honest with you because I always am. I really don’t give a shit what’s happening in the next street, the next town, the next country or even the next bloody galaxy. All that I’m concerned about is making sure that my little girl has what she needs and that she’s happy. I’ve got to put her first because no-one else ever will, will they? No one gives a flying fuck about her but me.’

I had obviously touched a nerve. I hadn’t meant to upset her - it had been the last thing I’d wanted to do. It didn’t take a genius to see that she was still smarting from what her husband had done to her and Penny. She hadn’t deserved any of it. No-one deserved that kind of treatment.

‘You know that I’m here if you need anything, don’t you?’ I said, struggling to find something constructive to say without overemphasising my concern or embarrassing my friend. ‘I’ll be around if you want me.’

She smiled.

‘I know,’ she sighed. ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offload at you. I know you’re here for both of us but...’

A moment’s silence.

‘But what?’ I asked cautiously.

‘But it’s not the same, is it?’

‘How do you mean?’

‘I don’t want to offend you, Tom, but...’ It was obvious that she was struggling to express her feelings.

‘Doesn’t matter,’ I said, trying to save her the effort (and myself the hurt).

‘Please don’t take this the wrong way,’ she continued, ‘but you can’t take the place of the man I married. No matter what he’s done he’s still Penny’s dad and there’s still a place for him here...’

‘I’m not trying to take anyone’s place,’ I began pointlessly. ‘I just want you to know that...’

I let my words trail away into an awkward silence. To my relief a change in the picture on the television screen brought a welcome distraction. It was another United Nations press conference. I

picked up the remote control and turned up the volume so that I could hear the news.

An extremely ordinary looking official stepped up to a plinth to deliver more extraordinary news. He cleared his throat and shuffled his papers.

‘Further to the facts that were released earlier this morning,’ he began, ‘we’re now able to bring you an update on the present situation. A thorough inspection and examination of the alien ship has been undertaken during the last few hours. The visitors have now concluded that the damage to the ship is beyond repair. To this end contact has been made with the alien home world today and a rescue mission has been dispatched. It is estimated that this will arrive within the next ten months.’

The official paused for a second and the gap in his delivery was seized upon by the hordes of media representatives gathered around. He held up his hands to try and calm the crowd.

‘Bloody typical,’ Clare hissed under her breath. ‘I suppose that’s it now, they’ve got their feet well and truly under the table.’

‘What?’ I grunted, half-listening.

‘We’re never going to get rid of them now.’

‘Why do we want to get rid of them?’

‘I want to get rid of them,’ she replied. ‘I don’t like them.’

‘You don’t know anything about them.’

‘No-one knows anything about them...’

Simple and direct as it was, I couldn’t argue with her logic. The United Nations spokesman continued;

‘We have extended our earlier agreement and will allow the travellers asylum until their colleagues arrive. It’s hoped that both the visitors and ourselves will be able to take advantage of this time together in order to learn about each other’s planets, technologies and societies. This is an extremely important stage in both the history and future development of both races...’

‘Bullshit,’ Clare interrupted again. ‘Who the hell are they trying to fool? What are they going to learn from us? There’s not going to be a fat lot we can tell them that they don’t already know. Bloody hell, look at the state of their ship. We’re still crashing planes...’

Again she was right. I wondered whether Clare really was as anti-alien as she sounded, or perhaps her venom was so obvious because she was just anti-everything at the present time? To her the sudden arrival of the aliens was nothing more than a temporary (and not very interesting) distraction. An unnecessary complication of her already unnecessarily complicated life.

The man on the screen had still more to say.

‘Finally, after several hours of discussions with the commander of the alien ship, it has been decided that the vessel will be destroyed. There is a very slight danger of a leak from the ship’s engines and so it has been decided that it is in the best interests of all concerned if the ship is destroyed. Arrangements have been made to launch the vessel away from the planet and into the sun. We are certain that this will have no detrimental effect on the sun and it would seem to be the safest and most convenient way of avoiding and potential danger. Furthermore...’

I didn't get to hear the official's last sentence. Clare switched the television off.

'Sorry,' she sighed, sounding tired and harassed, 'I've heard enough for one day.'

I forced a smile and then looked deep into my friend's face.

'Look, I'm only going to ask you this one more time, are you sure you're all right?'

For a fraction of a second I thought that Clare was about to become even more annoyed and defensive than she already had been. But instead she managed a smile and relaxed. She reached across and squeezed my hand.

'I'm fine,' she sighed. 'I'm sorry I'm such a miserable bitch, it's just that...'

'You don't have to explain,' I interrupted. 'As long as you're okay, that's all that matters.'

'I'm okay.'

Penny thumped into the room, leaving a trail of mud and dirt on the carpet behind her. Clare's face fell and, sensing that she was about to explode, I decided to make a move.

'I'm off,' I said, walking towards the front door. 'I'll see you both soon.'

'Okay,' Clare said as she followed me out. 'Thanks for what you've done today. I really appreciate it.'

'It's fine. And if you need anything else...'

'I'll call you.'

'Promise?'

'Promise.'

8

The Media

Up until today I had always assumed that what the media didn't know, they made up. If that really was the case, then today every television, radio and newspaper company must have had access to every last known fact about the alien arrival. There wasn't a single paper that hadn't printed dozens of pictures of the aliens and their ship by Sunday afternoon. Every television station continued to devote much of their programming to covering the unexpected arrival. Today all our questions were answered. For once no-one seemed to be hiding anything.

The eyes of the world were focussed on Thatcham.

I'd expected to hear stories about three-eyed monsters, about the aliens eating cats or people or each other, or that the pilot of their ship had turned out to be Elvis. But there was nothing. In the hundreds of articles to be read, web-sites to be hit, sound-bites to be heard and television reports to be watched there didn't seem to be anything that didn't sound like the complete, direct, unbiased and unequivocal truth. From the broadsheets to the tabloids, the cheap talk-shows to Prime Minister's question time, everyone dealt with the subject of the alien's arrival in a cool, calm and collected manner. Sensationalism was put to one side and replaced, to my complete and utter amazement, with honesty, acceptance and understanding.

It became harder not to learn facts about the aliens than to learn. There didn't seem to be any barriers to our knowledge - no hurdles to overcome before the truth was obtained. For once all reporting was undertaken without bias or unnecessary emotion. Silently, and without anyone noticing, the fantasy of science-fiction had become the reality of science-fact.

The streets of Thatcham were heaving with reporters, journalists, anchormen and women and correspondents. Every day the village was crammed with thousands upon thousands of unfamiliar but good-natured people, each of them clamouring to get closer to the centre of it all - to get closer to the aliens.

A month ago all of this would have seemed laughably implausible and unbelievable. Today, though, it's accepted. There's no debate and no question. The aliens are here and things are never going to be the same again.

Everyone tells me that's a good thing.

9

By the following Wednesday morning much of the initial novelty, trepidation, excitement and uncertainty surrounding the arrival of the aliens had disappeared. With a startling rapidity that I would never have predicted, daily life for the vast majority of the people living on the surface of our planet returned to its familiar humdrum pace. The relentless monotony and tedium about which most people complained (but which most people also secretly clung to) was back.

At some ridiculously early hour (I think it was somewhere between half-seven and half-eight that morning) I found myself sitting in the passenger seat of James' beaten-up and rattling old car, being driven at speed along the rough dirt track which connected Porter Farm to the main Portland Road and, therefore, to the rest of the world. Porter Farm was a little secluded family business nestled deep within the hills just a few miles outside Thatcham. Once or twice a week I would spend some time there helping out Joe Porter who had been a close friend of Dad's for many years. I was relying on a lift because today, for some inexplicable reason, I had allowed Robert to borrow my car. Christ alone knows why I

let him get away with it. I could never understand why he hadn't bought his own car and why he stayed at my house when we'd both inherited exactly the same from Mum and Dad's estate. I suppose it was easier (and cheaper) for him to sponge off me when he needed to rather than dip into his own pocket unnecessarily. Today - for reasons best known to himself - he had decided to travel halfway across the country to see a couple of his friends from college. I didn't understand the need. Rob and his friends drank, studied, socialised and partied with each other almost all the year round, and yet they always seemed to want to meet up in the holidays too. More drinking, socialising and parties perhaps? Still, looking on the bright side Rob had only been back with me for just over a month and I was already sick of the sight of him. It did us both good to be away from each other for a while. The loss of my car for a day was a fair price to pay for a little peace and space.

'Why the bloody hell do you do this?' James asked suddenly, waking me from my early morning daydreams.

'Do what?' I mumbled, confused.

'You know,' he said, shouting to make himself heard over the throaty roar of his car's exhausted engine, 'work on a farm for nothing? Christ, if I had the chance to stop at home and do nothing like you could then I'd do just that. You wouldn't catch me doing anything I didn't have to. And that tight bugger Porter doesn't even pay you!'

From the outside I guessed that his feelings were pretty understandable. My decision to give up my time voluntarily to work at the farm did seem out of character for someone who had recently jumped ship from the rat race. But there were reasons why I did it. Reasons that I usually chose not to share.

'I get bored sitting at home all day,' I said, hoping to throw James off the scent. It seemed to do the trick. He nodded thoughtfully and returned his full attention to the dusty road which stretched out in front of us.

That answer was partly true, but it wasn't the only reason why I helped Joe out. He had been a close friend of Mum and Dad, and he'd been the one who had broken the news of their accident to me. He'd been the one who had driven me to the hospital and he'd been the one who had picked up Rob from university and brought him home when it happened. I owed Joe Porter a lot. I had a debt of gratitude to him which I wanted to repay. On another level I knew that my dad would have been appalled if he'd known I'd left my job. It was something of a consolation to be doing something with my time that I thought he might approve of.

There was another reason for working at the farm. It was much more simple and obvious. The fact of the matter was that I couldn't stand spending all that time on my own. Siobhan worked long hours and Rob was usually away at university. I had other friends, but they worked too and were not often about during the day time. It wasn't so much the boredom that bothered me, instead it was the danger of having too much time to think. I had pretty much come to terms with losing Mum and Dad (well, as much as anyone ever can come to terms with such a loss) but there were moments when the strong facade I put up crumbled and fell. It was often when I was doing the most ridiculously mundane and uninteresting thing - mowing the lawn or washing up or cooking for example. Sometimes just hearing their names or seeing their faces in photographs on the walls would do it. A crack would appear that would quickly become wider and wider until it was more like a gaping chasm. Then it was only a matter of time before the floodgates opened and a tidal wave of grief washed over me. I always felt better again eventually. But whenever the pain begins it feels like it will never go away.

'The atmosphere's bad at work at the moment,' James sighed.

‘When isn’t it bad?’ I replied, not in the slightest bit interested. I had hoped that we might get through the journey without having to hear about the office but no such luck. If I’d turned to my right and smacked James in the face he wouldn’t have stopped. He was on autopilot - a pre-programmed routine of moaning and whining. I’d sat through this far too many times before, and I guessed that before long I’d have to sit through it again.

‘I tell you,’ he continued, ‘it’s pretty desperate right now. I know things were bad when you were there but Christ, I’ve never known it like it is at the moment.’

‘So what’s happened now?’ I heard myself ask. I hadn’t really wanted to know, but some stupid subconscious reaction inside me made me speak. What a bloody idiot. When would I learn to shut up?

‘Remember Simon?’

‘The bloke with the red Jaguar?’

‘No, that’s Marcus Phillips. Simon’s got an old Rover.’

I thought carefully for less than half a second. I couldn’t remember ever working with anyone called Simon but I knew that would be inconsequential. James would continue with his tales of woe whatever.

‘Oh yes,’ I lied, trying to speed things up, ‘I remember.’

James paused for a second to concentrate as he steered the car around a deep pothole in the track.

‘Middle of last week, one of the new juniors we’ve got asked him to check over an order he’d put up. Now Simon’s just like the rest of us, his desk’s piled high with crap and he didn’t check the order properly. Turned out it was an urgent order for E S Carters and they only got half of what they wanted. They’d had problems before apparently. Upshot of this one was that they closed their account. And they were worth a fucking fortune...’

‘But if you don’t give the customer what they want then...’

James ignored me.

‘Worst of it was though, because Simon’s signature was on the dispatch note, he’s the one who’s taking the rap for us losing the business. He’s up on disciplinary for it.’

‘Really?’

‘Really.’

‘And was it his fault?’ I asked.

James thought for a moment.

‘Suppose it was. I mean, the junior should have...’

‘Tough shit then, isn’t it?’ I said, successfully and abruptly ending the conversation for a couple of seconds.

Less than a minute later it started again.

‘They’ve downgraded him,’ James said.

‘Who?’

‘Simon. They’ve downgraded him. And they’ve transferred someone in from another department to do his job. Then they had the nerve to turn around and ask him to train the new bloke up!’

‘So has he done it?’

‘No, he told them to piss off.’

‘And what did they do?’

‘They suspended him. Now we’ve got some bloody graduate in there until Simon’s back or he’s given the boot. It’s all wrong, you know. There are four of us sitting there who could do the job with our eyes closed but instead of paying one of us a little deputising they bring in this fucking high-flyer who doesn’t know his arse from his elbow.’

I smiled to myself. As James became angrier so his language became worse.

‘Just grin and bear it like you always do,’ I sighed. James nodded. I sympathised with him to an extent, but James was one of those people who was always happy enough to moan but never willing to do anything about the problem. He’d quickly enough point out what was wrong, but never look for a solution. At that precise moment in time the only emotion I felt was sweet relief that I had managed to leave behind the desperate and dirty world of back-stabbing and seedy office politics. No matter how bad things got I could never imagine going back there.

‘How’s the baby?’ I asked with my voice full of blatantly false enthusiasm. The parents of young children had, in my experience, a devastating ability to bore. But these were desperate times, and desperate times called for desperate measures. I knew that if I wanted to avoid more soul-destroying stories about overtime, shipping orders and in-trays then I would have to suffer a string of humourless anecdotes about the varied colours of the contents of James’ baby’s nappy instead.

‘Fine,’ he smiled, suitably distracted. ‘She’s fine. Doing really well.’

‘Glad to hear it.’

‘I just wish I could spend more time at home.’

Here we go again, I thought.

‘I’m sure you do,’ I sympathised.

‘If I could resign tomorrow then I’d do it.’

‘Why don’t you?’

As James struggled to answer me we finally arrived (thankfully) at the entrance to Porter Farm. I had my seat belt off and the door half-open before he’d even stopped the car.

‘You okay for a lift back tonight?’ he asked.

‘Don’t know,’ I replied. ‘But don’t worry about it. I can walk or get a lift back from Joe.’

‘You’ve got my mobile number in case you get stuck?’

‘I’ve got it.’

James looked up at me and then slowly shook his head from side to side.

‘What’s the problem?’ I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

‘Nothing,’ he sighed. ‘I just can’t get my head round the fact that you’d rather be here than sitting at home with your feet up. You could be there in front of the telly with a cool can of beer in your hand...’

‘It’s not even nine o’clock yet...’

‘You know what I mean,’ he scowled.

I nodded.

‘I know what you mean. You’d understand if you were in my shoes,’ I assured him.

‘I doubt it,’ he grumbled. ‘I’d like to have the chance, mind you. Hey, if you ever feel like swapping places for a few days then give me a shout and...’

‘No.’

‘Just think about it for a minute...’ he joked.

‘No,’ I said again.

‘I don’t know, when I look at those bloody aliens...’

‘What about them?’

‘Well, they’re bloody stupid, aren’t they?’

Stupid was the last thing the aliens seemed to be.

‘What makes you say that?’

‘Just look at them. They’ve come half way across the galaxy to get here and now they can’t get back.’

‘So?’

‘So, they’re working. Imagine leaving your home for months on end to go to work? It’s bad enough just being out for the day. And I wouldn’t even go to the end of our street for my lot!’

I laughed and shut the door. James turned the car around in the dusty farm yard and stopped when he was level with me.

‘Thanks for the lift. I’ll give you a call.’

‘See you at the pub on Friday?’

I knew that I had to make an effort to try and stay away from the pub but he’d put me on the spot.

‘Probably,’ I said, being deliberately noncommittal.

‘See you there,’ he smiled, knowing full well that I wouldn’t be able to resist the temptation of a

pre-weekend drink.

James drove away and I watched him disappear before turning and walking towards the farm house.

10

In spite of the huge and sudden increase in the population levels of Thatcham, no-one in the village went to The Badger's Sett that Friday evening. Ray Mercer wasn't even there. In fact, for the first time in living memory (apart from when the cellar had flooded two winters back) the pub was closed.

Exactly one week had passed since the arrival of the alien visitors and preparations were well in hand for the jettison of their useless, crippled transport away from our planet and out towards the sun. Although no exact time scales were available, we were assured that it would happen tonight. Across the world the media reported that, within the next two or three hours, the massive machine's silent engines would be fired for the final time.

A vast crowd had gathered on the sprawling hills and cliff tops overlooking the ocean to watch the monumental event. During the last few days the flow of bodies into Thatcham and the surrounding villages and towns had been relentless and had increased still further once the launch date of the ship had been revealed. Even now with only hours to go and with the entire area heaving with people I could still see apparently endless columns of cars snaking along country roads towards the coast. They were so tightly packed that the headlamps of one car did little more than illuminate the back bumper of the one in front. Many had simply stopped and parked up on grass verges. Everyone wanted to be as close as possible to the alien ship when it finally left our atmosphere. People clamoured for a chance to see an alien or, at the very least, some distant alien activity. Everyone wanted to be there to witness history being made. Although I hadn't seemed to match the excited fervour of most people, I too didn't want to miss anything. This was a chance to be a part of something that would be permanently etched into our history books and, in all probability, into the alien's history books too.

Robert and I sat amongst the excited masses on the cliff-top not far from where I'd stood and watched the ship first arrive. We crouched down together on a small patch of dry, brittle grass and waited impatiently for something to happen.

'Bloody hell, did you see that one?' Rob gasped as a jet of brilliant white light suddenly shot across the distant horizon from left to right.

'I saw it,' I replied, finding it increasingly difficult not to sound bored. I had seen the last flash of light, and I had also seen the last twenty or thirty identical flashes before it. The aliens were stripping their ship - removing anything of value and using their small, silver shuttles to transport it back to the shore.

'There can't be much more left for them to do now,' Rob said, babbling like an excited child. 'Christ, they've had all week to empty the bloody thing.'

‘Think they’ll keep those shuttles here?’ I asked as I lay back on the grass and looked up into the clear, dark sky. My head was suddenly filled with images of the incredible, sleek ships struggling to fit in with the flow of our own clumsy, ground-based traffic.

‘They can’t,’ a loud and cocksure voice said from the darkness just behind and to the right of me. I sat up and turned around to try and locate the owner of the disembodied voice.

‘Why not?’ I asked, aiming my question in the general direction from which the last answer had come.

‘Because the shuttles are powered by the mothership,’ the voice replied. ‘They would be able to function for a couple of days, but after that they’d be useless.’

‘Did you know that?’ I asked Rob.

He nodded his head with some surprise.

‘Course I did. Everybody knows that. Christ, haven’t you been paying attention?’

A middle-aged man wearing a flat cap and a shirt (with the sleeves neatly rolled up to just above the elbow) and brown tie shuffled awkwardly down the gentle slope towards us and squeezed himself in between Robert and myself. He had a pair of thick, heavily framed glasses perched on the bridge of his proud, pronounced nose, and had a dark little moustache nestling above the middle of his top lip. In the low light he looked bizarre - the bastard son of Adolf Hitler and a pigeon-fancier.

‘The shuttles were only designed to be used for short distances,’ he continued, uninvited. ‘They’re nowhere near as well shielded as the main ship.’

‘They’re stronger than anything we could ever make, of course,’ Rob said, picking up where our visitor had left off, ‘but compared to the mother ship they’re nowhere near as robust.’

‘Bloody hell,’ I sighed, ‘have you done anything this week except sit and watch the TV?’

The other man interrupted again.

‘I don’t think I’ve missed a single piece of news yet,’ he said with some pride. ‘I’ve travelled almost two hundred miles to get here today. I was on the train before seven this morning.’

‘Were you really?’ I sighed, neither impressed or interested.

‘I was. What about you two? Have you come far?’

I shook my head nonchalantly.

‘No. If you stand up and walk to the top of the hill you can see my house.’

‘Really?’ he gasped, suddenly appearing to be both rabidly interested and insanely jealous at the same time. ‘Did you see the ship when it first arrived?’ he asked excitedly. ‘Where were you when it first appeared?’

‘I was just over there,’ I replied, pointing over to my right in the general direction of the twisting path I had been running along when the storm had broken and I’d watched the ship fly out over the ocean.

‘Could you see much?’

‘I saw everything,’ I answered, taking some sadistic pleasure in taunting our new friend.

‘What was it like?’ he demanded impatiently. ‘I’ve watched the footage again and again on the television, but to have actually been here when it happened...’

‘It was okay,’ I mumbled, deliberately trying to wind him up. ‘You know, big and black and...’

I was interrupted as a helicopter suddenly reared up from behind us and screeched through the air above our heads, causing a shock wave of noisy, slightly nervous excitement to quickly spread through the tightly-packed crowds like a massive Mexican wave. The unexpected deluge of sound and light was confusing. For a second or two just about everyone gathered on the hillsides thought that something had started to happen.

‘Damn,’ said the man sitting between Rob and I, ‘just a helicopter.’

I turned and noticed that he had a pair of battered binoculars hanging around his scrawny neck.

‘Could I borrow those for a second?’ I asked.

He thought carefully before reluctantly taking off the glasses and handing them to me.

‘Here,’ he mumbled. ‘Watch what you’re doing with them won’t you. I’ve had them for years...’

Staring out over the ocean and out towards the horizon I was just able to make out the shadowy shape of the alien mothership. Its smooth, black fuselage still hung steady and motionless over the calm sea. As my eyes became accustomed to the low light where the purple-black sky met the sea I could see hundreds of tiny lights which pinpricked the bulkhead of the ship and shone out into the night like the countless stars above me. A steady stream of busy shuttles poured out from deep within the bowels of the ship. Each one of them swooped down towards the surface of the water, unloaded their cargo onto the decks of a fleet of waiting boats, and then quickly disappeared back up into the dark safety of the cavernous ship again. Then, after I had been watching for a minute or two, they suddenly stopped.

Conscious that the man next to me was keen to get his binoculars back, I deliberately ignored him and turned my attention below to the gently rolling waves in the shadows of the colossal ship. I could see a long line of boats which were now travelling back towards land. The flotilla virtually stretched from the ship to the shore.

‘Looks like something might be happening,’ I said under my breath.

‘What can you see?’ Rob asked.

I put the glasses down for a second and they were immediately snatched back by their owner. He quickly lifted them up to his own eyes and stared out to sea.

‘The ships are moving back towards the shore,’ I answered, ‘and the shuttles have stopped flying. Looks like they’ve finished packing!’

The sudden change in the behaviour of the aliens was also noticed by some of the many other people in the vast crowd who were also using binoculars or, in one or two extreme cases, telescopes. Once again an unstoppable wave of contagious excitement and interest swept through the massive gathering with the deadly speed of a bush fire tearing through a tinder-dry forest.

‘They must be taking everything to their new base,’ the man who still perched between my brother and I said under his breath. He watched transfixed as the line of ships snaked away from the shadows of

the belly of the alien craft. 'Did you know that they've constructed a safe area near here for them?'

'I had heard something,' I replied, suddenly a little more interested in the conversation. 'I was wondering where they were going to go. You'd have thought they'd have been carted off and hidden somewhere well away from...'

'Not at all,' he interrupted. 'There's a disused holiday camp near here...'

'Brymer Sands,' Rob piped up.

The man continued.

'That's right. It's been refurbished and security has been tightened so that they can stay there.'

'But will they stay there?' I wondered.

'Why should they?' Rob snapped, sounding strangely defensive. 'Bloody hell, it's not their fault they're stuck here, is it? Christ, remember when Mum and Dad took us to Brymer Sands when we were little? We were hard pushed to spend a week there. You can't expect bloody interplanetary travellers to be locked up there for a few months, can you? No, they said on the news this morning that they were going to be free to travel.'

Was there anything that my brother and the irritating, annoying little man who had joined us didn't know about the aliens? They seemed to know everything about their needs and their plans, far more than I would have expected them to. But then information didn't seem to be very hard to come by. Every time I turned on the television or logged onto the Internet I saw nothing but alien news and updates. I guess my problem was that I didn't have the same rabid interest as everyone else seemed to. Their arrival was interesting and had changed the course of human history for sure, but my life was still the same. Nothing much had altered.

'Is it a good idea to give them freedom?' I asked.

'Why not?' questioned Rob. 'We all know so much that there's nothing left to hide. And if the authorities did an about face and closed ranks on us now, what would it achieve? If people don't get told the truth, they'll invent their own version, won't they? If the flow of information was cut-off now it would only be a matter of hours before the papers would be full of stories about little green men and ray guns and crap like that...'

I understood what he was saying but something didn't ring true. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, and I couldn't begin to explain how I felt because I wasn't really sure myself. Something was definitely eating at me. Everything seemed inexplicably simple and uncomplicated. In a sense it felt as if every question I could think to ask about the aliens had been answered for me before I'd even had chance to speak.

At seventeen minutes past eleven the last human ship reached the shore and, for the first time since the aliens had arrived, the skies over the ocean were almost clear. A hushed and expectant silence swept through the enormous (and still growing) crowd that had gathered to witness the final few moments of the mighty machine. People scrambled further up the hillside and balanced themselves precariously on the obliging shoulders of friends, stretching and craning their necks so that they could get a clear view of the release of the ship.

Without warning, in a fraction of a second, the sea for miles around the rear of the immense alien

machine was suddenly illuminated by a flood of searing, incandescent light which poured out from the powerful engines. The ship remained bewilderingly silent and I watched in wonder as it graciously turned full circle and began to glide back towards the shore. Billions of pairs of eyes stared out from every last corner of the globe to watch as the beautiful black machine gently lifted its nose to the stars and then blasted out into space, soaring straight over my head. Less than two minutes had passed before the incredible machine had disappeared completely from view.

A sudden wave of spontaneous cheering and applause echoed through the warm summer air. I stood up (my view had been good enough for me to remain seated throughout) and then reached back down to help pull Rob up onto his feet.

‘Bloody hell,’ he said with a vacant grin of disbelief plastered across his face. ‘That was incredible. Did you see the size of that thing?’

I nodded and yawned and began to walk back up the slope of the hill towards home. Hordes of excited, chattering people swarmed around me.

‘Impressive, wasn’t it?’ I said sarcastically, trying unsuccessfully to hide the unexpected disappointment that I was feeling. The ship had been an amazing sight to behold but, now that it had gone, I was left filled with a sense of anticlimax.

Rob was ignorant to my feelings and carried on talking regardless.

‘How could something so big be so quiet?’ he wondered enthusiastically. ‘And the light from those engines! Jesus, I’ve never seen anything like it!’

I weaved my way through the sea of vast, meandering figures. Some of them were still fixed to the spot, staring up into space transfixed and hoping to snatch one last glimpse of the awesome alien ship.

We reached the top of the hill and I looked down towards Thatcham. Even from a distance I could see that the village streets were heaving with cars and people.

‘We could have made a bloody fortune tonight,’ I mumbled, stifling a tired yawn.

‘How?’

‘I’ve never seen so many people,’ I explained. ‘I could have hired out the spare room or let a couple of them put tents up in the garden...’

‘It’s not too late.’

‘Suppose.’

‘You could still do it, there’s plenty of time. There are still people arriving. I bet there’s going to be hundreds of people sleeping in the back of their cars tonight.’

‘More fool them,’ I grumbled.

‘Don’t worry,’ Rob continued. ‘It’s going to stay busy round here for a long time yet.’

‘You reckon?’

‘Course it is. Bloody hell, we’ve got aliens living thirty miles up the coast. Everyone’s going to want to see them.’

He was right. As we stumbled on towards home I glanced back over my shoulder. I could just about make out the twinkling lights of the camp at Brymer.

The aliens were close. Damn close.

I wasn't overly concerned or worried that they were near, but I still couldn't bring myself to match the euphoria which seemed to have consumed just about everyone else.

11

On Saturday evening Siobhan, Rob and I along with James, his wife Stephanie and their four children, all gathered by invitation at Clare and Penny's house. Clare had told me many times during the last few weeks and months that she hated spending her evenings alone and these informal get-togethers had recently become a regular event. A chance for us all to relax in the company of our closest friends.

Fortunately the late summer evening was warm and bright and we were able to send the children outside to play - out of sight and out of earshot. Once they had disappeared we were, for a short time, able to relax without interruption. I lay back on Clare's comfortable sofa with Siobhan's head resting on my chest. Music played quietly in the background and long orange shadows filled the room.

'See the ship leave last night, Clare?' Rob asked. James was close to Stephanie (with their baby asleep in her arms) and Siobhan and I were most definitely sitting together. As one of the two single adults in the room, Rob seemed to feel duty bound to try and strike up a conversation with Clare. Often it was harder to stop a conversation with her, but tonight she seemed tired and reticent.

'No,' she sighed, shaking her head. 'Couldn't be bothered. Penny watched some of the pictures on the television this morning.'

'We walked over to the hills and watched it. Got stuck next to a really boring bastard, didn't we, Tom?'

I grunted and nodded. I looked across at Clare who was staring lazily into space. At the mention of the alien ship, however, the others immediately became more interested.

'We saw it leave,' James said enthusiastically. 'We watched it from home. Bloody amazing, wasn't it?'

'I've never seen anything like it,' Stephanie added as she passed her sleeping baby to Clare to hold. 'It seemed to fly right over the house.'

'Tom didn't think it was very impressive,' Rob whined.

'That's not what I said,' I protested. 'I just said that...'

‘You wanted more flashing lights and lasers and special effects.’

‘No I didn’t. I just thought that when you consider the size and power of that ship you would have expected a little more. We were sat on the side of that hill for bloody hours and it was over in seconds.’

‘Doesn’t really matter now, does it?’ Clare whispered quietly from her seat in the corner of the room. I turned to look at her and watched as she gently rocked the baby in her arms, her body haunched forward protectively over the tiny child. ‘It doesn’t matter how big their space ship was or how loud or quiet it was, the only important thing to remember is that they’re here now, and they’re not going anywhere.’

The hushed tone of her voice conveyed a deadly seriousness and concern.

‘Does that worry you?’ Stephanie asked, surprised.

Clare nodded.

‘Yes it does,’ she replied simply. Her opinion seemed to have changed since we’d spoken last week. Back then she’d seemed unconcerned and uninterested by the arrival of the aliens. Today, however, the tone of her voice made it sound as if she wanted them forced off the face of our planet altogether.

‘But why?’ Siobhan asked. She had been quiet for a while but was suddenly more animated and involved. ‘Why does it bother you?’

Clare shrugged her shoulders, taking care not to disturb the sleeping baby cradled in her arms.

‘Don’t know really,’ she admitted. ‘It’s probably nothing. I’m probably just wary because I don’t know anything about them yet. When I get to learn a little more then things might change.’

‘It might not be long before you get a chance to do that,’ Rob said suddenly.

‘Why?’ I asked.

‘Haven’t you heard?’ said James.

‘Heard what?’

‘They’re letting them out.’

‘Letting them out?’ gasped Clare. ‘They can’t do that, surely?’

‘Why not?’ questioned Rob. ‘Once they’ve been quarantined for a while and we’re sure they don’t pose a risk to our health, why should they be locked away? There won’t be any reason to keep them separated, will there?’

‘No, but...’ Clare stammered.

‘Will they want to mix with us?’ I wondered.

‘Of course they will,’ Stephanie said. ‘Why shouldn’t they?’

‘Well there are bound to be differences between us, aren’t there? They’re going to have completely different needs. They’ll probably eat different food and they’re going to have their own religions and etiquette, aren’t they? Bloody hell, you shake someone’s hand here and you’re letting them know that you’re pleased to meet them and you don’t pose a threat. Shaking an alien’s hand might mean something

completely different to them. It might be their way of telling each other to fuck off!

Siobhan laughed.

'He's got a point,' Clare said, quickly jumping to my defence.

'But come on,' James sighed, 'they're only going to be here for a few months, aren't they? And they don't want to be here, do they? Surely we can make an effort to accommodate them and their needs until they can get home again.'

'Do we really want to make an effort?' Clare asked.

'Of course,' Stephanie snapped. 'Well I do, anyway.' She seemed surprised and almost annoyed by Clare's apparent refusal to be flexible and by her uncompromising attitude towards the aliens. 'Christ, these people have travelled millions and millions of miles from their homes and now they can't get back. It's not their fault they're stuck here, is it?'

'No,' Clare agreed, 'but it's not my fault either. I'm sorry, Steph. I just don't seem to be able to get into the spirit of interplanetary co-operation as easily as you have. Not just yet, anyway.'

There followed a long and unexpectedly awkward silence in the conversation.

'This reminds me of something I was working on at university last term,' Rob said suddenly.

For some inexplicable reason best known to himself, my younger brother had decided to study towards a degree in twentieth century English history. Personally I couldn't see the point. I had always considered any historical study to be a complete waste of time. Where was the sense in continually looking backwards? My philosophy was simple - if you spend all your time looking backwards, you're going to walk into something eventually.

'So what were you studying?' James asked, sounding only half-interested.

'We were looking at the increase in immigrants who set up home here after the end of the Second World War.'

'What's that got to do with the aliens?' Siobhan asked.

'Just think about it,' Rob continued, adopting a pretentious tone of educated seriousness. 'When those people first arrived here back then the indigenous population were paranoid. The newcomers were different, and because they were different people were afraid of them.'

'I'm not frightened of anyone,' Clare snapped.

'I didn't say you were. That's not the point I'm making at all...'

'So what are you saying?'

He took a deep breath before trying to explain, obviously choosing his words carefully.

'In the forties and fifties, many of the people born in this country were convinced that the immigrants were here to take their jobs, families and homes from them.'

'What's your point?' I wondered.

Rob cleared his throat and ran his fingers through his hair. He looked around the room, paying

particular attention to Clare and I.

‘Those people were frightened because of their ignorance and their short-sightedness. I’m just trying to make you see that you’ve got a fear of the unknown and as soon as you learn more about these people, I’m sure you’ll be more than willing to share the planet with them.’

‘You’re a patronising bastard,’ I sighed. ‘You make it sound as if we don’t want anything to do with the aliens.’

‘Do you?’

I shrugged my shoulders.

‘I don’t know yet.’

‘Clare?’

‘I’m just not interested,’ she said, very definitely.

‘You should both just give it time.’

‘But it’s not just about time, is it?’

‘Come on,’ James interrupted. ‘I can’t believe that we’re even having to talk like this. Regardless of what you might think about the aliens, you’ve got to admit that there is a hell of a lot we stand to gain from having them here with us. You’ve got to be able to see it?’

‘Whatever,’ I mumbled.

The children returned to the room, bringing a welcome distraction from the increasingly heavy conversation. Their noisy, muddy arrival came as something of a relief.

I really hadn’t intended to sound anti-alien. I knew that their arrival here was of monumental importance to every single person on the surface of the planet.

But there was still something that bothered me. Something that didn’t quite ring true.

All caution was being thrown to the wind. In an age when the person who reads your gas meter needs full identification, we were being asked to embrace these visitors from the other side of the universe with open arms.

I wanted to accept them, I really did. But I needed to be able to trust them first.

Part II

RELEASE

The last Wednesday in August. Almost a month to the day since the aliens had first arrived.

I got up at eight. I had a shower, got dressed, and then ate some breakfast sitting on a deckchair out on the lawn. Robert was already up and about. He was hiding indoors in the shadows, glued to the television. There was an early morning discussion programme on which I couldn't bring myself to watch. The subject of debate was the release of the aliens from their camp at Brymer.

It felt like the last three weeks had passed by in three minutes. Looking back, the days and hours seemed to have disappeared in a continual whirlwind blur of new alien revelations and cascaded information. Every newspaper I'd picked up, every poster I'd seen, every television programme I'd watched, every radio programme I'd listened to and every website I'd visited seemed to have mentioned the aliens. Just after his youngest daughter had been born I remembered my friend James telling me that he had stood there one night watching her sleeping in her cot, and it had seemed impossible to believe that there had ever been a time when she hadn't been there. In a strange way I felt much the same about the alien visitors today. It was like they'd always been with us. The very idea that we had ever considered ourselves as being alone in the universe now seemed as preposterous and far-fetched as the prospect of alien contact itself had done just five or six weeks ago.

Within a week of the visitors settling into their temporary home at Brymer it had been announced that they were to be released. Enough tests had been run and enough checks carried out to ensure that their presence amongst us caused no threat to any life on Earth. They carried no germs, bacteria or disease that would harm us.

Within two weeks the first official human-alien summit had taken place and the results of all discussions held were quickly made public. A comprehensive and far-reaching consultation and education programme was immediately drawn up and put into place to educate the masses and prepare them for the very real possibility of direct and individual alien contact.

Within three weeks further communication had been made with the alien homeworld and the key principles, strategies and objectives of an ongoing relationship were clearly identified, defined and agreed upon.

Yesterday the aliens were released.

The programme that Rob was watching with fanatical interest was being broadcast from Dreighton, a small town some twelve miles north of Thatcham which had, by fate, been chosen to be the first place in the universe where aliens and humans were able to freely coexist. I caught brief snatches of the programme as I walked in and out through the room, and the town appeared to be busy but calm. There

hadn't been any trouble overnight.

We had both sat and watched live coverage of the alien's release yesterday. They had been presented as heroes and accorded an unexpected celebrity status. There had been thousands of men, women and children of all ages gathered at the re-enforced gates of the holiday camp at Brymer. They had waited for hours in the blistering sun to be among the first humans to get a good look at the unique visitors in the flesh. We had all heard more than enough about their incredible technology, their mothership and their sleek shuttle crafts, now it was time to get a good look at the aliens themselves.

The first figures had emerged from the shadows of the complex just before midday. The creatures marched - almost strutted - out into the bright sunlight with an impressive poise, dignity and pride which seemed to me to border on arrogance and superiority. There was not the slightest sign of any nervousness or trepidation as they walked towards the vast crowds which had gathered to greet them. I tried to imagine how I might have felt in their position. Not only was this a foreign land to them, there were also thousands of people crowded around to watch their every move. Even more daunting was the probability that there were hundreds of millions of people also watching on television from every country around the world and, possibly, even beyond.

There were three hundred and sixty-eight aliens on the crippled mining ship and three hundred and sixty-eight of them left the camp yesterday afternoon. Some of the higher ranking visitors were seconded to work with the authorities but most - their equivalent of workers and the labourers perhaps - were given the freedom of the country. Generally choosing to remain in small groups of three, four or five, they mingled freely with the humans who had gathered to see them. The atmosphere seemed light and good-natured. The creatures even stood and posed for photographs which would take pride of place in otherwise 'ordinary' family albums. They seemed happy and relaxed and well-suited to their sudden superstar status.

Today the morning sun was bright and warm and I didn't yet feel fully awake. I went inside. The shadows made the light in the living room seem comparatively dull.

'All right?' Rob's voice asked from somewhere in the gloom.

'Fine,' I replied. 'You?'

He grunted.

'Anything happened?' I asked.

'What do you mean?'

'Anything happened with the aliens? Has there been any trouble?'

'Trouble?' he repeated, surprised.

'Yes, trouble.'

'Not that I know of. Why, were you expecting any?'

'Don't know. There are a lot of people around Dreighton, and I guess most of them are there just to see the aliens. In just about every science-fiction film you see you expect someone to...'

'But this isn't science-fiction,' he interrupted.

'I know, but...'

‘But what?’

I thought for a moment.

‘I don’t know. I’m just an old cynic at heart. I never expected things to go this smoothly, that’s all.’

‘What do you mean? Christ, sometimes you sound as if you want something to go wrong. You’ve got to get rid of your attitude problem and give the aliens a chance. The rest of us intend to...’

‘I haven’t got an attitude,’ I snapped. ‘Listen, I want this to work just as much as you do, it’s just that...’

‘Do you really? You don’t sound like you do.’

The venom in my brother’s voice was bitter and unexpected.

I could have responded but there didn’t seem to be much point. He seemed convinced that I wanted the aliens to disappear back to where they’d come from but that really wasn’t the case. I genuinely wanted things to work out. Although I didn’t think that they would gain much from us, it was obvious to me that our species could benefit immeasurably from the experience and knowledge of the visitors. But their arrival had brought a change to my world. A change which, without directly affecting anything, seemed somehow to gradually be altering everything.

In an attempt to convince Robert of my good intentions and feelings towards the aliens, I agreed to go with him into Dreighton that evening. It was about half-past seven when we arrived there and the late summer sun that had lasted all day had finally begun to melt and fade away into darkness.

The town was just as busy as I had expected. There were film crews and reporters on every street corner. At least one reporter and cameraman from every television channel in the world and a photographer from every newspaper seemed to have set up camp somewhere in that normally grey, lifeless and unimportant place.

‘Bloody hell,’ Rob yawned as we drove around aimlessly. ‘Are we going to get parked anywhere?’

I shrugged my shoulders and continued to look from left and right then back again for a place to leave the car. Every single space (virtually every spare inch of pavement in fact) was taken. After driving in circles for almost half an hour our luck changed when an elderly lady (who had been shopping and who had obviously not expected any of this mayhem) reversed her little car out of a supermarket car park and trundled out onto the road ahead of us. I quickly squeezed my car into the gap she’d left.

‘Thank God for that,’ I sighed as I turned off the engine and stretched in my seat. With my legs stiff and heavy from having been sat in the same position for so long, I clambered out of the car and yawned. Even though the sun had almost completely disappeared the late summer heat was still close and formidable. The back of my shirt was soaked through with clammy sweat and clung to my skin.

‘So where do we go then?’ Rob asked, sounding almost as if he was expecting to have found signs saying ‘Aliens, this way,’ on every street corner.

‘Don’t know.’

‘There must be something...’

‘What, a map? You are here, aliens there or something like that...?’

‘Piss off!’ he snapped.

I glanced around to get my bearings. I didn’t come to Dreighton often because, to be frank, there was bugger all there. Just a moderately sized shopping area which I instinctively began walking towards.

‘If they’re going to be anywhere,’ I said as we headed up the street, ‘they’re going to be up here.’

We walked along a steep and narrow pavement at the side of a road which ran parallel with, and eventually merged into, the town’s busiest thoroughfare. The brilliant coloured lights from shops which were usually shut at this time of night still shone out brightly, illuminating the pavements and the swarms of people that had gathered there. I noticed that everyone seemed to be constantly looking from side to side, hoping for a glimpse of one of the three hundred or so aliens that had suddenly arrived in town.

‘Christ, this place is packed,’ Rob said as we merged with the milling crowds. His razor-sharp perceptiveness had obviously not been blunted by the heat.

The traffic travelling along the dual carriageway which bisected the town was nothing more than four motionless lanes of overheating vehicles. No-one was going anywhere. Rob spotted a pub over the road and began to weave his way through the virtually parked cars to get to it.

‘I need a drink,’ he said, talking to me over his shoulder as he walked. ‘Got any money with you?’

The large pub was as busy inside as the streets were outside. The air stank of stale smoke and spilled beer and every room was filled to capacity (and probably beyond) with tightly-packed punters. I pushed my way through the heaving throng and managed to worm my way into a gap at the bar. I then stood and waited for almost fifteen minutes before being served by a stressed-out and sweat-soaked member of staff. I bought a drink for Rob and one for myself (because I was too tired and thirsty to wait for him to offer to buy a round) and then looked for somewhere to sit.

‘Cheers,’ my brother gasped as he lifted his hand and took his pint from me. He knocked back half of his drink, wiped his mouth and stifled a belch. ‘Too bloody busy in here,’ he grumbled. ‘Shall we go back outside?’

I nodded and began to push my way back towards the door. By the time we’d fought our way out most of my beer had been spilt but I didn’t even contemplate trying to get back to the bar to get a refill. Tired and strangely dejected I found a space and sat down on a low stone wall.

‘I can’t get over how busy it is,’ Rob said.

‘What, the pub or the town?’ I grumbled under my breath. He scowled at me.

‘The town, you idiot,’ he snapped.

‘What did you expect?’

‘I didn’t think it would be as bad as this. Still, there’s a good atmosphere, isn’t there?’

He was right. Even though I was in a bad mood, most other people seemed to be enjoying themselves. For once there was no sign of the tightly-packed population being anywhere near as volatile, harassed or bad-tempered as it normally was. But having said that Dreighton somehow didn’t feel right to me. Maybe it was just me being miserable. Most people were acting as if it was carnival day, but as far as I could see no-one was wearing any costumes, I couldn’t hear very much music and the stationary

traffic jam running the length of the main road wasn't much of a parade.

'Think we're going to see one tonight?'

I shrugged my shoulders.

'Don't know,' I replied honestly. 'You'd have thought so. There are over three hundred of them, aren't there?'

'Yes but they're surrounded by about six million of us!'

I turned and looked at him. He was talking rubbish. Nothing unusual in that, but this was rapidly becoming relentless, high-speed rubbish. He was genuinely excited like a kid on the morning of their birthday.

'What do you think they make of this place?' he asked. 'Wonder what their towns are like? Do you think they have pubs like this or...'

'I expect they think Dreighton's a shit-hole,' I sighed, interrupting and hoping to stem the flow from his mouth. 'I do.'

'I bet they don't have shops. Bet it's all done from home on an Internet kind of thing. I bet this is like taking a massive step back in time. This will seem all dirty to them. They'll be used to sterile conditions I expect. When you think about the technology they've got...'

He stopped talking.

I looked up to see what was wrong and saw that he was staring further along the street. There was a huge crowd approaching.

'Fucking hell,' he gasped, 'this must be it. Bloody hell, this must be it! I bet there's one of them in that lot.'

We looked at each other for a fraction of a second before putting down our glasses and jumping up. The mass of figures was now only some ten or fifteen metres away and I could see that as they moved down the street in a huge wave, more and more onlookers were picked up and carried along with the flow. From where I was standing all that I could see was heads. I climbed up onto the wall we'd been sitting on and then jumped over onto a wooden table, landing right in the middle of someone's round of drinks.

'Bloody hell,' a man's annoyed voice spat from below me. 'What the hell are you doing...?'

He immediately stopped speaking when he became aware of the approaching noise. He looked over his shoulder momentarily (he had his back to the road) before clambering up onto the table next to me. I lost sight of Rob for a few seconds before spotting him shinning up a lamppost.

There must have been around a hundred to a hundred and fifty people walking towards us. They seemed generally well ordered and, although obviously excited by everything that was happening around them, they also seemed calm and even-tempered. There was no jostling or fighting for position as far as I could see.

At the very centre of the crowd, standing slightly taller than most of the assembled humans, were two aliens. From where I stood I could see little more than the tops of their large, white-haired heads. As they approached, however, they gradually came into view. I glanced across at Rob but he didn't look back.

He was transfixed. His eyes were fixed firmly on the visitors.

The people moving along with the aliens had formed a deep and protective circle around them. As they neared I was able to see slightly more of the creature's tall, gangly bodies. Although appearing willowy, slight and long of limb, they walked confidently and with clear strength and poise. They carried themselves with impressive dignity and composure and did not seem at all fazed or pressurised by the relentless curiosity of the humans gathered around them.

They were level with the front of the pub when the man appeared.

At first insignificant and looking to all intents and purposes like just another member of the vast alien appreciation society, he stood motionless in the middle of the pavement and waited for the advancing crowd to swallow him up. With his arms folded defiantly across his chest he stood and waited. The people moved around him - like water flowing round a boulder in the middle of a stream - but when the aliens reached him they stopped. The crowd fell silent when the aliens stopped moving.

'I want to ask a question,' the man spat venomously, loud enough for everyone nearby to hear.

'Ask,' replied the first alien in a medium-pitched, slightly monotonous voice.

'I want to know why you're here?'

'You know why we're here.'

'What do you want?'

'You know what we want.'

The man stared into the alien's face and continued to stand his ground. The second alien remained silent. It pushed out its chest and lifted its head, making it appear a good six or seven inches taller than it had done originally. Other than that no-one else moved. There was a brief moment of silence and unexpected, almost unbearable tension.

'I don't trust you,' he hissed at the aliens, still glaring intently into the face of the first creature. 'I don't care what you say or what you do, I just don't fucking trust you.'

The alien slowly lifted a single hand into the air and uncurled its unnaturally long fingers.

'Stop,' it said, quietly and calmly. 'Just stop talking and take a look around you.'

Obediently (perhaps instinctively) the man slowly and cautiously turned to look into the faces of the vast crowd which surrounded him on all sides.

'What?' he mumbled anxiously.

'Take a good look around. How many other people are objecting to us being here? How many other people don't trust us? We don't want anything from you. We're stuck here until we can get home and that is all there is to it. We're sorry if you take objection to our being here, but there's really nothing we can do about it.'

The stand-off lasted for two or three seconds longer.

'I just don't believe you...' the man muttered again.

'Go home,' the second alien said in a softer, more soothing tone than that of its colleague. 'Please go

home. We don't want any trouble.'

Rather than wait to see if there would in fact be any trouble, the two aliens instead neatly side-stepped the lone protester and continued to move down the street. All at once the crowds of people began to babble and chatter again. Less than half a minute later and the man was left standing alone on the pavement, arms hanging down by his sides dejectedly, the sound of the passing crowd still ringing in his ears.

'Shit,' Rob yelled as he slid down the lamppost and ran over to the table where I stood. 'Did you see that?'

'What was the matter with him?' I wondered. 'Poor bugger, I guess he just wanted to...'

'Not him,' Rob snapped, annoyed, 'the aliens. We saw one!'

'We saw two,' I corrected.

'I don't believe it,' he sighed, grinning from ear to ear. 'I just don't bloody well believe it!'

I climbed down off the table and picked up the remains of my pint.

'Shall we head home then?' I asked. I felt suddenly overcome by a sense of anticlimax. So I had seen an alien. Big deal. I had already seen a hundred of them on TV. And as easy as it seemed to be for Rob, I was also finding it difficult to simply ignore the unexpected defiance of the single man we'd just watched.

'What's the matter with you?' Rob asked. 'Christ, it's not even nine o'clock yet.'

'I'm tired.'

'No you're not, you're just a miserable bastard.'

'I'm not, I just...'

'Yes you are, you're a bloody miserable bastard.'

Suddenly extremely fed up and not wanting to fight, I began to walk back towards the car. My brother reluctantly followed. By the time we'd left the main street he had caught up and was at my side again.

'Pretty amazing though, weren't they?' he said, his mood seemingly unaffected by mine.

'Suppose,' I grunted.

'I just can't get over how similar to us they are. I mean, they've come from millions of miles away and yet they've got the same basic features as us - two eyes, two ears, a nose...'

'I know.'

'And they even walk the same way too. Did you see the length of their fingers though? I suppose that they...'

Realising that I wasn't saying much he stopped talking momentarily. 'What's wrong?' he asked.

'Nothing.'

'Come on, tell me for God's sake. Something's not right, is it?'

I didn't really know what to say. I shrugged my shoulders.

'I just feel a bit odd, that's all.'

'Odd? Was it the beer or the heat or the crowds...?'

'Don't know.'

That was the truth. I didn't know why, but I suddenly felt uncomfortable and unnerved. Was it because of the man on the street? None of it made sense - he was only asking questions that I had also wanted to ask. He was only speaking out and saying what was on his mind and there was nothing wrong in that. But in today's strange environment the man and I seemed to be in the minority. The aliens were right of course - the vast majority of people didn't seem to have a problem with them being there. Perhaps I just needed to be more trusting.

We were quickly back at the car. I unlocked the doors and got inside.

We drove back towards Thatcham and continued the one-sided conversation that we had begun after seeing the aliens.

'How must they be feeling?' Rob wondered. 'They're millions of miles from home. It might be years before they get back. Christ, it must be hard. I remember when I went on my first cub camp - it was only down the road but it felt like we were a hundred miles from home, remember?'

I nodded and managed half a smile.

He had a point. How would I feel if I ever found myself in their position? How would I feel trapped some immeasurable distance away from everyone and everything that I held precious? How painful and frustrating would it be knowing that there were people back at home waiting for me? How would Siobhan feel? How would I feel waiting for her?

After the shock of losing Mum and Dad my life had finally begun to regain some semblance of order and normality again. I was damn sure I was never going to let that control go.

13

I was back in Dreighton by half-past eleven on Friday morning.

I woke up and found myself alone again. Siobhan was working early and Robert had decided to spend yet another day away with his friends from university. With nothing better to do I ended up back at Porter Farm. Joe Porter was as pleased to see me as he normally was (I was, after all, free labour for him). He reeled off enough jobs to fill four days, never mind the four or five hours that I had originally intended to stay.

Just after ten I was standing knee deep in manure, cleaning out a barn that had been used as a temporary shelter for Joe's cattle while repairs had been made to another building. Joe interrupted my work to ask me if I would take him into Dreighton to pick up a piece of machinery that he'd ordered last week. There wasn't much of a choice really - stay and shovel shit or get out into the sunshine for a while. Within ten minutes I was washed, changed and ready.

Most of the conversation between Joe and I on the way to Dreighton was as sparse and monosyllabic as ever. I didn't mind - that was Joe's way. He only ever got excited about a couple of things (usually rugby and cattle) and as I had little interest in either subject I hadn't expected to talk much. Nevertheless, my instinctive reaction to the silence in the car was to keep trying to say something anyway...

'Rob and I were in Dreighton on Wednesday night,' I said.

'Oh,' grunted Joe.

'He was on at me all day to go and see one of the aliens. Wouldn't shut up about it until I agreed.'

'Oh,' he grunted again.

'We got to see one though. Saw two actually. You know the pub opposite the garage on the high street?'

Joe looked blank.

'Next to Mathesons?'

Still blank.

'Two doors down from the bank?'

Still blank.

'By the Doctors?'

He nodded and grunted.

'We were sitting outside having a drink when this bloody big crowd starts coming towards us. The whole town was packed out anyway but this crowd was huge. We knew straight away that it had to be aliens. I climbed up on a table and Rob shinned his way up a lamppost.'

I glanced to my left to check that Joe was still there.

'Oh yes,' he mumbled, prompted to say something by my silence.

'Anyway, right in the middle of this crowd were two aliens. I couldn't believe it. They were just walking along the street like you or I would, except we wouldn't be surrounded by hundreds of people, would we?'

'Suppose not.'

'Then some bloke started giving them grief, didn't he? He just stood there in the middle of the pavement and started asking them why they were here and what they wanted and telling them that he didn't trust them and...'

'There's no need for that, is there?' Joe interrupted unexpectedly. 'It's not their fault they're here, is

it? Bloody hell, how would you feel if you was stuck somewhere a million miles from home?’

‘I know, but...’

‘No, that’s not on. They ain’t done anything wrong.’

‘Didn’t think you’d be that bothered, Joe,’ I said, surprised by the strength of his reaction.

‘Course I’m bothered,’ he said. ‘Came here to see them myself.’

‘Did you?’

He nodded.

‘I was here Wednesday morning. Had to see the doctor about me back so I thought I’d come early and try and see one of them.’

‘And did you see one?’

‘Saw a few. Wanted to be one of the first.’

The fact that Joe was interested amazed me and for a couple of seconds I couldn’t think of very much to say.

‘How is your back?’ I eventually asked. ‘What did the doctor say?’

He shrugged his shoulders.

‘Didn’t go in the end. I see Dr Ellis every month, didn’t think it would hurt if I missed one appointment. And anyway, he was out there with me. I saw him and the nurse in the crowds.’

I drove along the high street (which was still busier than usual), turned left onto the road that goes to Yarnell and then pulled up in the car park (which was still fuller than usual) outside the warehouse that Joe wanted.

‘Back in a minute,’ he grunted as he got out of the car.

I watched him disappear into the warehouse and sat and waited.

And waited.

It was a glorious late summer’s day and even with the windows and sunroof open, the heat inside the car was rapidly becoming unbearable. I got out and sat down on a narrow grass verge which sloped down between the edge of the pavement and the tarmac of the car park. The temperature was adding to my mounting frustration. I wouldn’t have minded if Joe had said he’d be back in three hours - what bothered me was sitting there wasting my time not knowing whether he was going to be out in the next five minutes or whether he’d be talking to his mates in the warehouse for another hour. I could have got up and gone inside to see what was going on but, if I was completely honest, I just couldn’t be bothered to move. I didn’t have anything else to do and, anyway, it was too hot...

‘Excuse me,’ an unexpected voice suddenly said from somewhere behind me. There was something about the tone and the accent of the voice that was unusual. I knew before I’d turned around that it was an alien.

I stood up and tried to reply but I felt inexplicably nervous and my mouth was dry. The alien (which

was a good six inches taller than my five foot eleven height) attempted something resembling a smile and shuffled awkwardly on its feet. I knew I was staring but there was nothing I could do to stop myself.

‘I’m sorry if I disturbed you,’ the visitor said gently. ‘I’m lost.’

What kind of a species can travel halfway across the universe and then get lost in Dreighton I found myself wondering silently? I didn’t dare say anything even remotely facetious.

‘Where are you trying to get to?’ I asked instead.

‘I’m looking for Lime Street,’ the alien replied politely. ‘I’m supposed to be meeting a friend there.’

Again I found myself staring at the creature in front of me. It had obviously seen many more humans than I had aliens and I sensed that I was of little reciprocal interest. Its baby-blue eyes quickly scanned my face and the thin lips of its small, delicate mouth gently curled at the corners again. I’d heard that the aliens had two separate sexes in much the same way we do and I guessed that this one was female. There was something about its movements and mannerisms that was innately feminine.

‘You’re a long way off,’ I said, eventually remembering to reply. ‘Lime Street’s on the other side of town.’

‘Oh,’ she said quietly.

‘When I say you’re a long way off,’ I continued, blabbering like an idiot, ‘I’m talking relatively. It’s only half a mile away.’

I was talking before thinking. A bad mistake that was making me look like an idiot. What kind of ambassador was I for my species?

‘I don’t understand,’ the alien said. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

There I was, talking to a visitor from the other side of the galaxy who had been speaking English for just a few weeks and who was speaking it like an expert. I, on the other hand, had been using the language for more than twenty years and yet I was still having trouble making myself understood.

‘What I meant to say,’ I explained sheepishly, ‘was that the distance to Lime Street is nothing compared to the distance you’ve travelled to end up here.’

She nodded. No smile this time.

‘I see.’

There followed a long, awkward and humourless silence.

‘So can you tell me how to get there?’ the alien asked hopefully.

‘What? Oh, yes,’ I stammered, feeling my face redden. ‘Sorry, it’s just that I wasn’t expecting to...’

‘To what?’

I didn’t know what to say. Instead I began to direct the alien across town.

‘Take a right, follow the high street until you reach the junction with the road to Fordham. Turn left and Lime Street is the second road on your right.’

‘Thank you,’ she said and she turned and began to walk away.

‘So how are you finding it here?’ I asked, shouting after her. I instinctively wanted her to stay a little longer. I would have been disappointed if my first conversation with an alien had ended as completely unrewarding and embarrassing as it had begun.

She turned back and smiled again.

‘When you say here,’ she began, ‘are you talking about the town or the planet?’

‘Either,’ I replied. ‘Both.’

She sighed and thought for a moment before answering.

‘I don’t know how to answer honestly without offending you...’ she said.

‘Just offend me then,’ I interrupted.

‘Your planet is fine, but it’s not what I’m used to. It’s not my home, is it?’

Although her use of the word ‘fine’ annoyed me because it made my planet sound nondescript and barely adequate, I understood what she was trying to say.

‘Of course it isn’t,’ I agreed.

‘Don’t get me wrong, I like what I’ve seen here,’ she continued, ‘but I’d rather be back home.’

‘How long will it be before you get back?’

‘A year and a half, maybe longer.’

‘And how does that make you feel?’

‘Desperate,’ she replied, before turning and walking away again.

I watched the alien disappear and thought about her constantly until Joe finally emerged from the warehouse.

14

By seven o’clock that evening I was restless and bored. The day was in danger of ending as dishearteningly lonely and quietly as it had begun. Everyone seemed to have something to do except me. I was too tired and it was too late to do any more work at Porter Farm, Rob still hadn’t come back from wherever it was he’d gone to, Siobhan was visiting her parents and just about everyone else I could think

of were at home with their families. Leaving the rat-race behind seemed to have had a strange and unexpected side-effect on my life in that I had become a misfit of sorts. Without the normality of a regular routine to base my life around I was free to stay up late or go to bed early or stay out all night or do pretty much anything I wanted to. Everyone else was still trapped by their responsibilities. Though I was delighted with my freedom and lack of restrictions at times like this I felt completely alone and out on a limb.

I decided to go for a walk. I started off wandering through the centre of the village but quickly got fed-up. The population was still artificially swollen by holidaymakers and alien-spotters alike. It was time to take myself away from it all for a while. If no-one wanted to be with me then I didn't want to be with anyone. It was time to be as antisocial as I was beginning to feel.

I walked away from Thatcham and soon found myself wandering along the rough coastal path that I often followed when I ran. I had allowed my training to slip recently and it had been almost two weeks since I'd been out running. I could have run tonight, I thought guiltily. Never mind. I would get up early tomorrow and run first thing. Well, that was the plan...

The sky above me was clear save for a few light speckles and bands of clouds on the edge of the horizon. The huge orange sun was just completing its steady daily descent from high, casting long, dragging shadows all around. I stopped walking and looked directly up and then down and out to sea, following in my mind the path that the alien ship had taken when I had watched it first arrive.

I silently walked on.

Along with the rest of the world I had now had over a month to get used to the idea of our playing host to visitors from another planet. Just about everyone else had, however, seemed to have taken to the role much better than I had. Everyone else had been caught up on an all consuming tidal wave of euphoria and excitement. So why did I feel like the only one still sitting on the beach paddling up to my ankles? Although all of the initial strangeness and uncertainty I had first associated with the presence of the aliens had quickly disappeared, I still felt distant and unconvinced. While the rest of the world welcomed the visitors into their homes with open arms, mine were still firmly crossed in front of me.

I stopped walking again. I sat down on the grassy hillside and stared out over the gently rippling ocean.

Perhaps I was being too hard on them? After all, it wasn't their fault they were stuck here, was it? They hadn't (as far as I was aware) done anything wrong. I remembered the alien I had spoken to in Dreighton earlier in the day. She had seemed genuinely sad and remorseful when she'd walked away from me. Who knows what she might have left behind to travel and work in space? I didn't know anything about their emotions, relationships, feelings and society and yet it had been clear to me from her words and her manner that the creature in the city needed her home and familiarity as much as I did. And I had to stop calling them creatures. Bloody hell, even the dumbest alien was probably a thousand times more intelligent than any human genius - how insulting and derogatory of me to use a word which made them sound base and uneducated.

But it still didn't feel right.

I had to go with my gut reaction, and that gut reaction was saying wait - bide your time - don't jump in with both feet.

I'm a strong believer in gut reaction, and have been ever since I met Siobhan. I can't imagine what my life would have been like without her. She was the one who pulled me out of the mire when we lost Mum and Dad. If it hadn't been for her strength, love and determination I would have crumbled - no question.

I met her at a party that I hadn't wanted to go to. It was at a friend of a friend's house (who I couldn't stand) and I had decided not to go. It was only the promise of a free drink and quick exit after a few minutes that persuaded me to change my mind. And thank God I did. I remember very little about that night - just walking into the living room and meeting Siobhan. As soon as I walked into the room I focussed on her and didn't take my eyes off her all night. I can't remember what we did or said in the first few hours we were together, I just knew that it was right. The music, lights, drink, dancing and other distractions had faded into insignificance next to her. The fact that she had arrived at the party with another man meant nothing. I knew from the first second I saw her that we were going to be together. Gut reaction told me that we would.

One day soon I would finally pluck up the courage to ask her to marry me.

So what was my instinct saying to me tonight? I lay back on the grass and looked up into the light blue sky which was beginning to darken as night rapidly approached. I could see a thin crescent moon - almost translucent against the heavens and I stared at it for a while and tried to comprehend its incredible distance from me. The furthest distance I had ever run was thirteen miles. Hard to believe that the moon was over seven million times further away than that. At that moment in time I could completely understand why the alien in the village had seemed so low and disheartened. Even with the most advanced form of transport ever seen, they were still an inconceivable distance from everything that mattered to them.

I stood up and stretched. The wind had picked up and a few small waves had appeared on the otherwise still surface of the sea. I watched as small white splashes of foam were kicked up around the base of the Devil's Peak. Since I had arrived in Thatcham I had wanted to hire or even buy a little boat so that I could sail out there and wallow in the peace and isolation that I was sure I would find on the small rocky island. Joe Porter once told me that there was a small cove on the side of the island facing away from the mainland. He told me that he'd sailed out there with more than one girlfriend and shared many illicit moonlight rendezvous during his long and colourful past. The notion of being out there alone (or almost alone) was strangely romantic and appealing. Imagine being the only living creature for miles around...

The green and comfortable world around me suddenly seemed a much smaller place now that the aliens had arrived. They had shown us that the barriers keeping us confined to our world could be broken. But at the same time their arrival had made me think of myself from a new perspective. Although I remained at the centre of my own little world, I knew that I was a completely insignificant cog in an unimaginably huge and complex machine.

I stood next to the wide bay window in my living room and looked down onto the village below. Even though it was late and the light was fading the streets were still alive with bustling activity. By this time of year Thatcham was usually silent. I noticed that the leaves on many of the trees I could see from my house had begun to show their first signs of curling and turning from green to golden-brown. The arrival of Autumn was imminent. All of the greenness I could see would be replaced by yellows, oranges and golds during the next few weeks.

I turned around as Siobhan entered the room. Inside the house was dull and full of evening shadows and at first I could only see her silhouette. As she walked towards me the fading light coming in through the window revealed her in all her beauty. She wore tight black jeans and a loose white top which hung open casually. She knew I was staring at her and she was enjoying the attention. She was flirting with me.

‘Okay?’ she asked.

I nodded and wrapped my arms around her. For a few long seconds I stared deep into her eyes before kissing her.

‘I’m fine,’ I whispered, nestling my face against her soft, smooth cheek. ‘What about you?’

She lifted up my shirt and ran her long fingernails down my back before grabbing hold of my backside.

‘I’m not too bad,’ she whispered.

Siobhan sat down on the couch and pulled me down next to her. I kissed her again.

‘I love you, you know,’ I smiled.

‘I know!’ she laughed gently.

I had been with Siobhan for a long time now (by my unimpressive standards) and I still found it hard to believe that she had chosen to be with me. It wasn’t that I thought there was anything particularly wrong with me, it was just that she was so damn perfect and...

‘Do you want me?’ she asked, pulling me close and quickly derailing my train of thought. Her breath tickled my skin. She knew that she hadn’t really needed to ask the question. I always wanted her.

‘I want you,’ I gasped, my excitement rapidly rising. I fumbled clumsily to undo my belt and fly. She brushed my hands away and undid my trousers herself.

‘Then take me,’ she whispered.

I undid the buttons on the front of her blouse and was about to push it back off her shoulders when she froze.

‘Shit!’ she snapped, suddenly sitting upright. ‘What time is it?’

‘Who cares,’ I mumbled as I continued to undress her.

‘I do,’ she insisted. ‘Bloody hell, it’s nearly eight.’

‘So?’

She gently pushed me away. Feeling suddenly rejected, self-conscious and concerned, I stood and

pulled up my trousers.

‘Sorry, love,’ she sighed, smiling as she pulled her blouse back on. ‘I almost forgot.’

‘Forgot what?’ I asked, frustrated and desperate to make love.

She reached across for the television remote control and switched on the set. My heart sank.

‘You must be joking,’ I protested. ‘You’d rather watch some stupid programme than...’

‘It’s not a stupid programme. Bloody hell, you have forgotten, haven’t you?’

I shrugged my shoulders.

‘I must have. Haven’t got a clue what you’re talking about.’

‘Come on,’ she smiled, ‘we can try again at half-past. We need to watch this. It’s important.’

As I wandered over to the window realisation suddenly dawned. Monday night, eight o’clock. It was time for ‘Visitor Update’. I gazed down into the suddenly silent village and cursed the bloody aliens yet again.

Visitor Update was shown in every conceivable language in every country. Its purpose was to educate the population in all aspects of alien life. Their biology, psychology, history, sociology and just about everything else was covered in handy half-hour blocks. In the short time that it had been on screen the programme had gathered a following which bordered on the fanatical. Even I usually watched it. I didn’t know of anyone who hadn’t seen it.

Don’t get me wrong, the programme was always interesting and useful, but I couldn’t understand why it was so popular, and why the rest of the week seemed now to be planned around eight o’clock on Mondays. Given the choice between watching half an hour of alien home movies and making love with Siobhan, I knew which I would have preferred. But she was hooked. She hung on every last second of footage, like just about everyone else seemed to.

Tonight I couldn’t bring myself to look at the screen. I went out to the kitchen and made a drink.

I stood in the living room doorway watching Siobhan as the kettle boiled. She was half-dressed and completely transfixed. Eventually she sensed that I was watching her.

‘Come on,’ she sighed, looking over her shoulder. ‘Come and sit with me.’

‘Wouldn’t you rather I waited until your programme had finished,’ I replied sarcastically.

Her face dropped.

‘Don’t be like that. You know I’d rather...’

‘Rather what? Watch a television programme than make love with me?’

‘But it’s not just any old programme, is it? This is important. This affects all of us.’

‘So put a tape in the video recorder, record the fucking thing and let it affect us later on then.’

She shook her head sadly.

‘Come on,’ she said again. ‘Sit down.’

The kettle was boiling. I went out and made the drinks.

I stood alone in the kitchen and fumed silently to myself. She had me wrapped around her little finger and she knew it. I wanted sex with my girlfriend now, was that too much to ask when she obviously wanted it too? I didn't want to sit through half an hour of bloody alien propaganda and then have sex with her. But the worst thing was, as desperate and pathetic as it might have sounded, I knew that I would have sat through a week of bloody propaganda if I knew that making love with Siobhan would follow.

Calming myself down (it wasn't really her fault) I went back into the living room and sat down next to her. She shuffled herself around and lay across my lap. She pushed herself up against me and I revelled in the warm caress of her delicate body on mine. Having her this close was soothing and reassuring.

Oh Christ, I thought, what's the matter with me? Why do I feel so out on a limb? Am I that untrusting? Why couldn't I just sit back and accept the situation in the same way that everyone else had? The fact that I didn't share everyone else's utter fascination with the aliens was really starting to bother me. I felt like I was building up a wall between myself and the rest of the world.

I'd missed the first five minutes of the programme but I hadn't missed much. A report from Dreighton and some footage from the alien homeworld, but nothing that I hadn't seen before. The next half-hour dragged.

By the time the programme had finished the faint light in the room had disappeared almost completely. Siobhan got up and switched off the television, plunging the room into a deep, murky darkness. She walked back towards me and I knew that she was undressing. I took off my shirt and, for the second time in an hour, undid my trousers. She lay down on top of me and my excitement rose as I felt her naked body on top of mine.

'Still want me?' she asked.

I didn't answer. Wrapping my arms around her I rolled off the sofa, reversing our positions so that she lay on the carpet with me on top. She took hold of me and gently guided me into her.

'I love you,' I whispered.

'I love you too,' she hissed in reply. 'Now fuck me.'

Three-quarters of an hour later we lay on the floor together, tired, naked and completely fulfilled.

I was starting to fall asleep. I couldn't help it. Siobhan seemed to have ten times the energy I did tonight. She buried her face on my bare chest and kissed and nibbled my skin.

I was filled with a feeling of overpowering warmth, security and comfort, the likes of which I'd only known since Siobhan had walked into my life. There had been long, dark days just a few months earlier when I had thought that there would never be anything positive in my life again. Days when I had envisaged spending the rest of my time alone, never wanting to leave the silent isolation of my home. But Siobhan had always been waiting for me in the next room or at the other end of the phone, and I knew that all of the credit for dragging me back from the edge of the darkest abyss imaginable belonged to the wonderful girl resting in my arms.

'Let me ask you a question,' she asked suddenly.

'Go on,' I replied, forcing myself to wake up a little.

'If you had the chance to travel to the alien planet, would you go?'

'Return trip or one way?'

'One way.'

'A would you be going with me?'

'Forget about me, this is hypothetical.'

'Doesn't matter. I can't forget about you.'

She playfully thumped my chest.

'Just answer the question, will you?'

'I'd like to go, but only if I could come back. And like I said, I'm not going anywhere unless you're going with me.'

How could I turn down the opportunity to travel through space? But on the other hand, was there any point in going? I had everything I wanted in Thatcham. More to the point, I had everything I wanted lying in the living room with me.

I still couldn't believe that I had Siobhan.

It was impossible not to learn about the aliens. Their power and technology seemed limitless (except, it seemed, when it came to getting home) as did the amount of information available about them. I must have heard a thousand and one facts about them, but I only bothered to remember a handful.

The footage we saw of the homeworld on Visitor Update was reassuringly familiar in many respects. The planet had rolling seas, lush forests and huge open plains. The cities seemed clean and well-ordered. Family homes were spacious and comfortable.

The alien families themselves were similar to our own in some respects, but vastly different in others. The family group itself on the homeworld was considerably more extended than our own, with three generations living together under the same roof. There were two sexes (as I had supposed). Promiscuity, however, was unheard of. When an alien found a partner (and once the partnership had been given approval by the eldest female in the family) the two would be married in a simple ceremony and then mate. And every time they mated, bizarrely, there would be a two-way exchange of genetic information. The upshot of this biological quirk was that, over time, one alien began to assume the characteristics of the other. Any resultant offspring would, therefore, be almost identical to both parents. As generation after generation had come together in this way it had resulted in a lack of any strong variation throughout the entire race. There were no 'black' or 'white' aliens, there were just aliens.

Their genetic quirks did not end there. Once their general schooling was complete, the aliens were genetically assessed. Their potential skill levels were then matched with any prevalent social, moral and economic need to decide upon their required vocation. In essence, therefore, it was their biological and emotional make up that decided the path their lives would take, not any personal choice.

Having such an incredible understanding of their genes and their bodies in general, the aliens were, unbelievably, able to calculate their projected date of death (accidents and errors and omissions excepted, of course). The length of their working lives would be calculated accordingly so that there was a fair and equal opportunity for each one of them to enjoy a fixed-length retirement before passing away. I found that concept particularly hard to comprehend. How would I feel knowing the date of my death? Or knowing exactly how many working days I had before I could stop and rest? Such cold precision and knowledge would do me far more harm than good. I now preferred to do nothing for a living and I enjoyed the luxury of being able to get up and not have a clue what I was going to do or where I was going to go. I thrived on the new-found spontaneity of my life.

At seven-thirty on Tuesday evening Rob brought an alien home with him. He'd been shopping in Dreighton when he'd met the visitor. The novelty of their unexpected arrival on our planet and their unusual appearance had long since worn off, but I still found it difficult to come to terms with the fact that an alien had just walked through my front door.

'This is a friend of mine, Tom,' Rob said as he introduced me to the tall and gangly figure standing next to him. 'I met him while I was in town. I didn't think you'd mind if he came back for a drink and something to eat.'

'Pleased to meet you,' the visitor said, confidently reaching out a spindly hand in front of him. I took hold of it and shook it firmly, staring down as the long extended fingers wrapped around my hand and wrist. 'I hope you don't mind my being here...'

I shook my head.

'No, it's fine...' I mumbled, still shocked.

'You okay?' Rob asked, immediately picking up on my obvious unease and surprise.

'Fine,' I replied.

I really didn't mind the visitor being there, I was just struggling to get over the sudden shock of the unannounced arrival. It would have been okay if I'd had a little time to prepare. It was one thing seeing the aliens on television and even passing them in the street, but in my hallway...?

'There you go,' Rob said to his new friend. 'Told you he'd make you welcome.'

The three of us stood there for a few long seconds in an uncomfortable, awkward silence. As the host (no matter how surprised or unwilling) I took it upon myself to try and break the ice. I stood to one side so that the alien had a clear view through to the living room.

'Go on through,' I said, gesturing deeper into the house.

Rob led the alien down the hallway. Ignorant to his arrival, Siobhan stepped out of the kitchen just in time to see our guest's wiry frame disappear through the living room door.

'Was that...?' she began to ask.

I nodded.

'Certainly was. Rob brought him back with him from...'

I didn't bother to finish my sentence because it was obvious that Siobhan wasn't listening. Like one of the children of Hamelin following the Pied Piper she quickly wandered down the hall and peered round into the living room. I followed at a cautious distance. By the time I had reached the three of them the introductions were already being made.

‘This is Siobhan,’ Rob said. ‘She’s Tom’s girlfriend. Bloody beautiful, isn’t she? Christ knows what she sees in my brother...’

‘She must like him,’ the alien said quietly and factually, completely misunderstanding Rob’s pathetic attempt at being funny.

‘Hello,’ Siobhan mumbled, uncharacteristically timidly. She squirmed and smiled like an embarrassed teenager being introduced to their favourite pop star.

‘So what’s your name?’ I asked from the doorway. A perfectly reasonable question.

‘I can’t say it,’ Rob replied.

The alien turned round to look at me.

‘You wouldn’t be able to pronounce it.’

‘Try me,’ I snapped. I didn’t like being told that I wouldn’t be able to do something by anyone, certainly not by an alien.

Rob seemed to pick up on my irritation and immediately did his best to try and diffuse the situation.

‘I’ve been calling him John,’ he said. ‘You don’t mind that, do you John?’

‘John’ shook his bulbous head.

‘I don’t mind. It doesn’t really matter. Popular name, isn’t it?’

‘Used to be the most popular name,’ Siobhan said.

The alien managed a thin-lipped smile.

‘Thought so.’

‘Why?’ asked Rob.

‘Because a lot of my friends have been given human names by the people they’ve met. Not including me I know of seventeen Johns, four Stevens, three Christophers and one Thomas!’

That really annoyed me. I didn’t know why, but it did.

‘Who wants a drink?’ I grumbled.

‘Beers for us two please, Tom,’ Rob answered.

‘And me,’ added Siobhan.

‘Can you have beer?’ I asked, nodding in the general direction of the alien.

‘I’m old enough, if that’s what you mean,’ he replied, deadpan.

The supercilious tone of his voice was infuriating. I couldn’t tell if he was intentionally trying to wind me up or whether he was just doing it by chance. I walked out to the kitchen and fetched four bottles of beer.

By the time I returned to the living room the others had dragged three chairs out onto the front lawn. I

grabbed another one (nice of them to think of me) and sat down next to Siobhan before passing the drinks around.

‘So, how are you enjoying yourself here?’ Siobhan asked the alien. Although she was sitting just inches away from me she had managed to angle herself so that all I could see was her back. ‘Are you getting used to being here yet?’

I watched John the alien and smiled inwardly as he struggled to open his bottle of beer with those long, slender fingers. Siobhan reached across, took the drink and did it for him.

‘I wouldn’t say I’m enjoying it,’ he answered, sniffing and cautiously sipping his beer. ‘It’s adequate for now.’

He shuffled in his seat, looking distinctly uncomfortable. His body was too long for the seat.

‘Looking forward to getting back?’

‘Of course I am.’

‘You must miss home,’ Siobhan continued.

‘I do,’ he replied. ‘I knew I was going to be away for a long time, but this is going to take much longer than any of us expected.’

‘So what exactly happened?’ I asked.

‘What? Happened when?’

‘When you were out there on your ship. I can’t imagine what could have happened to cripple something as big and complex as your ship.’

‘We were mining minerals in an asteroid field and we were hit by debris.’

‘Debris!’ I exclaimed. ‘Fucking hell, must have been a bloody big bit of debris to do so much damage.’

He fixed his baby-blue eyes on mine.

‘It was.’

His voice was icy cold and devoid of all emotion. Although I had no way of knowing whether the aliens normally used the same expression and intonation in their voices as we did, I sensed that was his way of telling me to piss off.

While I stared at the alien and wished that he would fuck off back to wherever it was that he had come from, Rob and Siobhan continued to bombard him with a barrage of questions.

‘So how did you feel when you stepped out of the ship?’ Siobhan wondered. ‘What were your first impressions?’

‘First impressions of what?’

‘Of everything. What did you think of the planet, our cities, our people?’

He thought carefully for a few moments and finished his beer. He was drinking at an impressive

speed. I had only just started mine.

‘If I’m honest,’ he began, ‘arriving here was a very strange experience.’

‘Strange?’ I asked. ‘In what way?’

He thought again before replying.

‘Strange in that being here is like being in a living history book. There are some major differences between our planets and our people, but generally your technology and way of living is similar to the standards we had on our planet a considerable time ago...’

‘When you say considerable,’ I interrupted, ‘just how long are we talking about?’

‘You are about three hundred years behind us.’

‘You’re that far ahead?’ Siobhan gasped.

‘We’re that far behind?’ I mumbled.

He nodded.

‘Approximately.’

A moment of silence passed while we all individually stopped to consider the alien’s apparent superiority over our race.

‘So what did you do on your ship?’ Rob asked, effortlessly restarting a conversation which I silently hoped had finished.

‘I worked in the Storage and Gradation team. I looked after the machines that graded the ore before it was passed to the refinery.’

‘The refinery?’ I said, surprised. ‘Bloody hell, just what did you do on that ship? I thought you just mined for whatever it was you needed and transported it back to your planet.’

He shook his head.

‘Because we’d used up pretty much all of our planet’s resources we had to start mining further and further afield. And because of the length of time it took us to travel to these places, we prepared the ore en route so that it was ready for use when we got back home. That also avoided polluting the planet with the by-products of our operations.’

‘So you just polluted space instead?’ I snapped.

He nodded again.

‘That’s right.’

‘So how did you do it? How did you mine? Did you have machines with hammers and pickaxes or...?’

‘We took most of our minerals from asteroids and small moons. We’d locate the source, attach the ship to it and then extract whatever it was that we needed to take.’

‘You mined asteroids?’ Rob asked, his eyes like saucers. ‘Jesus, how dangerous is that?’

‘Dangerous enough to mean that I’m sitting here with you tonight,’ he replied. ‘The asteroid we were working on had an undetected flaw. Our machines tapped into the wrong place and the whole mass disintegrated.’

‘Disintegrated?’ I pressed.

‘Exploded,’ he explained. ‘That’s where the debris I was talking about came from. It damaged the engines and breached the hull.’

I nodded and thought for a second.

‘So where exactly did you stand on board?’ I then asked. He didn’t answer immediately - did he think I was asking where he physically stood on the ship? I elaborated. ‘There are about three hundred and seventy of you here, right?’

‘Correct.’

‘So how far up in the chain of command are you? Do you sit at the captain’s table or are you...?’

‘Am I what?’

‘Bottom of the heap?’

He shook his head.

‘We don’t have rankings as such in our society, there isn’t any need. I was trained to do my job and I did it to the best of my abilities, as did the pilots, the technicians and the maintenance staff.’

‘So who’s fault was it that your ship got damaged?’

‘No-one’s fault. It was a freak accident.’

‘Shouldn’t you have been prepared for freak accidents if you were all so highly trained and effective?’

I was conscious that both Rob and Siobhan were glaring at me but I wasn’t interested in anything they felt or had to say. I wasn’t particularly interested in what the alien had to say either. I just found myself feeling particularly territorial and awkward.

‘It was a freak accident,’ he repeated quietly.

I didn’t believe him. How could they have been so advanced and yet have left themselves so exposed? Surely they must have had contingency plans and safety measures to prevent such accidents from happening? Or perhaps I was just being overly critical for no better reason that I didn’t like this alien. Or any alien for that matter. More to the point, it wasn’t that I didn’t like them, it was just that I couldn’t be bothered with them. I resented the fact that to everyone else I knew, these uninvited guests had suddenly become the be-all and end-all at the expense of absolutely everything else.

‘Do you like what you do?’ I wondered. Now I was the one asking the incessant stream of questions.

‘There’s no point liking or disliking it, is there?’ he replied. ‘It’s what I was trained to do. It’s what I always knew I would be doing. I know everything there is to know about my job...’

‘And you know exactly how long you’ll be doing it for, don’t you?’

‘That’s right.’

‘But don’t you ever yearn to do anything else?’

‘No.’

‘Haven’t you ever looked at the bloke who lives next door to you and felt like you wanted to do what he does? Or have you ever liked the look of someone else’s wife or house and...’

‘I’m not even going to bother answering your questions. I’ve already told you the answers.’

‘Is there anyone you don’t like?’ I pressed.

‘My race or alien?’ he sneered.

‘Your race,’ I sneered back. ‘Alien.’

He shook his head.

‘No-one.’

‘Any one ever pissed you off?’

‘Pissed me off?’

‘Got on your nerves?’

‘You’re the first for a while.’

‘Any of your kind?’

‘No.’

‘So you live in this perfect world where everyone gets on and there’s no resentment and no discrimination and...’

‘Give it a rest, Tom,’ pleaded Siobhan. I ignored her.

‘...and you all do everything for the good of everyone...’

‘What’s your point?’ Rob butted in.

‘My point is I find it hard to believe any of this bullshit.’

‘Believe what you want to believe,’ the alien said softly. ‘The fact is it’s true. We work together because it is the collective effort of each one of us that keeps the structure of our society intact. We are all equal.’

‘Do you feel superior?’ I asked.

‘Superior to what?’

‘Us.’

He thought carefully for a moment, still staring at me with those piercing blue eyes.

‘Yes,’ he said simply.

Conceited bastard, I thought. I got up from my chair and went to fetch more beer. I could feel Rob and Siobhan's mood physically lift as I walked away. I guess that if I had been in the alien's shoes then I would have probably felt the same way about our backward society as he did. But this was my backward society and my home and I loved it. How dare he think himself above us? Technical knowledge and skill was not all that success and advancement was measurable by. What did his kind know about art and music and other, less regimented pursuits?

I could hear the conversation continuing outside without me.

'So,' Rob asked, seemingly unaffected by my outburst and my exit, 'tell us more, will you? If everything's so structured back where you are, how do you deal with illnesses and accidents?'

'We don't have illnesses,' he replied.

'What?'

'We've eradicated them all.'

'How?'

'Remember your computer revolution when the silicon chip was invented?'

'Yes, why?'

Rob answered. 'That was a fundamental technological change that enabled a thousand other technologies to advance, wasn't it? About fifty years ago we entered a similar kind of phase on our planet.'

'How do you mean?'

'We made a discovery that changed everything.'

'What discovery?'

'We discovered how to take apart and reassemble the smallest atoms and electrons. We're able to modify them, control them, change them, rearrange them, destroy them, create them...'

'Jesus...' Siobhan whispered.

'And once you have the ability to do all of that,' the alien continued, 'you can look at everything in a new way. You're able to do just about anything.'

'Such as?'

'You mentioned medicine? We can now look at our bodies in a whole new light. We can break things down to the very lowest level imaginable. In the same way that you might repair a complicated computer network with a single new chip or a change of software, we can repair our bodies by forgetting about limbs and bones and organs and thinking in terms of individual cells.'

'I don't follow,' Siobhan mumbled, already feeling the effect of her first bottle of beer.

'A diseased cell was probably once a healthy cell, agree?'

She nodded.

'Yeah...'

‘So what we’re able to do is reverse the process that caused the cell to become diseased. We can rearrange the component parts of the cell in order to return it to a healthy state. By learning the precise role of the smallest parts of even the smallest atoms of the smallest cells it’s been possible for us to identify and isolate the base cause of every physical problem. And as our technology has continued to improve, so we’ve been able to cure those problems and, eventually, prevent them from happening in the first place.’

‘So what are you saying?’ I asked, entering the room in much the same mood as I had been in when I had left.

‘What do you mean?’ the alien sighed, obviously tiring of me.

‘Does this make you all powerful?’

‘You could say that. There’s very little that we can’t do...’

‘So why do you die?’

‘Because it’s part of the plan. There has to be progression.’

‘Why bother? You all look the same, there doesn’t seem to be much progression to me...’

‘Bodies age...’

‘So reverse the ageing process.’

He shook his head.

‘We have very strict ethics that control the use of this technology.’

‘Are you controlled?’

‘No.’

‘You mention computers - you can erase a computer’s memory and reprogram it. From what you say it sounds as if you’re able to do that with your memories and brains.’

‘The technology exists, yes.’

‘So you could delete memories, change personalities, suppress emotions...’

‘We could, but we don’t.’

‘You’re programmed to tow the line, aren’t you? You don’t deviate from what you’ve been ordained to do because you’ve been programmed not to.’

‘This is bollocks,’ spat Rob.

‘No it isn’t,’ I protested. ‘Come on, can you tell me with any certainty that no-one’s messed with your mind? Are you sure that you’re not just a worker drone that’s been sent out into space to do the work of who knows what?’

‘It just wouldn’t happen,’ the visitor sighed. ‘Listen to yourself, will you? You’re talking about ‘us’ and ‘them’ all the time. In our society we only talk about us. Everything is done for the common good.’

‘It’s all wrong,’ I insisted. ‘It’s all fucking wrong. You’re talking about a technology that allows you to

control everything - even the most basic thought processes.'

I noticed that Rob and Siobhan were looking at each other. They appeared awkward and uncomfortable. I felt frustrated and angry, but I wasn't completely sure why. I was getting nowhere and all it was doing was winding the others up.

I got up, walked to the end of the garden and stared out over the calm, dark sea. A brisk, cold wind blew in from the coast and chilled me to the core.

The things that I had heard that evening rattled round and round my head for hours. I couldn't sleep. Siobhan lay in bed with her back to me, sleeping soundly. I had really pissed her off with my behaviour tonight. She hadn't spoken to me since the alien had left the house just after midnight.

I just couldn't accept what I'd been told. The alien had asked us to believe that he came from some utopian paradise billions of miles away - a place where people lived predestined lives without question or complaint; a place where individuals worked together selflessly for the common good. Someone once said that we only see things from our own perspective. I could only base my judgement on what I knew of myself and the rest of the human race, and that experience made me doubt that this paradise could ever have existed. What about character and personality? What about creativity and spontaneity? None of those qualities could possibly have been allowed to exist on the alien homeworld. Such attributes would only serve to disturb the precious status quo.

If what I had heard was true then the options were limited. Either this place was a shining example to the rest of the universe, a cold, anodyne hell that no-one in their right minds would want anything to do with, or it was simply the most dangerous mind-fuck in existence. My gut reaction was that this alien 'John' and the rest of his blissfully happy species were being controlled like puppets by some godlike being who's purpose I didn't even want to think about.

18

October.

Autumn had arrived with a vengeance.

The days were shorter and the nights longer and the temperature had begun to plummet. I lay in bed with Siobhan sleeping soundly next to me. I was restless. I'd drifted in and out of sleep a few times but hadn't been able to properly lose consciousness. It was one of those endless dark nights where everything and nothing ran round and around my mind constantly. Without thinking of anything much in particular I had managed to keep myself awake until just after three o'clock. The cool night air was icy cold. I shuffled closer to Siobhan and wrapped my arms carefully around her.

It was hard to believe that the aliens had been among us for the best part of three months now. It was even harder to believe that Mum and Dad had been gone for almost half a year.

If I was perfectly honest with myself and put aside my own personal feelings and misgivings, then it felt as if the aliens had been with us for much, much longer. They had become such an accepted and integrated part of society that it was difficult now to try and remember what things had been like before they'd arrived.

Although they seemed to have passed by in a matter of moments (certainly much quicker than the dark dragging hours had tonight) our first months together had been more than long enough for the first tangible benefits of our mutual existence to become evident. It didn't matter what I thought of the aliens (and, to be honest, I still didn't think much of them) there was no denying that we as a race had benefited greatly from their experience and expertise. The truth of the matter had been brought home to me a week or so earlier when I'd found myself watching live television coverage of man's first landing on Mars. Okay, so the distance to the red planet was nothing compared to the vast distances the aliens had travelled, but no human had ever been further away from home. It was a monumentally important new beginning for mankind. Years ahead of previous schedules and predictions, the trip had been made in a vessel which had once been an ordinary, run-of-the-mill space shuttle. By the time our alien advisors and human technicians had finished redesigning, cannibalising and rebuilding the machine it was able to take off, fly and land completely unassisted like a conventional plane. Once white and bulky but now smooth, sleek and black, the ship could cruise effortlessly at incredible speeds which, just weeks earlier, we had only ever dreamed of.

This year the summer had been particularly harsh and dry. Elsewhere in the world the landscape and whole populations had been all but destroyed by high temperatures and virtually non-existent rainfall. Now, with the help of alien technology, previously lifeless fields had begun to flower and to flourish again. I'd heard reports that in one of the driest parts of Africa, a water manufacturing plant had just been opened and a vast man-made lake had already been filled. In the short time that the aliens had been with us, they seemed to have changed the face of the planet more than we had done in the last hundred years.

I rolled onto my back and stretched. Siobhan stirred next to me. She mumbled something and then reached across and ran her outstretched hand over my chest. She stroked me tenderly for a few seconds before moving her hand further down and gently grabbing hold of my balls. I was erect in seconds, and completely awake in microseconds.

'You are the sexiest woman alive,' I groaned as she took me in her mouth and began to suck and lick.

'I know!' she tried to say with her mouth full of me.

We fucked for almost an hour. Ravaging each other like animals, scratching and biting each other's naked flesh, sliding into position after position until we were too exhausted to carry on.

When we'd finished Siobhan silently rolled over and, still sweating and panting like a dog, I wrapped my arms around her and pressed my face against hers. Within seconds I was asleep. Completely satisfied and blissfully happy.

Part III

ACCEPTANCE

19

Sunday morning. Cold, dull and uneventful. With Siobhan working I drove across town to see Clare. It was Penny's birthday and I had a card and present for her.

In stark contrast to the summer just ended, the village now appeared almost deserted. The vast invading armies of tourists and journalists had all but disappeared as the holiday season had finally ended and also as the aliens had begun to travel outwards and the phenomenon of their arrival had no longer been restricted to my home village and the few towns surrounding.

I found Penny and Clare together at their home. I had expected to see other people there as it was Penny's birthday but the house was strangely quiet. As I stood at the door all that I could hear was the distant crash of rolling waves hitting the rocky shore. The smell of the sea hung heavily in the grey air.

Much as she tried to hide it from Penny, it was obvious as soon as I was inside that Clare was upset. Selfishly I thought about truncating my visit and quickly heading back home but my conscience got the better of me. I could sense that my friend needed to talk. She stood there in silence at first, just watching her daughter happily playing with her birthday presents. Whatever it was that was troubling Clare, she had obviously done all that she could to keep her feelings hidden from Penny.

'So what's up?' I asked as I sat down on the sofa next to her.

She shrugged her shoulders and looked away.

'Nothing, why?'

Here we go again, same old bullshit, I thought.

'Come on,' I sighed. 'You do this to me every time. It's bloody obvious you're upset. So are you going to talk to me about it or should I just piss off back home now...?'

'Don't have a go at me,' she sniffed.

'I'm not. I'm trying to help, that's all...'

'But there's nothing you can do.'

'Try me.'

'There's nothing.'

'Try me,' I said again.

'It's impossible. You can't be a dad for Penny, can you?'

I had guessed that whatever was wrong would have been connected to Bill, Clare's estranged husband. That man (in the loosest possible sense of the word) deserved nothing more than to have seven shades of shit beaten out of him. And I would happily have done it for doing what he did to Clare and Penny. No matter what his reasons were I couldn't forgive him. I had never seen anyone suffer as much as my precious friend had during those first few days, weeks and months since the bastard had walked out on her.

'So what's he done now,' I asked dutifully.

'It's what he hasn't done,' she replied, her voice beginning to waver with emotion.

'What d'you mean?'

'You've made the effort to come and see Penny on her birthday, haven't you?'

'Yes.'

'You've brought a present and a card...'

'Yes,' I said again.

'Well that's more than that fucker has.'

'You can't be serious,' I said, genuinely appalled. 'For Christ's sake, she's his only child. You'd have thought he'd...'

I didn't bother to finish my sentence. The desperate, empty look on Clare's face said it all.

'I know...' she sighed. She took a deep, unsteady breath and I watched as her tired eyes filled with heavy tears. She tried to nonchalantly and discreetly brush them away but it was too late.

'Have you heard anything from him?'

'I phoned him up last week to ask him what time he was going to come over and see her...'

'And...?'

'And do you know what the bastard said?' she sobbed.

'What?'

'He asked me what he needed to come round for. I told him it was Penny's birthday and he started to backtrack and apologise and...'

'It's okay,' I said softly, passing her a tissue.

She cleared her throat and continued.

'He said that he had something on and that he wouldn't be able to come over. He said he'd try and make it at Christmas.'

'So what did you say?'

'I told him that if he was too busy to come and see her on her birthday then he could fuck off at Christmas.'

'And what did he say to that?'

'Don't know. I hung up.'

'And you haven't heard anything from him?'

'I found this this morning.'

She reached down and picked up a ragged brown envelope from where it lay discarded on her low coffee table. There was a typewritten name and address on the front which had been scribbled out with a biro. 'Penny' had been scrawled just above the address.

'What was in it?'

'A card and a ten pound note,' she replied.

'And how's Penny taken it?'

Clare shrugged her shoulders and wiped her eyes again.

'As well as she could do, all things considered. She's got used to not having him around now but it still hurts. I tell you, Tom, I sat there this morning and watched her looking out of the window for over an hour waiting for him to turn up. She thought he'd be coming back to see her...'

'Bastard,' I muttered under my breath.

In the days, weeks and months since the aliens had arrived virtually everyone's lives had been affected to some degree. Everything seemed to have somehow changed now that the boundaries that had previously restricted us had suddenly disappeared. But Clare's life hadn't changed at all. Before the aliens had arrived her sole aim in life had been looking after her little girl and providing for her. Today that aim remained exactly the same. My other close friends like James (and Rob and Siobhan to an extent) along with, it seemed, pretty much everyone else, had let themselves be carried away on the crest of a wave of euphoria and excitement. I was beginning to wonder where I stood in the newly defined overall scheme of things.

The atmosphere in the room was as cold and grey as the miserable day outside. I had two choices; do something about it or leave. Much as leaving seemed to be the easier option, I owed it to Penny and Clare to stay.

'Right then,' I said, standing up and stretching. 'Pizza, burger or chips?'

'What?' Clare mumbled.

‘Burger and chips!’ Penny yelled.

Clare stared at me quizzically.

‘I can’t leave you two ladies trapped inside on a day like today now, can I? You need to get out, and you need to get out now.’

She obviously wasn’t in the mood to go anywhere. Penny, on the other hand, obviously was.

Three long hours later it was over.

Three long, loud hours sat in a Day-Glo burger bar on the sea front watching the rain drip down the windows.

Penny loved it. Clare and I hated it.

As far as I was concerned our trip out had the desired effect. It took Clare away from her home and distracted her from her painful thoughts and memories for a while. Penny remained in blissful ignorance of her mother’s pain and that was all that Clare had wanted.

It had been an unexpected and somewhat surreal Sunday afternoon. Greasy junk food, plastic cutlery and Styrofoam packages were the order of the day and Penny wouldn’t have had it any other way. I didn’t know what they made of it (either the ritual of the takeaway or the nutrition-free food itself) but four aliens sat at a table nearby eating quietly. They had travelled billions of miles and, surely, they had witnessed countless incredible sights and experiences along the way. What they thought of sitting in a burger bar in Thatcham on a wet Sunday afternoon I could not even begin to imagine.

20

I dropped Penny and Clare off at their place and was back home by half-past six. Rob was at the cottage with that damn alien again. He and Rob had become quite close since they’d met back in August but I just couldn’t warm to him. It was more than the fact that he was an alien - there was something about him that I really didn’t like. I had spoken to him on several occasions - once or twice at length - and we had discussed many different topics. We’d talked about families, technology, homes, hobbies, sport and even war. Regardless of all that I’d learned about him I still felt the same distrust and dislike today as I’d felt the first time I’d set eyes on the bastard.

‘Where you been?’ Rob grunted as I closed the front door and took off my jacket.

‘Out with Clare, why?’

'Siobhan's been on the phone for you.'

'Oh, right. Does she want me to call her back or is she...'

'I think you should call her,' Rob said, cutting across me.

'Did she say whether she's...'

I stopped talking when the alien appeared in the hallway from the living room.

'Evening, Tom,' he said in his low, monotonous voice. He sounded like Mr Franks, the maths teacher who had made my life hell when I was thirteen. Maybe that was why I didn't like him?

'Evening,' I replied, my voice as curt and abrasive as I could make it sound with a single word.

'Had a good day?' he asked as he walked towards me.

'Fine,' I snapped as I neatly side-stepped him and went into the kitchen. What I'd really wanted to say was 'it's none of your fucking business,' but I didn't.

I glanced over my shoulder and, to my relief, saw that Rob and his friend were heading back towards the living room. I filled up the kettle and, as I waited for it to boil, I picked up the phone to speak to Siobhan.

It rang out five or six times before she answered.

'Hello?' a quiet, distant voice said.

'Hi, it's me. How you doing?' I said, suddenly feeling more alive and awake than I had done all day.

'Do you give a damn how I'm doing?'

For a second I could think of nothing to say.

'What?' I eventually mumbled.

'I said do you give a fucking damn how I'm doing?'

'Of course I do. Look, what's the...'

'I don't think you do. Christ, it's been so long since you bothered to speak to me that I was starting to think you'd forgotten I existed. Thought you'd found someone better to spend you time with...'

There were such unexpected levels of anger, bitterness and unwarranted accusation in my girlfriend's voice that I found myself having real difficulty trying to respond.

'What are you talking about?' I stammered. 'Of course I haven't forgotten about you. We went out on Wednesday, didn't we? I called you yesterday...'

'I wasn't there.'

'That wasn't my fault.'

I frantically checked and rechecked over the events of the last few days in my mind to make sure I hadn't missed anything important. Her birthday was in April. It wasn't Christmas. It wasn't Valentine's Day. I was at a loss. But my memory had served me well. I had taken her to the pub on Wednesday

night. We'd had a bar meal and then stayed on for a few drinks.

'You should have called me again. You should have kept trying.'

'You could have called me,' I protested.

'I shouldn't have to.'

Again I struggled to comprehend the garbage that was coming from Siobhan's mouth. She was normally so calm and level-headed. We'd been apart for longer recently, so why was she making such a fuss about the last few days in particular? I thought our relationship was stronger and more solid than that.

'Look,' I began, keen to hear some kind of explanation from her, 'I don't know what the matter is. Am I supposed to have done something? I was going to try and call you this afternoon but...'

'But what?' she demanded, interrupting. 'Couldn't you be bothered? Had you got something better to do? Something more important...?'

'No. Fucking hell, you're more important to me than anything else, you know that.'

'Do I?'

'Of course you do. I love you.'

'Do you?'

'You know I do. Look, have I done something wrong? Have I forgotten something I should have remembered? If I have then I'm sorry, but...'

Rather than bother to listen to what I had to say, Siobhan instead chose to ignore me.

'Where were you this afternoon?' she asked, her voice cold and uncharacteristically stern.

'What?'

'Come on, I asked you where you were this afternoon?' she repeated angrily. 'I know you weren't at home because I called you. And I didn't just call you once, I tried about fifteen fucking times and I still couldn't get an answer. I came over but the house was empty...'

'Look, I...'

'Where were you?' she screamed.

She's lost it, I thought, completely lost the fucking plot. Why should I stand here and listen to this? Just because we were going out together didn't give her the right to know my every move.

'Does it matter where I've been? I don't have to tell you everything I...'

'Where were you?' she screamed again.

Like a frightened school boy I answered quickly.

'I went to see Clare,' I snapped reluctantly. 'Is that all right with you or should I have checked first...?'

‘What were you doing there?’

I took a deep breath. For a second I thought about just hanging up the phone but I knew that would have done more harm than good.

‘It’s Penny’s birthday. I took her card and present over and I took them both out for a burger. Clare’s having problems with...’

‘Is there something going on between you two?’

‘What?’

‘I said is there something going on between you two? She’s a single woman now. If you didn’t have anything to hide you would have told me you were taking her out.’

‘I didn’t take her out. Anyway it was a spur of the moment thing...’

‘Bollocks,’ she spat. ‘I know something’s going on.’

‘You’ve got this all wrong,’ I sighed. ‘Clare’s a good friend of ours...’

‘...of yours...’

‘She’s a good friend of ours who happens to be going through a rough patch at the moment. I’m not about to let her...’

‘What about me?’ demanded Siobhan, now screaming down the phone at me. ‘What do you think I’m going through? How the hell do you think I feel when I find out that my fucking boyfriend’s seeing another fucking woman?’

‘Don’t talk rubbish,’ I said, fighting a losing battle to keep calm. ‘You know damn well that I’d never cheat on you...’

‘That’s what I used to believe.’

‘So what’s happened to change your mind? I’ve spent time with Clare before and never had any of this from you. What’s different this time?’

She didn’t answer. The empty silence was deafening. I could still hear faint sounds coming from the other end of the line so I knew she hadn’t hung up. I looked around the kitchen helplessly as I waited for her to speak. I still couldn’t comprehend the bizarre conversation we were having.

‘You could’ve asked me to come with you,’ she sobbed suddenly.

‘I’ve already told you, it was a spur of the moment thing. I went over to Clare’s to drop in Penny’s present and card. They were on their own and it was Penny’s birthday and I decided to take them out. That’s all there was to it.’

‘I was on my own.’

‘You were at work. You told me you were shopping afterwards.’

‘I didn’t. I came home early. I didn’t feel well. Christ, do you know what you’ve put me through today?’

Her voice sounded hoarse and wracked with emotion. I hated it when she cried.

'Look,' I sighed, 'I'm sorry.'

'What?'

I cleared my throat and prepared to apologise again. Christ alone knows what I thought I was apologising for.

'I said I'm sorry,' I repeated. 'Do you want me to come over?'

Silence.

Then she spoke.

'I just don't believe you,' she said, her voice little more than a whisper.

'Shall I come over?'

'Just leave me alone. Just fuck off and leave me alone.'

She slammed down the phone.

What had just happened? I couldn't get my head around any of it. I stood there for a while, just staring at the phone. When I'd said goodbye to Siobhan on Wednesday we'd kissed more passionately than ever. So passionately, in fact, that we almost ended up making love on her doorstep. And now, just a few days later, the same girl had accused me of cheating on her without having any evidence or any reason to doubt me. I couldn't believe that Siobhan - the one dependable and stable influence that there had been in my life recently - had turned on me like this. She had been friends with Clare for almost as long as I had and I found her sudden lack of faith in either of us incredible and painfully hard to comprehend.

As far as I was aware, save for the unforgivable crime of not being at home to answer the telephone, I hadn't done anything wrong. Last Wednesday night had been perfect. We'd left the pub hand in hand and had walked back to her house in the cool moonlight. With the distant satellite's silvery rays dancing and playing on the rippling waves of the ocean she had been the one who had commented on how perfect and romantic our evening had been. There hadn't been any indication of the venom and hostility so evident in her voice now.

'Everything okay?' Rob asked, startling me. 'I heard you shouting. Was that Siobhan?'

I nodded and pushed past him and headed for the living room.

'I didn't realise you two were having problems,' he said, following close behind.

'Neither did I,' I grunted angrily. I was in no mood to talk.

I walked into the living room where the alien was stood at the bay window, looking down on the dark village below. I had forgotten he was there. He was the last person I wanted to see, certainly the last person I wanted to speak to. I was about to turn and go to my bedroom when I stopped myself. No, I thought. This is my house. The living room was the warmest, most comfortable room and it was where I wanted to be. Why the hell should I go anywhere else?

The alien turned round and looked at me before turning back to look out of the window again.

‘So what’s wrong?’ Rob asked with genuine concern in his voice. ‘What’s happened?’

I didn’t answer immediately. I didn’t want to talk with the alien in the room. I wasn’t even prepared to talk about the weather in his company and I was not about to share my private and personal problems while he was there. But at the same time there was no way I could avoid talking to Rob. It was obvious that he was worried.

‘I don’t know,’ I mumbled. ‘Haven’t got a clue.’

‘So what did she say?’

I shrugged my shoulders.

‘She’s decided that I’m having an affair.’

‘An affair? Who with?’

‘Clare.’

‘Clare!’ he exclaimed, surprised. ‘Bloody hell, that’s ridiculous. For Christ’s sake, the way she feels about men at the moment is enough to put anyone off.’

‘Not according to Siobhan it’s not.’

‘But you and Clare are just friends, same as me and Clare, same as Siobhan and Clare and me and Siobhan for that matter. So why does...?’

‘We’re more than just friends, we’re good, close friends. And when a good friend of mine is hurting I want to do something about it. So I did something today.’

‘Why today?’

‘Penny’s birthday, isn’t it,’ I said, my voice still quiet so our eavesdropping alien guest couldn’t hear. ‘Her ex let her down. Couldn’t be bothered to turn up for his only daughter’s birthday.’

‘She’s better off without him.’

‘That’s not the point.’

‘You see, this is one of the things that I really have trouble understanding,’ the alien said suddenly. I was angry that he’d dared to listen to and then interrupt our private conversation. Rob, on the other hand, was encouraging him to join in.

‘What don’t you understand?’ he wondered.

‘How you could even consider changing from one partner to another. Back home it just wouldn’t happen, not even if our partner died. There’s never any question of...’

‘I wish you’d just fuck off home,’ I spat, incensed. ‘You come here with your bloody holier-than-thou attitude and then stick your nose into my business uninvited. Do yourself a favour and do me a favour and fuck off!’

‘Tom,’ Rob protested uselessly. ‘Come on, he was only...’

I stormed out of the room and slammed the door behind me.

All I wanted was an explanation. I felt empty and hollow. I loved Siobhan. I would have done anything for her. Christ, I would have taken a bullet for her. I thought she knew just how much she meant to me and I thought she knew how I felt. So why was she so hostile towards me? Had it really been that insensitive of me to have taken Clare and Penny out?

I sat alone in the darkest, quietest corner I could find and listened to the silence.

I loved her and I wanted her close.

21

I woke up early next morning. It was still pitch-black and silent outside. After a few sleepy and blissfully ignorant moments had passed I quickly remembered all that had happened yesterday. I was immediately consumed by a heavy melancholy and bitter, desperate sadness again. The night just ending had been long, dark and lonely. I could still smell Siobhan's perfume on the bedclothes and that added to my wanting. Maybe I would try and phone her later. Perhaps I'd even pluck up the courage to go round and see her. But then again perhaps I wouldn't bother. It hurt not being with her but I knew it would hurt much, much more if she rejected me again.

For a while I lay in my bed and stared out at the sleeping world through a narrow gap in the curtains. The sky was dark - a deep, ruddy purple - but the darkness was very gradually being eaten away by the first distant glow of the orange light of dawn. The tops of the trees I could see were perfectly still. The only movement was that of an occasional bird darting across the morning sky in silhouette.

I dragged myself out of bed a little after half-past five. There didn't seem to be any point in lying there and festering when there was virtually no chance of being able to get back to sleep again. Dark, depressing thoughts were already beginning to run around my mind at a thousand miles a second and I stumbled into the living room in search of distractions. I collapsed on the sofa and reached for the remote control. I hadn't been up at this hour of the day for a long, long time. I sat down and watched few seconds of a ridiculously bright breakfast television programme on the TV. The pictures on the screen provided a stark contrast to the cold, grey shadows in the gloom all around me.

I didn't want to be without Siobhan.

I ended up at the farm. In the car on the way there I had been looking forward to some company and conversation. Within minutes of arriving there, however, I found that I wanted to be alone. I had a quiet word with Joe Porter and he seemed to understand. He found me a job in one of the fields furthest from the farm house. Something that would last for a while and keep my mind and body fully occupied.

And the therapy seemed to work. After venting my anger and taking out my frustration on a stretch of

weather-beaten fence which Joe wanted replaced, I began to feel slightly better. Even though nothing made any more sense than it had done last night, I had at least managed to put everything into some kind of perspective. I gradually managed to convince myself that I had been right all along and that it was Siobhan who had the problem. I hadn't done anything wrong. I didn't have to take the kind of crap that she'd hurled in my direction. I loved her and I was there for her and, as far as I was concerned, that would always be the case. So what had happened in her life to change things? Why had her opinion of me suddenly changed so drastically?

The dilapidated fence that I was replacing separated a recently ploughed field from a rough pasture where Joe's sheep often grazed. As I worked the sheep became used to my presence and slowly got closer. I found that the harder I concentrated on the job, the easier it was for me to switch off from my problems, but I was distracted when the nearby sheep suddenly scattered.

There was a tractor approaching.

I thought at first that there was an emergency, such was the speed that it came towards me. The huge, heavy wheels churned up the pasture and sent the sheep running in all directions, many into the ploughed field through gaps where the fence was still down. I stared at the driver and saw that it was Joe Porter himself. I immediately knew that something was wrong. He would never normally have driven with such disregard for his land or his livestock.

He stopped the tractor alongside me.

'What the hell you doing?' he yelled over the deafening din of the engine.

'Fixing the fence,' was my obvious reply. 'Just doing what you asked me to do.'

For a second I wondered whether I was fixing the right fence. Joe looked ready to explode.

'I can see that,' he snapped as he jumped down from his seat. 'I ain't stupid. I know what I asked you to do.'

The engine was still running and I watched as thick clouds of oily exhaust fumes spewed into the air.

'So what's the problem?' I wondered.

'Problem is that you were supposed to be fixing the fence this morning. I can't wait all bloody day for you to finish a job.'

'It's taking longer than I thought. I'm on my own here and...'

'I need it finished.'

'I should be done in a couple of...'

'I want it done in the hour. If you're going to work for me, then you're going to work how I want you to. If I give you something to do, you bloody well do it quickly.'

This was not the Joe Porter I was used to seeing. His familiar wrinkled smile had disappeared and his face was flushed red with anger. I had never seen him like this. Something must have happened. Surely the fact that I was still working couldn't have been the only reason for his frustration? Christ, this was the man who hadn't even raised his voice when he'd lost virtually an entire herd of cattle in a flash-flood earlier this year.

'Listen Joe,' I protested, looking him straight in the eye, 'I work here because I want to help. You don't pay me for what I do and I don't think you're in any position to criticise. I'm working as fast as I can. If you don't want me to help then I'll just go...'

'Finish the job you started,' he said, 'then go.'

With that he turned his back on me and climbed back into the tractor. I still couldn't help thinking that this whole conversation didn't make any sense. Something else must have happened.

'Look,' I said, trying a different tack, 'what's the problem? I'm doing what you asked me to...'

Porter just scowled at me and shook his head before putting his foot down and driving away again, carving yet another set of deep, muddy furrows in his precious green field. I watched him disappear in disbelief.

Determined not to give him any more reasons to be angry with me, I decided to finish the job before leaving for home. First Siobhan and now the farmer, what the hell was going on? I began smashing down a wooden fence post with a lump hammer, beating out my frustrations.

I didn't want revenge or retributions. I wanted explanations.

22

Clare telephoned me later.

I was sitting alone in the house again and I was glad of the interruption. I had been dragging myself down again, thinking dark, pointless thoughts when the call had come. I was sitting next to the telephone contemplating calling Siobhan. Clare provided me with the perfect excuse not to.

'You okay?' I asked.

'I'm okay,' she replied softly. She didn't sound too good, but at least she, unlike just about everyone else I knew, wasn't yelling groundless accusations at me. Yet.

'Penny enjoy her burger yesterday?'

'Yes,' she said quickly. 'Yes, she really did. Didn't stop talking about it all night...'

'But...?' I pushed, sensing that there was more she wasn't telling me.

'But what?'

'I don't know, you tell me. You sound distant. Is everything all right? Has Penny's dad done something else that's...'

'No, I haven't heard from him.'

'Then what is it?'

Clare was silent. The longer the silence lasted, the more uneasy and worried I began to feel.

'Are you still there?' I asked cautiously.

'I'm here.'

'So what's up? Is it something I've done?' I asked anxiously. It was beginning to feel like I was gradually turning everyone else against me. It was logical to assume that Clare might also have turned too.

'Christ, no,' she replied, her voice suddenly a little louder and more confident. 'You haven't done anything.'

'What is it then?'

I hated playing games and being messed around. In my current state of mind I considered telling her as much.

'Bloody hell, you're going to think I'm off my head,' she eventually said.

'Try me.'

I heard her take a deep breath.

'It's Penny,' she quietly admitted.

'What about her?'

'She fucking hates me.'

'What?'

Another awkward silence.

'I don't know how else to put it, Tom. She hate's me. She's...'

'She's what?'

'Oh, Jesus, I don't know what's going on anymore. I think she must be ill. She was fine when we got home yesterday and she seemed all right this morning when I took her to nursery. It's only since I picked her up that I've noticed it.'

'Noticed what?' I asked, concerned. 'What's the matter with her?'

'I can't explain,' she sighed, her voice rapidly filling with emotion. 'I'm probably just being paranoid but I'm really worried. I've never seen her like this before. It's like I've bought someone else's child home with me by mistake.'

'So what's she doing?'

Yet another pause.

‘It must be me you know, Tom. I must have changed. I must have said something because it’s almost as if she can’t stand to be in the same room as me anymore. She came downstairs for a few minutes for her tea but she didn’t say a frigging word. She’s been up in her bedroom ever since.’

‘Has it got anything to do with her dad? Do you think he saw her at nursery today?’

‘I don’t know. I think he’s working away...’

‘Do you think she could be reacting because she didn’t see him yesterday. She might not have said anything but kids do pick up on things...’

‘I don’t know,’ she snapped again.

‘It’s got to be that, or something else that happened at nursery perhaps? Maybe another one of the other children said something to her and...’

‘So why doesn’t she tell me?’ Clare interrupted. ‘Why is she taking it out on me like this?’

‘Because you’re her mum? Because you’re the only one there. Because you’re the one she sees the most and you’re the only one she’s got to blame?’

I didn’t like being so blunt with Clare, but she needed to be told. I didn’t think for a second that Penny really did hate her. Yesterday the two of them had been inseparable. I felt sure that the little girl was suffering greatly as a result of the break-up of her parent’s marriage. She was too young and innocent to be able to put her feelings and concerns into words. Maybe this was her way of dealing with what had happened?

‘I’m frightened,’ Clare said, her voice little more than a fragile whisper.

‘Why? What is there to be frightened of? This is just a phase she’s going through.’

‘I’m not sure...’

‘Look, she’ll snap out of this as quickly as she managed to snap into it,’ I interrupted. ‘I’m sure she will.’

I didn’t have much confidence in what I was saying. I thought it was what Clare needed to hear.

‘I don’t know,’ she mumbled. At that moment I began to sense that there really could be something wrong with the little girl – her mother’s intuition was rarely wrong. ‘I’ve seen her have bad moods and off-days before, but never anything like this. She’s never been like this before...’

‘Why do you say that? What’s different about today?’

‘I’ve heard her throwing things around her room. And when I try to go up and see her she slams the door and sits with her back against it so I can’t get in. She tried to shove her bed across to block it but it was too heavy for her.’

‘What?’ I said, trying to make sense of what I was being told.

‘I swear, Tom, she’s not my Penny tonight. I sat outside her room for over an hour before I phoned you. I could hear her crying and talking to herself and...’

‘And what?’

‘And I’ve just never seen her like this before. And I’m frightened.’

‘People have bad days,’ I said pathetically, trying unsuccessfully to reassure her. ‘Take Joe Porter for example. I was helping out on the farm today. I’d been there for a couple of hours and the cantankerous old bastard just turned on me.’

‘Why?’

‘Don’t know. Practically ordered me off his land.’

‘So what had you done?’

‘Nothing.’

‘You must have done something.’

‘Not that I know of.’

‘So what are you saying? That there’s something in the bloody water?’

‘No,’ I snapped, annoyed that she was mocking me, ‘I’m just trying to say that...’

I shut up quickly when I realised that I didn’t know what I was trying to say at all.

‘Can you hear that?’ Clare asked.

‘I can’t hear anything.’

‘Listen...’

I held my breath and listened carefully with the phone pressed hard against my ear. I could hear something, but I didn’t know what it was. I concentrated as hard as I could but it was difficult to hear anything more than a few muffled bangs and dull and distant crashes.

‘What is it?’ I wondered.

‘That’s Penny.’

‘What’s she doing?’

‘Tearing her room apart. Throwing things at the door. I told you, she’s been like this since we got home. I’ve yelled at her and I’ve begged her to stop but...’

‘Why’s she doing it?’

I knew that was a bloody stupid question to ask.

‘Don’t know. You tell me. I wish someone would.’

Clare was crying.

‘Do you want me to come over?’ I asked pointlessly.

‘Why? What are you going to be able to do?’

‘You need someone with you. What about your mum?’

'She's not here. She's staying with my aunt in London.'

'Is there anyone else who could...'

'Who could what? What's anyone else going to be able to do?'

'Have you thought about calling the doctor out? He might be able to give her something to...'

'She doesn't need drugs,' she said abruptly.

'Look, just do me a favour and think about it will you?' I pleaded. 'It might help her to...'

'No!'

'Maybe she just needs sleep then. Let her get this out of her system and I bet she'll be fine in the morning.'

'Do you really think so?'

If I was completely honest I didn't, but that wasn't what I told Clare.

'Of course I do,' I lied through gritted teeth.

I heard another loud crash from the other end of the phone line. Clare sniffed back more tears.

'I've got to go,' she sobbed.

'Do you want me to come over?' I asked again.

'No, it's okay. If I need you I'll call.'

Another crash. I heard Clare call out to Penny before she put the phone down.

23

In stark contrast to the previous morning, the next day I hid myself away in bed for as long as I could. I lay on my back with my head buried under the covers, almost too afraid to look out. What the hell was happening to my world? It seemed to be falling apart at the seams and I had no idea why. I began to think that I must have been the cause of all the grief. I was, after all, the common denominator. In less than forty-eight hours my girlfriend had accused me of having an affair, an old family friend had turned against me for no reason and, now, my best friend's little girl seemed to be beginning to self-destruct. Normally I would have confided in Rob and asked him his opinion. Nowadays, however, everything I told him seemed to be freely shared with his alien friend. I much preferred to keep my mounting problems to myself.

Yet again I had spent a sleepless night staring at the walls and ceiling of my bedroom for what had felt like an eternity. The bed had seemed huge, cold and empty without Siobhan. In the darkness I managed to convince myself that it really was me who was to blame. It had to be. The sudden change in the behaviour of many other people around me was inexplicable. The idea that I was losing my mind seemed much more probable than the bizarre alternative – that Siobhan, Penny and Joe Porter had somehow all lost their collective grip on reality.

Just after seven I had heard the front door slam shut. That had been Rob leaving. I was seeing less and less of him each day, not that that was a problem. But he always seemed to have that fucking alien in tow. There were only three hundred and sixty-odd aliens as oppose to Christ knows how many millions of humans in the country. So why did that one in particular want to spend all his time with my brother?

Eight o'clock slowly passed, as did nine and then ten. I watched the figures on my alarm clock as they marched on mercilessly towards eleven. Minutes before the hour I finally forced myself to get up, more because I desperately needed to go to the toilet than for any other reason. As soon as I was up I felt dangerously vulnerable, tiptoeing through the house in my underwear, bracing myself against the bitter autumn cold. The central heating had long since gone off. Had I got up earlier I would have been warm, but that was the price I paid for my laziness. The thought of going back to bed again was dangerously tempting. There was nothing stopping me spending a day hiding behind the soft armour plating of my duvet and sheets.

The kitchen cupboards were bare. I didn't even have enough milk for a cup of tea and I quickly reached the inevitable conclusion that I was going to have to go down to the shops. The thought filled me with dread. The last thing I wanted to do was speak to people. The prospect of traipsing along the cold, wet and miserable streets of Thatcham was far from appealing. Dejected, I showered and dressed.

Outside was as grey and unpleasant as I had expected. I stepped out into the bitter late morning air, locked the door behind me and then turned round to face the world. My breath condensed around my face in cool, billowing clouds and I shoved my hands deep into my jacket pockets in a vain attempt to keep warm. The streets below looked fairly quiet. The entire scene looked lifeless and drained of colour – almost monochrome. The once lush green hillside upon which my house stood was now covered in spiky, brittle-branched trees. Their spiteful, spindly wooden bodies seemed to climb, twist and claw their way up into the ominously overcast sky as if they were trying to escape.

I met Tony Wilson halfway down the cobbled footpath which ran past the front of my house and down into the centre of Thatcham. Tony was a member of the local coast guard. He was walking towards me, coming back up the hill and away from the village. He had made eye-contact at a hundred yards. Although I wanted to keep myself to myself at all costs, I knew that I had no option but to acknowledge him.

'Morning, Tony,' I said when he was only a short distance away.

Tony said nothing.

Perhaps he hadn't heard me. I tried again.

'Morning,' I said again, this time a little louder.

Wilson lowered his head and quickened his pace. The footpath was narrow and he barged past me, pushing me to one side. I turned and watched him disappear around the corner.

'Ignorant bastard,' I hissed under my breath as I began to trudge towards the centre of the village.

Ken Trentham, the old drunk who I often ignored in The Badger's Sett, was standing perfectly still at the side of the main road. He was leaning heavily against a lamppost with his head resting against the metal and his arms hanging down at his sides. His yappy little dog was sat at his feet, barking incessantly. True to form, Ken, I thought. Pissed again.

The main shopping area of Thatcham was in reality little more than a glorified high street lined with a motley collection of small gift shops, offices, banks, charity shops and a single medium-sized supermarket. I hoped that I would be able to get everything I needed from that one shop. For the sake of my sanity and my temper I needed to get in and get out as quickly as possible.

I walked inside through the clattering automatic doors and picked up a battered wire basket for my shopping.

'Morning, Tom,' a familiar voice suddenly said from behind, startling me for a second. I turned and saw that it was Ray Mercer, the landlord of The Badger's Sett.

'Morning, Ray,' I replied. 'How you doing?'

I suddenly felt a little more positive. I had finally found someone who was actually willing to speak to me and who was still civil, friendly and rational.

'I'm okay,' Ray sighed sadly. 'Not too bad considering.'

'Considering what?' I asked instinctively.

He shook his head and shrugged his shoulders.

'Nothing,' he mumbled. 'You know what they're like.'

'Who?'

'Women,' he whispered secretively.

'Tell me about it,' I agreed, understanding more than he knew.

'I just don't know what's going on from one day to the next,' he continued. 'She was all right yesterday. Don't know what I've done to upset her today...'

'Who? Brenda?'

He nodded.

'Married for thirty-two years and hardly ever a cross word. This morning she can't even bring herself to talk to me.'

'What happened?'

'I left the kitchen window open.'

'What?'

He shrugged his shoulders again.

'That's the only reason I can think of. Stupid, isn't it?'

'What's she said then?'

‘Not a lot. She’s screamed at me quite a bit – like a bloody banshee she was – but she hasn’t actually said a fat lot that I’ve been able to understand. Bloody hell, Tom, you’d have thought she’d caught me with another woman the way she’s been acting today.’

Ray’s words immediately struck an uncomfortably familiar chord with me. His rift with Brenda was as unexpected as mine with Siobhan. The pair of them had been inseparable in the time that I’d known them both. Their warmth and friendliness was the main reason why their pub was always the busiest pub in the village. Okay, so Brenda liked a drink (rumour had it she drank gin with her breakfast) but she lived in a pub – it was part of the job. I could tell from the empty sadness and confusion on Ray’s face that what he’d seen this morning had absolutely nothing to do with alcohol.

‘I know just how you feel, mate,’ I quietly admitted, allowing myself to speak without thinking.

‘Do you?’ he said, obviously not believing me.

I couldn’t avoid telling him about my problems with Siobhan. I guessed that it might have helped him to know that he wasn’t alone.

‘Same thing happened with me and Siobhan,’ I said. ‘Everything’s fine one minute, then she went off on one like your Brenda.’

‘Sorry to hear it,’ he sighed. He was obviously preoccupied with his own problems but still sounded genuinely concerned.

The conversation dried up. Ray looked up and down the shelf next to him and picked up a box of cornflakes. He put the box into his basket and then began to trundle down the aisle. His body seemed hunched forward and heavy. It was almost as if he had the weight of the world resting on his unwilling shoulders.

‘See you later,’ he mumbled, ‘I’d better get back. Don’t want to upset our Brenda any more than I already have done.’

‘All right, take care then Ray,’ I said as I watched him shuffle off. I felt sorry for him. Normally jolly and effervescent, today he was a shell of a man. It looked like it was all he could do just to keep going.

He turned back momentarily.

‘See you on Friday night, Tom?’ he asked hopefully.

‘Probably,’ I smiled, remaining as noncommittal as I could.

He nodded and went on his way. I turned my attention to getting my shopping done, getting out and getting home.

‘I had it first, you bastard,’ I heard a gruff, croaking voice say from the next aisle. The mass of shoppers crammed into the building seemed to stop what they were doing in unison to watch what was happening. I peered round the end of the display rack and saw two old men, face to face, each one trying to wrestle a bottle of whiskey off the other.

‘Get another bottle,’ one of the men hissed. ‘Fuck off and get yourself another bottle.’

‘There’s no more of these. This one’s mine. You get another bottle.’

For a moment the two men stood motionless, each one glaring into the other’s glasses, locked in a

fierce (but ultimately pointless and pathetic) conflict. They looked bizarre – all braces, tweed jackets, flat caps, slip on shoes and absolute hate and contempt for each other.

Then it happened. In a single sudden and unexpected moment of movement, the smaller of the men yanked the bottle from the other's hand and threw it into a display of bottles of wine. He then punched his adversary in the face, sending him sprawling to the ground like a rag doll.

'That was mine,' he hissed, leaning over the body on the linoleum. Without saying another word he then turned and walked out of the shop.

A few seconds later, with a cold disregard for the unconscious old man on the ground, the rest of the shoppers turned their backs on the scene, forgot what had just happened and went about their business.

It took me another twenty minutes to get out of the shop.

There must have been something seriously wrong with the elderly population of Thatcham, I thought as I crossed the high street. I could see an old lady sitting on a bench. Her coat was open. Underneath her long grey mackintosh she was completely naked.

I stopped at James' house in the way home. I hadn't seen anything of him or Stephanie for a couple of weeks. I hoped that Stephanie would be in. She was a good friend of Siobhan's and they often spoke on the phone. Maybe she'd be able to tell me what it was that I was supposed to have done to offend her.

James answered the door. He shouldn't have been there. He should have been at work.

'All right, Jim?' I asked cautiously.

My friend looked strangely distant but at least he didn't curse me, ignore me, punch me or slam the door in my face. In fact he didn't do anything. He just stood there, swaying slightly from side to side as if he was drunk. But it was far too early in the day for that.

He slowly lifted his head and looked at me. His bleary eyes began to focus.

'What?' he mumbled.

'I said are you all right?'

He nodded.

'Fine.'

He then turned around (bumping into the half-open door as he did) and stumbled back inside the house. Unsure, I followed him in and found Stephanie sitting on the living room floor, barely dressed. She looked up as James walked back into the room, then looked at me, then looked down again. The expression on her face was just as confused and directionless as that of her husband.

'Okay, Stephanie?' I asked softly.

She looked up again, then looked down again. She muttered something. It might have been a word or two, but her speech was so blurred and indistinct that I couldn't be sure.

James collapsed into the nearest chair.

‘What’s up with you two?’ I asked. No response. ‘Are you ill, Jim?’ I tried. ‘Why aren’t you at work?’

James said nothing. He just listlessly stared into the space in front of him.

‘Do you want me to get a doctor? Do you want me to...?’

‘Hello,’ the couple’s eldest child – Jessica – said suddenly. She was standing next to me. I hadn’t noticed her come into the room.

‘Hello, you,’ I whispered, crouching down so that we were on the same level and I could speak to her quietly. ‘You okay?’

She nodded. Her eyes were wide and unblinking.

‘So what’s up with your mummy and daddy today?’ I asked.

Jessica shrugged. Two of her three younger sisters peered around the kitchen door and then crept into the room when they recognised me. Although she was the oldest, Jessica was just under eight years of age. She obviously understood little about what was happening around her. Unfortunately neither did I.

‘They’re acting strange, aren’t they?’ she said, looking down at her mother sprawled haphazardly across the living room floor.

‘Were they like this yesterday?’

‘No,’ she said quietly.

‘When you went to bed last night,’ I asked, ‘were they like this then?’

She shook her head.

‘No they were different.’

‘Different?’

‘Angry.’

James and Stephanie remained virtually motionless. Occasionally one of them would move, but it would only be to scratch the side of their face or shuffle their weight slightly. As I stared at them both I began to feel a desperate, claustrophobic fear building up inside me. The realisation that this was not just some freak coincidence – that there was something happening to the people around me that was wrong and unnatural. Just about everyone I had seen so far this morning had been either filled with seemingly unjustified anger and hate or, like these two, zombie-like and morose.

A sudden movement on the sofa behind Stephanie caught my eye. I leant over and saw that the couple’s youngest child was lying in amongst a bundle of dirty linen. The helpless baby didn’t have any clothes on, just a nappy which seemed fit to burst. It hadn’t been changed for some time. Disturbed by my sudden movement, the baby began to cry and wail and wave its tiny arms and legs frantically. Feeling desperately inexperienced I scooped her up and held her close to my chest. She was freezing cold. She squirmed and kicked with fear.

‘Stephanie!’ I hissed. ‘Stephanie, will you get up off your backside and see to this baby?’

No response.

I looked up and saw that James was watching me.

‘For Christ’s sake, James, will you do something?’

Nothing.

I didn’t know what to do. With Jessica’s help I managed to change the child’s nappy, find it some clothes and get it some milk. The other children played happily in their bedrooms, oblivious to whatever it was that was happening around them. I knew there was nothing I could do for their parents. I shook them, shouted at them and I even hit them. Nothing.

The irrational behaviour which I had already seen in some of my closest friends seemed to be sweeping through Thatcham like a plague. Completely unbelievable but painfully true, the people around me were beginning to systematically self-destruct. It seemed to me – although I couldn’t be sure – that there was a pattern. They first seemed to become violent and unpredictable before slipping into the withdrawn, catatonic state that I had found James and his wife in.

I had to get out of the house. I could feel the panic beginning to rise inside me. I didn’t know where to go but I knew that I had to get away. I phoned James’ brother (who lived a couple of streets away) but there was no reply. In desperation I knocked on the front door of James’ neighbour’s house. Mrs Simpson – the old widow who had lived alone there for years – seemed as reassuringly calm, lucid and unflustered as she always did. I did my best to explain the bizarre situation to her and, although she didn’t seem to believe a word of what I told her, she did at least agree to sit with the children until I managed to get hold of someone to look after them or their parents managed to snap out of their unnatural state – whichever happened first.

In the midst of the sudden confusion and disorientation I managed to salvage and hold on tightly to a single positive thought. Now that I had seen this irrational behaviour from other people who were unconnected to me, I could safely assume (if anything could be safely assumed any more) that I was not the cause of the problem.

I ran back home to get my car.

I needed to find Siobhan next.

I needed to know that she was all right.

As I drove towards Siobhan’s house my nervousness and uncertainty increased. Despite all that I had seen in the last hour or so, a part of me still wondered whether I was to blame for the wall which seemed

to have been built between the two of us. Had something I'd done offended her? Had I missed or forgotten something crucial? Should I have called yesterday or just swallowed my pride and gone round to see her the day before? Would she even let me in the house when I turned up today? I couldn't believe that in less than half a week all that we had managed to build together through months of intimate closeness seemed to have been destroyed. I hoped and prayed that when I knocked on the door it would be answered by my Siobhan – the girl that I loved, remembered and missed desperately. The girl who had saved my sanity. The one and only person who had always been there for me since Mum and Dad had died.

Siobhan's house wasn't far from mine and it didn't take me long to get there. The roads were quiet. I hadn't been expecting to come across much traffic, but I hardly saw any. I could only have passed another five or six cars during the entire journey.

I turned into her road and pulled up outside her house. For a couple of minutes I did nothing but just sit there and try and compose myself and get my thoughts together. All of the fear and concern I felt for the rest of the people around me paled into insignificance alongside my desperate fears and concerns for Siobhan. Whatever it was that was happening in Thatcham, I knew that I could deal with it with a thousand times more strength and determination if the woman I loved was standing by my side again.

It was no good. I didn't matter how hard I tried, I couldn't stop myself trembling and shaking with nervous anticipation. I stared at Siobhan's house and anxiously watched for even the slightest sign of movement. I had hoped that she might come out to see me when she saw the car but no, there was nothing. My tension was increasing with every second. All that I wanted to do was hold her tight again, but I couldn't bring myself to take that first step forward. The fear of being rejected by her was too much to even begin to think about.

Two or three long and painfully drawn-out minutes went by before I decided that I couldn't wait any longer. I took a long, deep breath and then got out of the car and walked up the short garden path to the front door. I closed my eyes and rang the bell. I peered through the small frosted glass window, hopeful of seeing some movement inside the house and quickly moved out of the way when I saw that someone was coming.

Siobhan yanked the door open and stood and glared at me. She looked bad. Her clothes were creased and worn. She wasn't wearing any make-up and her usually perfect hair was knotted and tangled.

'Siobhan, I...' I began.

She slammed the door shut in my face.

Stunned at first, I shook my head with disbelief. Then, more out of anger than for any other reason, I began to pound my fist against the door again and again and again.

'Siobhan!' I yelled, loud enough for the entire street to hear. 'Let me in! Just open the fucking door and let me talk to you!'

I peered in through the small window again. I could see her waiting in the shadows of the hallway. That was a good sign. At least she was considering coming back and talking to me. If she hadn't wanted to know she would surely have gone further into the house. As it was she was still just a few feet away.

'Come on,' I begged. 'Please Siobhan, just stop and tell me why you're acting like this. If it's something I've done then at least have the decency to tell me what it is. I'm worried about you...'

I glanced back over my shoulder self-consciously and wondered if anyone else in the road had heard me shouting. Not that it really seemed to matter – shouts, screams and arguments were par for the course today.

‘You don’t care about me,’ a muffled voice suddenly grunted from inside the building.

‘Yes I do,’ I insisted, relieved that she had finally spoken. ‘Of course I do. I love you for God’s sake. What makes you think that I don’t care?’

I braced myself for her response. I had asked a question that I didn’t really want to hear the answer to.

There was another long and painful silence. I squinted through the window again and saw that she had moved a little closer to the door. I quickly moved back out of the way, hoping that she hadn’t seen me staring. To my relief I then heard the latch click. The door slowly opened inwards.

‘Thanks,’ I gasped, my heart racing. ‘I can’t tell you how worried about you I’ve been. I was starting to think that...’

My words were wasted. Siobhan obviously didn’t have any interest in what I had to say. Rather than listen she just turned her back and walked towards the living room. I followed but kept a cautious distance between us. The building was cold (I could see through the kitchen that the back door was open) and untidy. The carpets were covered with discarded food, clothes and belongings. She’d never been particularly house proud, but I’d never seen the place like this before. Siobhan stumbled and tripped across the littered living room floor and dropped heavily into the nearest seat. I waited by the door, unsure if I was welcome. When she didn’t react I took a few hesitant steps forward.

‘I missed you,’ I said, simply and honestly.

She just stared into space.

‘Are you okay?’ I asked when she didn’t respond. What a fucking stupid question – of course she wasn’t okay.

She mumbled something, but I couldn’t make out what it was she’d said.

‘Pardon?’

‘Leave me alone,’ she said, this time a little louder.

‘What?’ I sighed with tears welling up in my eyes.

‘I said leave me alone,’ she repeated again.

‘But why? Christ, what is it I’m supposed to have done...?’

‘I don’t want you here. I don’t need you anymore. I don’t want to see you again.’

Her vicious words were spoken without emotion in a dull, low and cold tone. Her voice was monotonous and lifeless and it seemed to be a struggle for her just to open her mouth and speak.

‘But after everything we’ve been through...?’ I pleaded. ‘You can’t just turn your back on me without any reason. Have you got any idea how much you mean to me?’

‘Just go.’

‘What’s the fucking matter with you?!’

‘Nothing.’

‘What’s happened, Siobhan?’

‘Go.’

Her orders were ruthless and final. There wasn’t even the slightest hint of remorse in her brutal words.

‘Okay,’ I said quietly with tears of frustration now rolling freely down my face. ‘If that’s what you want...’

I turned and slowly walked back towards the door, feeling that I should turn around and try and reason with her again but knowing that it would be pointless while she was in this desperate state.

I stood in the hallway for a second before relenting and allowing myself to turn back. The woman I loved – the perfect creature to whom I had been ready to dedicate my life and soul – sat motionless, slumped forward in her chair with her head hanging down heavily. She stared at the floor just in front of her feet.

I cleared my throat and wiped my eyes.

‘I’ll come back soon,’ I said, doing my level best to sound strong and composed but failing miserably.

Siobhan grunted something unintelligible but still didn’t look up.

I tripped and stumbled through the house and stepped back out into the cold autumn air. I made sure that the latch had dropped and the door was secure before walking back towards my car.

In the same way that I had found it necessary to try and compose myself before I’d seen Siobhan, I now needed to stop and steady my shattered nerves again. Seeing her in such a desperate state had torn me apart, and the lack of any explanation made her condition all the more difficult to accept. I gave up trying to work things out. There was little to be gained from searching aimlessly for ways to try and rationalise the completely irrational.

My options were becoming increasingly limited. I could go back to my empty house or I could try another friend. Clare was next on the list. I had no idea where Rob had gone earlier and so she seemed like the best person to try. With her elderly mother still away and her bastard ex-husband providing no support whatsoever, I knew that she too would have few people to turn to.

The temperature seemed to have plummeted in the short time I had been with Siobhan. I zipped up my jacket and looked around. The world was still. Nothing moved. An overwhelming silence had descended everywhere. There was a definite and unexpected air of finality and resignation in the air.

Before I drove away I allowed myself one last long look at Siobhan’s house, hoping that I would see her. Just a moment of movement would be enough. Just to know that she still cared enough to drag herself out of her seat to see me would have made all the difference to my mood and resolve. But there was nothing.

I made a silent promise to myself to get back to her as soon as I could. As soon as I had found someone who could make sense of the madness of this morning I would drive straight back to the house

and make her talk to me. I'd do whatever I had to. If I ended up knocking her out cold and dragging her back to my car then I would. There was no way I was going to leave her. I couldn't stand the thought of leaving her alone but I knew that for now I didn't have a choice.

Fighting hard to keep my concentration, I drove towards Clare's house.

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Clare was at the door before I was out of the car. She ran over to me and then just stood there in silence with tears rolling down her face. My brain was struggling to cope with everything that was happening. I didn't know what I was supposed to say.

'Are you okay?' I eventually mumbled, my voice wavering and cracked with emotion and uncertainty.

'No,' she replied in little more than a whisper.

'What's wrong?' I asked nervously, almost too scared to listen to her answer.

'It's Penny...' she began before stopping when the pain and tears took over. 'She's... I don't...'

She withered and collapsed in front of me, virtually falling into my arms, and I instinctively reached out and caught her. I hauled her back up onto her unsteady feet and she buried her head in my chest as she sobbed hysterically. I held her tightly, keen to let her know that I was there for her, but also because I was relieved to have found someone else who had not deteriorated into the same pathetic and sorry state as most of the rest of the population seemed to have done.

'Tell me what's happened,' I pressed gently as I walked her back towards the house. 'What's wrong?'

Clare looked up at me with red eyes filled with desperate, stinging tears. She sniffed and wiped her face.

'It's Penny,' she sighed.

'What's the matter with her? Same as last night?'

'Worse.'

'Worse? How?'

I closed the door behind us and followed Clare into the living room. I sat down with her on the sofa.

'Last night,' she began, 'after I'd spoken to you she just seemed to get worse and worse. I've hardly

had any sleep. I had to lock her in her room because...’

‘Because what?’

She shook her head, tears running freely again. She couldn’t bring herself to finish her sentence.

‘It’s all right,’ I said, reaching out to hold her. My attempts to console and reassure her were failing pathetically. Even after all that had already happened I was still frightened and disturbed by news of Penny’s condition. I tried to at least appear strong for Clare’s sake.

‘Can I see her?’ I asked.

She nodded, stood and led me upstairs, holding my hand all the way. As we approached the door of the little girl’s room she squeezed tighter and tighter.

‘I’ve been sitting here for hours just listening,’ she whispered, nodding towards a small area of the landing which was littered with empty coffee cups and other rubbish. She stopped, dried her eyes on the sleeve of her blouse, and then lifted her head to look at me. Her face was a picture of frozen fear and pain. She turned back to face the door, lifted her hand to open it, and then stopped, letting her hand fall away again.

‘I can’t...’ she began. ‘She’s...’

‘She’s what?’

Clare shook her head and sniffed back more tears.

‘Nothing.’

She took a deep breath and pushed the door open. She moved to one side and gestured for me to go through.

‘It’ll be okay,’ I whispered as I passed her. She didn’t believe me but she managed half a smile.

I peered cautiously around the door into the little square bedroom. I couldn’t see Penny at first. It was difficult to make out much. The light was low and the room looked as if it had been hit by a tornado.

‘Is she okay?’ Clare asked, trying to lean over my shoulder to see inside.

‘Don’t know,’ I replied. ‘I can’t see her. Maybe she’s...’

In one unexpected movement Penny appeared from behind the door and stopped in front of me, staring at me with dark eyes full of anger and inexplicable hate. Her sudden appearance and malevolence caught me off guard and I jumped back, almost tripping over Clare behind me. And then she moved. With the speed of a wild animal and the strength of someone ten times her size the little girl shoulder-charged me and sent me flying back out onto the landing. It took all my strength just to keep hold of her. As I dragged her back towards her room she spat and hissed and bit me. I threw her down onto her bed and then ran back and slammed the door behind me, feeling her slam into the other side just moments later. She was thumping on the wood, trying to get out. And she screamed. A fucking awful wail of a scream which paled into insignificance alongside the desperate cries of her heartbroken mother standing next to me.

‘What’s happened to her?’ she demanded. ‘Why is she doing this?’

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t answer. I locked the door, leant against the wall and slid down to the

ground.

The thumping and banging continued for another twenty minutes. When it finally stopped I crept back into the bedroom and found the little girl curled up in a ball underneath her bed, shaking. Stronger than a shiver but nowhere near as violent as a full-blown fit or convulsion, she was trembling from head to toe. She was breathing and her vital signs were okay but apart from that she didn't move or respond to me in any way. I didn't know what to do other than just leave her there until we'd managed to fetch a doctor to her. I stood up and ushered Clare out of the room and then turned back to look at Penny once more. She was bruised, bloodied and exhausted. Her normally sparkling eyes were dull and clouded. She was just an empty shell. There didn't seem to be anything left of the beautiful little creature that I'd taken out for a birthday treat just a couple of days ago.

Clare and I quietly made our way back down to the living room where we spoke in hushed whispers.

'Is she going to be all right?' she asked.

'Don't know,' I replied honestly, shrugging my shoulders. 'Impossible for me to say. We need to get someone out to see her but...'

'What's caused this?' she demanded, cutting across me.

'I don't know. Look, Clare, have you been out today?'

'No, I've been here with Penny all day, you know that. Why?'

I paused for a moment. After the trauma she was already having to deal with, could my friend cope with any more news?

'Because she's not the only one who's like this.'

'What do you mean?'

'I told you last night that Joe Porter had been acting weird...'

'But he's a sixty year-old man and Penny's just a child for God's sake...'

'Yes, but that's not all. Did I tell you about Siobhan?'

'No,' she mumbled, shaking her head.

'She's hardly spoken to me since you and I went out together at the weekend.'

'Why not?'

'Christ knows. She's screamed at me, shouted at me, ignored me and virtually accused me of having an affair with you just because we went out together on Penny's birthday.'

'What?'

The disbelief on Clare's face was clear to see.

'I've just come from her house. I left her sitting on the sofa like she was in a fucking coma, just staring at the floor. And James and Stephanie were the same when I saw them earlier, and Ray Mercer from the

pub says that his wife Brenda has...'

'So what are you saying? Is it a fucking epidemic?'

I shrugged my shoulders and walked across the room to look out of the window. The street outside was deserted.

'I don't know. To be honest I haven't really thought much about it. I had just assumed that Siobhan and Joe Porter were both off on one and I thought Penny must have picked something up from nursery...'

'But what about the rest of them?'

'Don't know,' I mumbled again.

'It's got to be a virus or something doing the rounds, hasn't it? Last winter half the village went down with flu just before Christmas. Maybe that's it?'

'Could be.'

'Mrs Conner's the same. Explains why she was so vile to me this morning.'

'Who's Mrs Conner? I thought you said you hadn't been out?'

'She lives next door. She was out in her garden this morning. I saw her when I went out to put the dustbin out. I said good morning to her and she just started ranting and raving at me. No warning. Christ, she's over eighty years old and we've never had a cross word in all the time I've lived here but today...'

'So what exactly did she do?' I asked, keen to know if this old lady's behaviour matched that of the other people I had come across.

'Like I said, I was just minding my own business and she started yelling at me. It was fuck this and fuck that, the kind of things you just wouldn't expect to hear from someone like that.'

'The people I've seen have either been like that or completely bloody catatonic. Siobhan went off the handle at me on the telephone but today I left her sitting there like a bloody cabbage. You know James' eldest? She said her mum and dad spent the night shouting at each other and this morning they haven't even got themselves dressed.'

'Christ, what about their baby?'

'I left the kids with next-door. You, James' neighbour and Ray Mercer are the only people I've been able to have anything resembling a sensible conversation with so far today.'

Clare held her tired head in her hands and ran her fingers through her hair. I could see that she was trying to make sense of everything that was happening and, for the first time, so was I. So far I had spent the day moving from conflict to conflict to conflict and I hadn't actually stopped to try and understand what was going on. It was only now that I was able to take a step back that I began to think there might actually be more to the day's events than I had first thought. It had been all too easy to gloss over the reasons behind all that had happened as I had been preoccupied with each individual argument.

'What about Rob?' she asked.

'Haven't seen him all morning,' I answered. 'He went out before I got up.'

After that there was silence.

About ten minutes later Clare got up from her seat and picked up the telephone. She tried a few numbers – various family members, the doctor, Siobhan, my house – but predictably didn't get any answers. All that had happened was so sudden and inexplicable that my mood and feelings were swaying violently. One moment I felt complete and utter fear, helplessness and disorientation, the next nothing but disbelief.

It was like a switch had been flicked.

Numb and almost too afraid to move, we sat and waited for a reason to leave.

During the long, slow hours that followed I tried to telephone my friends and family again. I couldn't get any answers using either Clare's phone or my mobile. It was only four o'clock but it felt more like ten. The light outside was quickly fading. Clare drew the curtains and switched on a table lamp.

'Hungry?' she asked.

I shook my head.

'No.'

'Want a drink?'

'No thanks.'

She stood up and paced impatiently around the room before sitting down again, frustrated.

'You all right?' I asked instinctively. Bloody stupid question. Of course she wasn't all right.

'I'm fine,' she sighed. 'The world's falling apart, I can't get anyone on the phone and my daughter's upstairs lying on her fucking bed like she's been fucking lobotomised. I'm absolutely fucking fine! What about you?'

'Sorry,' I mumbled.

She grunted and shook her head.

'Look, do you think we should...?'

The lights went out.

'Shit,' Clare hissed.

'Where's your fuse-box?' I asked.

'Cupboard under the stairs,' she replied as she felt her way across the room to stand next to me.

I carefully made my way around the room with outstretched hands, using the walls and furniture to support and guide me. I eventually reached the front door, then the stairs, then the cupboard. The fuse hadn't tripped.

I retraced my steps back through the shadows to the living room.

‘Everything looks okay,’ I said. ‘Has this happened before?’

‘No.’

Clare was standing by the window. Although I couldn’t see clearly what she was doing, I knew she was opening the curtains.

‘Is it just us?’ I asked.

Even from where I was standing I could tell that it wasn’t. The world outside was bathed in a total, inky darkness. I couldn’t see even a single electric light out there. The houses nearby were dark. Every street light was dull and unlit.

‘A power cut,’ Clare hissed. ‘Bloody hell, that’s all we need.’

Instinctively I tried a few more electrical items although logic said that none of them would work. The television was dead, as was the stereo. Strangely, even the little battery powered radio which Clare kept in the kitchen seemed to have stopped working.

‘What about the phone?’ I wondered.

‘No-one’s answered the bloody thing all afternoon,’ she snapped, ‘what difference will it make?’

Begrudgingly she walked over to the phone, picked it up and then dropped it down again.

‘Well?’

‘Dead,’ she sighed. ‘Can’t even get a dialling tone.’

‘So what do we do now?’

‘Are you going to try and get back home?’

I thought for a moment. There didn’t seem to be any point. There probably wouldn’t be anyone there. On the other hand we could all have gone to my place, but I didn’t like the idea of moving Penny in her current state.

‘I’ll stay here with you if that’s all right,’ I said.

‘Good,’ she replied. ‘You sure?’

‘Sure.’

‘What about your brother and Siobhan?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Should you try and get to them?’

‘Don’t know. I’d rather stay here and sit tight. I know where Siobhan is and I haven’t got a clue where Rob is. I’d rather not take any chances tonight. We’ll wait for the power to come back on and then we’ll decide what to do next.’

‘Are we going to be safe here?’

‘Safe from what?’ I replied rhetorically. Her question was logical but surprising and impossible to

answer nonetheless. In the shadows and low light I saw her shrug her shoulders. She turned away from me to look out of the window.

I crept upstairs to check on Penny a short time later. On my hands and knees (so that I didn't trip in the darkness and disturb her) I crawled into the bedroom. She was still lying under the bed where I had left her earlier. I gently pulled her out, lifted her surprisingly heavy frame and lay her on top of her covers. Her skin was cold and clammy. Even though her eyes were tightly closed, her face looked troubled and unnatural. Her innocent features were twisted and contorted with pain and confusion.

Part IV

CHANGE

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I slept intermittently and woke early next morning to find myself sprawled across the settee in Clare's dark living room. She lay asleep in my arms and for a long time I did nothing. I lay perfectly still and relaxed in her warmth and listened to the soft sounds of her steady breathing. Having her so close was reassuring.

We had waited together in the darkness for hours the previous evening, just sitting there waiting for something – anything – to happen. But nothing did. The power remained off and I remained unable to summon up the courage to get off my backside and go back home. It was easier to stay where I was and the excuse of looking after Clare and Penny was, in my own mind, enough justification for my actions. Just before two o'clock Clare had finally drifted off to sleep. My nerves and creeping anxiety had eventually been overtaken by tiredness an hour or so later.

As the cold grey light of day poured through the half-open curtains I began to remember everything that had happened previously, and the shock of recollection flooded over me like a torrent of ice-cold water. Any last vestiges of comfort, sleep and tiredness quickly disappeared and I knew that I needed to get up and get moving. I gently lifted Clare's sleeping body from on top of me and, taking care not to wake her, I slid off the sofa and stumbled over to the window. The world outside seemed reassuringly dull and overcast.

With trepidation I climbed the stairs towards Penny's room. My heartbeat quickened nervously as I gently pushed the bedroom door open. I found the little girl in much the same state as she had been when Clare and I had last checked on her shortly after midnight. She lay on top of her bedclothes – cold but breathing steadily – covered with just a single blanket. Her angry fever had lessened although her forehead was still clammy. In the harsh light of morning, however, the extent of the horrific damage she'd inflicted (both to herself and her bedroom) was painfully apparent. All around me the carpet was covered

with a layer of smashed and now useless toys, and strips of wallpaper hung down, torn angrily from the walls. Penny's skin was bruised and she was smeared with traces of dried blood which had run freely from untreated cuts and grazes. I couldn't even begin to imagine what could have caused such a normally calm and placid little girl to have turned like this. There wasn't a single reason I could think of to explain why such a normally intelligent, bright and loving child should act with such anger and irrational spite and venom. As I stood and stared into her sleeping face I thought about the other people I had seen yesterday – James, Stephanie and Siobhan. I knew that I couldn't afford to stay hidden in the house and do nothing any longer.

I leant down and gently touched the side of Penny's neck with my outstretched right hand, cautiously checking for a steady pulse. I quickly found one and, as I pulled my hand back, her eyes flickered open. She silently turned her head to look at me and stared angrily. Instinctively I backed away from the bed. Thankfully she lay still and did not react in any other way. Her eyes remained wide – huge, dark pupils – but she seemed to be looking through me and past me, not directly at me. I made my way back downstairs.

Clare was awake when I returned to the living room, sitting waiting on the sofa.

'How is she?' she whispered anxiously.

'A little better I think,' I replied honestly. 'She just opened her eyes. She's calmer and her temperature's gone down.'

'Thank God for that,' she sighed with relief clear on her face. 'Did she say anything to you?'

I shook my head.

'No. I think she knew I was there with her but she didn't say anything.'

I deliberately chose not to tell Clare about the way Penny had looked through me. I could still see those cold, emotionless eyes.

'Good,' she said, standing up and stretching. 'I'll go up and see her in a few minutes.'

'Okay.'

'So how are you feeling this morning?'

'Fine,' I replied, giving little away. 'You?'

'I'm all right.'

'Good.'

'Has the power come back on?'

I hadn't even thought to check. I flicked the nearest light switch on and off a few times but nothing happened.

'Still dead,' I sighed dejectedly.

Clare walked into the kitchen, continuing to talk to me as she went.

'So what are we going to do now?'

‘What do you mean?’

‘Do we still need to get a doctor out to see Penny or should we wait and see if...? Shit...’

‘What’s the matter,’ I asked, concerned. I followed her into the other room and found her standing next to the cooker.

‘Bloody gas is off as well.’

‘You sure?’

I walked over to the stove and tried the controls. She was right. I waited for the hiss of the gas but there was nothing.

‘What the fucking hell is going on here?’ I cursed, tired, irritated and unnerved.

I pulled the cooker back from the wall and checked that it was still connected. Everything looked okay.

‘Forget it,’ Clare said from the other side of the room. ‘Look.’

I looked up and saw that she was standing at the sink, holding the kettle under the cold tap. The tap was full on but just a pathetic trickle of water was coming from it. Ten seconds later and the trickle had dried up to nothing.

I could feel panic and uncertainty beginning to rise up in my throat like bile. I wanted to sit down and try and look for a rational explanation but I couldn’t. I couldn’t speak. For a few seconds I couldn’t even move.

‘What’s happening?’ Clare asked. Her throat sounded dry.

‘Don’t know,’ I mumbled pathetically. ‘I don’t know.’

She swallowed, put down the kettle and began to look around the room for answers. Then she looked at me.

‘We’ve got to do something,’ she said. ‘We can’t just sit here. Something’s happening and we need to find out what...’

‘I know, but...’

‘But what?’ she snapped angrily. ‘But fucking what? What is going on?’

I took an unsteady step towards her and then stopped. She turned away from me and leant over the sink and looked out of the window.

‘I don’t know,’ I said before quickly running out of things to say. ‘Look, maybe we should...’

I stopped speaking. Clare’s body tensed. Her attention had obviously been caught by something she’d seen outside. From where I was I couldn’t see what it was. Rather than tell me, she ran over to the back door, unlocked it and pushed her way outside. I followed close behind.

‘What’s the matter?’ I shouted after her. ‘What is it?’

She didn’t answer.

She didn't have to.

Hanging heavily in the sky, at a distance of maybe ten miles from the house, was an alien ship. Seemingly identical to the first ship we'd seen in the summer just passed, the huge vessel hung silently over the land.

'Fucking hell...' I began before my mouth dried. 'What the hell is that doing here? I thought their rescue ship wasn't due for another few months...?'

I walked a little way further away from the house and out into the garden. Turning back to look over the roof of the building behind me, I saw that there was a second noiseless ship in the sky, this one much closer. Both of the machines were vast and impervious.

'What's going on?' Clare demanded desperately. 'For Christ's sake, Tom...'

She knew that I couldn't answer.

A cold, autumnal rain had begun to fall. I wiped my face dry as I walked the length of Clare's garden towards a low stone wall which separated her property from the fields beyond. I climbed the wall, jumped down and then ran into the middle of the nearest field, hoping to get a better view of the alien ship closest to the house. When I turned back I froze with sudden, bitter fear. I could see another five ships, all watching and waiting ominously from seemingly random positions in the dark and overcast sky.

Feeling vulnerable and exposed, I ran back to the house.

Having to fight to keep calm and stay in control I bundled Clare back indoors and slammed the door shut behind me.

‘Why are those ships here?’ she demanded as I pushed her towards the living room.

‘No idea,’ I gasped, forcing my words out between deep, nervous breaths. ‘There are loads of the fucking things out there.’

‘But why?’

Ignoring her questions I instinctively grabbed at the phone again and held it to my ear. It was still dead and I angrily threw it back down to the table.

‘Are they here to pick up the aliens?’ she asked, pressing me for answers which she knew I couldn’t give.

‘Don’t know. They could be.’

‘But what else could they be doing...?’

‘I’ve told you,’ I snapped. ‘I don’t know. For Christ’s sake, I don’t know any more than you do.’

Maybe I could have thought of a hundred and one reasons why the ships might have arrived, but none of them would necessarily have been right. Whatever the reason, I knew we were in trouble. Each one of the ships on their own would have been sufficient to hold the three hundred and sixty-eight original aliens so why were there so many here? And from the time they’d first made contact with us we had been told that it would take at least ten months for their rescuers to get here. Less than half that time had so far elapsed.

‘We should wait here,’ Clare rambled nervously. ‘Wait here and...’

‘Why? We’ve done all our waiting, haven’t we? We waited here all last night for the power to come back on and for Penny to...’

‘Well what else are we going to do?’ she screamed.

I didn’t know. I walked away. I had to think.

The only logical explanation I could find – although it sounded bizarre and completely illogical – was that the behaviour of the population had been controlled and manipulated by the aliens. And the ships we had just seen must have been a part of the same plan. The bastard things had enslaved the whole bloody

planet right under our noses. So why hadn't Clare and I succumbed? Why were we different?

'Stay here and keep out of sight,' I said suddenly. 'Don't go out and don't let anyone in.'

'Where you going?' she asked anxiously.

'To get Rob and Siobhan. I don't care what condition they're in, I'm going to get them in the car and bring them back here.'

'You can't leave us!'

'I can't take you with me, can I? We can't risk moving Penny.'

'But you can't leave us...'

'I have to,' I sighed. 'I don't want to but I've got to go. I need to know that Rob and Siobhan are safe. They're all I've got left.'

I walked over to Clare and held her tightly. Leaving the relative safety of the house really was the last thing I wanted to do but I didn't seem to have a choice. I couldn't bear the thought of Siobhan being alone with all of this going on. Even if she was still in the same desperate condition when I reached her today, at least we would be together again. I didn't think she'd offer much resistance. And as for Rob, my duty to him was just as strong.

'I'll be back as soon as I can,' I said quietly.

'Okay,' she said, still holding on to me tightly.

'Just promise me that you'll keep the door locked and that you won't let anyone else in.'

'I promise. But what if...'

'No buts.'

'Okay.'

Deliberately moving quickly so that I didn't have the opportunity to change my mind, I grabbed my coat and headed for the front door. Clare followed close behind me.

'See you later,' I muttered and, with that, I went outside and pulled the door shut behind me.

As I fastened up my coat and shivered in the icy-cool air of early morning I walked to the end of Clare's short drive and looked up and down the street. It was deserted. No doubt those people who were still capable of functioning rationally were curled up in fear deep inside their homes waiting for whatever was going to happen next.

My car's remote central locking wasn't working.

I tried the key in the lock and managed to open it manually. Once inside I quickly pulled the door shut and started the engine.

Nothing.

I checked the immobiliser, checked I had the right key and even checked that I was in the right car. I tried again.

Nothing.

It was completely dead.

I looked back at Clare's house and could see her standing in the shadows of her living room, watching. I got out of the car and gestured for her to get out of sight. I didn't wait to see if she'd understood, I just started to jog back towards the village and then, ultimately, home. I had no idea how I was going to reach Siobhan's house without the car. Maybe I could find a bike or something else to use so that I could...

A sudden change in the light and shadow around me made me freeze. I looked up into the turbulent sky directly above me and watched in terrified awe as one of the immense alien ships carved a silent passage through the swirling clouds over my head, heading in the general direction of Thatcham. As it cruised powerfully forward, a bright opening appeared in its otherwise featureless belly and from it swooped a fleet of seventeen sleek, grey-silver shuttle crafts. As each one of the shuttles dropped down into the morning air a single pulse of brilliant white light appeared from their engines and they raced on ahead of the mother ship.

Although the entire fleet was gone in seconds I knew that I couldn't afford to drop my guard. No matter where I was standing, I could always see at least one other alien ship somewhere in the sky. I had no option but to keep on moving towards home. I hoped that my insignificance would be my saviour on this bitter and desperate morning.

The streets of the village were silent and dead.

I had a thousand and one unanswerable questions spinning round my tired mind as I ran and then walked towards my house. Why was I the only person stupid enough to be out in the open? Where was everyone else? I searched pointlessly for the answers to the most serious questions of all – why were the alien ships here? There was no point in avoiding the obvious – this was a full scale invasion. But why? And how had it happened? I didn't get any comfort from knowing that my long held mistrust of the aliens had been well-founded. But Clare and I couldn't have been the only ones who'd thought this way, could we?

I took a right turn into Hope Street . Bloody ironic, I smiled to myself.

'Hey, you...' a voice hissed from out of nowhere. I span around quickly, looking for whoever it was who had spoken. The back doors of a inconspicuous-looking transit van slowly opened outwards.

‘Who’s there?’ I whispered.

From out of the shadows of the van a small and very slight young woman appeared. Perhaps aged between twenty and twenty-five, she looked exhausted and dishevelled. She began to get out of the van. I gestured for her to go the other way and climbed in with her.

‘What’s your name?’ she asked quietly.

‘Tom Winter,’ I replied.

‘I’m Bhindi, Bhindi Shah,’ she croaked, her throat dry.

I pulled the door closed behind me.

‘What’s happening, Tom?’ she sobbed. She must have known that I couldn’t answer her.

‘Don’t know. How long have you been here?’

It was dark and cramped inside the van. In the low light I could just about make out a blanket, a pillow, some clothes and the remains of a little food scattered around.

‘I slept here last night,’ she explained. ‘I’ve been staying with my aunt and uncle just over the road for the last few days and...’

‘And?’

‘And last night Uncle started going ballistic. He was shouting and screaming and throwing things around. Auntie started to do the same and then my cousins and I just had to get out...’

‘Have you seen them this morning?’

She nodded.

‘I went back about an hour ago. They were all just sat there, not saying or doing anything. I tried to get some help but I couldn’t find anyone. I was walking round for ages but I couldn’t find anyone...’

‘I understand,’ I interrupted. ‘You do know that it’s not just your family this is happening to, don’t you?’

‘I know that.’

Bhindi looked past me and out of the window behind me. I turned and saw that another alien ship was soaring through the sky perilously close to where we were hiding.

‘What do they want?’ she asked.

‘Don’t know,’ I replied truthfully.

‘I wish they would just fuck off,’ she spat. ‘Fuck off and leave us. I never wanted them here anyway.’

‘You and me both,’ I mumbled under my breath. ‘Look, I can’t stop here. I’m going back into Thatcham to fetch my brother then I’m going back to my friend’s house. If you want to come with me then...’

She shook her head.

‘No.’

‘Sure?’

‘I’m not going any further into the village. You’re a fucking fool if you do.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘Those bloody aliens,’ she hissed. ‘The place will be full of them.’

I turned back to look out of the window again. What if she was right? In any event, did it matter? I had to go back to try and find Rob and Siobhan. If the village really was crawling with aliens then I would just have to take my chances with them. I didn’t have any choice. I couldn’t turn back without having tried to reach Siobhan. If something happened to me along the way then so be it. It was a chance I knew I was going to have to take.

‘Are you sure you’re going to stay here?’ I asked again, just in case.

‘Sure,’ she replied. ‘I want to stay close to my family.’

I nodded and made my move. I crawled carefully out of the van.

‘Take care of yourself,’ I said quietly.

Bhindi nodded and snuggled down under a blanket in the far corner of the van just behind the front passenger seat. I slammed the door shut, looked around anxiously, and then carried on walking.

I didn’t see or hear another soul in all the time I was out there.

If they’d wanted to I was sure the aliens could have taken me out. I was obviously of very little concern to them. It helped to put things into perspective – what could a single man do against an invading force of such vast and unprecedented power?

As my confidence increased, so did my speed.

I ran towards home.

29

The last mile home was the longest.

I sensed that I was being watched, but I didn’t know who by or where from. Despite having

reassured myself that I was in no immediate danger because I didn't seem to matter, I was still filled with an unimaginable dread – not that my life was in danger, but that I was never going to see Siobhan or Rob again. I was almost home. I had to force myself to close my mind to all memories of Siobhan because I knew that there was hardly any chance of me ever being by her side again. The end of everything that I knew and loved was beginning to seem hopelessly inevitable.

I continued to run for a while but eventually stopped. In the dense silence which filled the world around me my footsteps seemed to echo and bounce off the walls of empty, lifeless buildings. In contrast to ground level, the skies above me were teeming with activity. More and more alien ships seemed to arrive with each passing moment. If each ship was like the first (and many seemed to be much, much larger) then it stood to reason that there were many thousands of aliens arriving every minute. Thatcham was a small and insignificant place. Elsewhere there would be countless more. I knew that there would be millions of aliens swarming through the skies above every country in every continent.

A salty spray hung in the air, washed over the grey sea wall by a strong wind gusting off the ocean. The smell was instantly familiar and strangely comforting. The rest of the world felt different, as if all the life and energy had been drained from it. There was little movement. I couldn't see another soul.

I paused at the bottom of the hill and looked up towards my house. It was little more than a dark black silhouette against the cold grey sky behind. It looked like all the other houses I had passed – empty and lifeless – but for one slight difference.

There was a silver alien shuttle craft hovering outside.

30

After almost an entire day away from home I finally dragged myself wearily back up the steep and twisting pathway which led to my front door. What had started out less than twenty-four hours earlier as a simple trip into the village for food had eventually become a silent nightmare played out in the dead streets of Thatcham. Alone and afraid I felt lost in the sudden hugeness of my tiny home village.

The shuttle craft hovered about ten meters away from the door. Perfectly still and silent it was just sat there without reason or explanation. Cold and tired and not daring to take my eyes off the alien ship, I fumbled in my jacket pocket for the keys to the house. My hands were numb and cold and I struggled to try and open the door. But it was already unlocked and for a fraction of a second I felt some hope. The only other people who had keys were Rob and Siobhan. Finding the door unlocked meant that one of them at least had to be inside.

'Rob?' I shouted as I pushed my way in. I kicked the door shut behind me and looked hopefully down the hallway. 'Rob? Siobhan? Are you here?'

My words echoed off the cold walls of the house just as my footsteps had echoed in the streets

outside. I didn't believe for a second that either my brother or my girlfriend really were there but I instinctively knew that I wasn't alone. Before I had seen or heard him I sensed that Rob's alien friend was about.

'Your brother's in here,' he said in his dull and dishearteningly familiar voice. He was in the living room. He stepped out of the shadows and stood in the doorway.

'What the fucking hell are you doing here?' I spat as I barged past the alien and shoved him to one side. I found Rob sitting motionless on the sofa, staring at the ground between his feet. For a split second the room was filled with an immense black shadow and I turned and watched through the wide window with frightened fascination as one of the immense black alien machines powered silently through the turbulent sky towards the centre of the helpless village.

'Rob,' I said, quickly turning back to face my brother, 'can you hear me? Are you okay?'

What had once been my brother was now just a shell. Cold and emotionless, he was as empty and lifeless as my house and the entire village. I crouched down so that I was directly in front of his dull, vacant eyes but there was still no response. I gently shoved his shoulder and, although he rocked to one side, he still didn't respond. His corpse-grey skin was clammy and cold but he was still breathing.

'He can't hear you,' the alien said softly. I ignored him and continued to try and elicit some response from what remained of Rob.

'Come on, son,' I whispered. 'Just give me a sign. Let me know you're still there, will you?'

Nothing. I wiped tears of pain and frustration from my eyes.

'I know how you must be feeling...' the alien began.

'Fuck off!' I spat. 'Why don't you just fuck off? How the hell do you know how I feel?'

Still crouching, I rocked back and sat on the carpet in the middle of the living room. To my right was the television and for a second I turned and glanced into the cold grey screen. I could see Rob's reflection. He looked just as he had done when we'd sat there together and watched the news broadcasts when the first alien ship had arrived. What had the bastards done to him? What had they done to the world?

'It wasn't supposed to happen like this for you,' the alien continued, apparently ignorant to the strength of my anger and hate. He took a few steps closer and stopped when he was just a short distance in front of me. I quickly stood up so that we were on the same level.

'What are you talking about?' I asked, wiping my stinging eyes dry.

'It would have been so much easier for you if you'd been able to accept everything like the rest of them.'

'You're not making any sense,' I sighed. Nothing was making sense any more. While the rest of the world lay dead outside, it didn't make any sense to find myself talking to an alien in my home. 'Anyway, what the hell are you doing here?'

'Recording,' he said.

'Recording what?'

‘Preserving your lifestyle for the archives.’

‘What archives?’

‘Our archives. I’m a historian and zoologist. We keep records of everything.’

I couldn’t take any more of this in. I fell back into the seat next to Rob. His heavy body slumped against mine and I struggled to hold back more tears.

‘The very least I owe you is an explanation,’ the alien continued.

‘You owe me a hell of a lot more than that but go on,’ I grunted, unable to even bring myself to look up at the creature.

‘Remember the night when I first came here to your house?’

I thought back to the hazy summer just gone and recalled our first meeting when Rob had brought the alien home with him. I remembered feeling uncomfortable like an outsider that night. Rob and Siobhan had treated the damn thing like a bloody superstar.

‘I remember.’

‘We talked a lot about what we were doing here and how we got here. We talked about what I did and where I came from...’

‘And...’

‘And most of it was lies.’

‘I’m not surprised.’

‘I was.’

‘What?’

‘I was surprised at first. But then again, I always am when it happens. You never get used to it.’

‘What are you talking about?’ I was rapidly getting sick of his bloody stupid games and riddles.

‘I told you that my ship was on a mining mission, didn’t I?’

I nodded.

‘I was wrong, but that was what I truly believed at the time. That was what all of us who came here believed.’

It still wasn’t making any sense.

‘So what were you here for?’

‘Our ship was a probe. It wasn’t destroyed, it was sent back to the fleet. We came here to investigate this planet and see whether it was suitable.’

‘Suitable? Suitable for what?’

‘For us.’

‘What?’

‘I told you that the supplies on my home planet had been exhausted. In order to survive my people need more. We need more space and more resources and...’

‘So you think you’re just going to take it like that?’

‘Wake up, Tom, we already have.’

An icy cold chill of realisation washed over me. The entire human race had been duped by these fucking monsters. I wanted to kill the alien in front of me but I didn’t dare move. I wanted to hear the rest of his explanation first.

‘But how? How did you do it?’

‘Remember we talked about our technology? Remember that night when we argued about how you thought my society was wrong because of the way we work together for the common good? You said it was wrong and I disagreed...’

‘I remember.’

‘You said it was wrong for us to be able to manipulate thoughts and emotions.’

‘It is.’

‘I accept that you have your opinion. The beauty of working with minds is that you don’t know it’s happening until it’s done. We’ve been looking at your planet for several years now. This isn’t something that just happened overnight. Once we’d decided that it was suitable we began broadcasting..’

‘Broadcasting what?’

‘Simple and constant signals. We interrupted your transmissions and added a code of our own. We’ve been reprogramming the entire population of the planet for the last seventeen months through television, radio, the Internet, film and any other medium we could use.’

‘Subliminal messages?’

‘More complicated than that, but you’re on the right lines. Think about it, Tom, how else could we have just arrived here and dropped ourselves in the middle of your civilisation? You didn’t trust each other, never mind anyone else. You had to let us do it. You had to believe us. And we had to believe what we were telling you.’

‘So why all the bullshit about the mining mission and the accident?’

‘We needed to be completely sure the planet was right before occupation. We were sent here first to confirm suitability.’

‘So you’ve been lying too, or were you being lied to as well?’

‘You’re starting to understand. My colleagues and I on the ship fully believed the story we told you. It was important to the mission to ensure that our purpose wasn’t revealed so we didn’t know what it was. Simple as that. We truly believed that we were stranded here.’

‘Fucking hell...’ I mumbled. ‘But how...? How could you have...?’

I couldn't think straight. This was too much to absorb.

'Yours was a fairly advanced society,' he continued. 'And the more advanced a society is, the more it tends to rely on different methods of communication. We just interrupted and modified what you were receiving.'

'But for what purpose? We were prepared to help...'

He shook his bulbous head slowly.

'It's not that simple. Our race continues to grow and we need to expand. We don't need your help, we need the planet.'

Now I was beginning to feel as though I was trapped in some third-rate science-fiction film.

'What are you planning to do...?' I asked cautiously.

'With a few adjustments we'll create an atmosphere similar to our home world and colonise. Your planet will become the fifth home world.'

'You've done this before?'

He nodded his bulbous head and stared at me with his baby-blue eyes.

'This is the second time I've been directly involved.'

'But you can't. Christ there are billions of people here...'

'Why can't we? That's a little hypocritical of you, isn't it? I don't expect you to agree with me, but I don't think that what we're doing is any different to what you've been doing for years.'

'It's completely different,' I spat, walking over to the window and looking down on the dead village below. 'Of course it's different.'

'Why is it? Is there any difference between us taking your land and you taking the land of someone or something else? You've been doing it for millions of years, and now we're doing it to you.'

'But we're not just some other animal...'

'You are.'

'But we would never treat another people like this...'

'You would,' he said simply and without malice or spite. 'In fact, the way that we are doing this is fairer and more humane than anything from your history.'

'What's humane about what you're doing?'

'Most of you don't even know it's happening.'

I stared out at the silent world as the alien's words ran round and round my head. Could it really be true? Had I lost everything? I remembered looking out from the same position countless times during the summer just ended. Now all of that seemed a million miles away, and those rapidly distant memories felt painfully perfect and idyllic. Back then I'd had a life to lead, a brother to argue with and a girlfriend to hold and be held by. Now, if what he was saying was true, I had nothing. So why was I the only one?

‘Why am I different?’ I asked. ‘Why am I here talking to you while the rest of the population is...’ I looked down at what remained of my brother but I couldn’t finish my sentence.

‘It’s difficult to achieve one hundred percent success. Not everyone is able to accept the program.’

‘How many are left?’ I wondered, thinking instinctively (for a fraction of a second) about rebellion and honour.

‘About half a million of you in this country. Look, I’m sorry that it didn’t work for you. It would have been much easier if you hadn’t had to go through this.’

I didn’t want to hear his answer, but I had to ask my next question.

‘So what happens to everyone else? What about the rest of the population? What about the billions of innocent people who are sitting vacant in their homes like Rob? What are you going to do with them?’

‘We’re not going to do anything with them,’ he answered. ‘We don’t need them.’

‘So are you going to ship them off somewhere?’

‘No.’

‘Sterilise them? Stop us reproducing?’

‘No. There’s going to be a cull.’

‘What?’

‘I said there’s going to be a cull. I thought you might have worked it out by now.’

For a few long seconds I didn’t know how to react. I just stood there uselessly, shifting my weight uncomfortably from one foot to the other and staring at the creature in front of me.

‘But how...?’ I stammered. ‘How are you going to...?’

‘That’s not important.’

‘When?’

‘It’s already started. It will run land mass by land mass. There are probably one or two continents which have been completed by now. Things should start to happen here in the next few hours.’

The alien took a single step forward and, instinctively, I took one back.

‘I’m sorry that it had to happen for you like this,’ he said. I didn’t know if his sorrow was genuine or manufactured. More to the point, I didn’t care.

‘So what you going to do about me?’ I spat. ‘If I’m not going to conform to your fucking program, what are you going to do about me?’

He answered quickly.

‘Nothing.’

‘What?’

‘Nothing,’ he repeated. ‘There’s no point, is there? What are you going to do? This isn’t one of your science-fiction books or films, you know. There’s nothing you can do to stop the inevitable. We’re not going to catch a virus and die. You’re not going to find a computer glitch and destroy our ships. There’s absolutely nothing you can do except sit here and wait...’

What he said made it all the more harder for me to accept what was going to happen. There would have been more dignity in dying in battle, but it looked as though I wouldn’t even be able to pick a fight. I felt like a lone tree left standing in the remains of a forest where thousands of others had been torn up by their roots to make way for a new city. And what could I do to stop this happening? Nothing. Absolutely fucking nothing.

‘Sit back and watch,’ he continued. ‘You might be able to survive for a few weeks. Keep out of the way of the cull and find yourself somewhere remote and watch it happen. I’ve seen it happen elsewhere. It’s exhilarating.’

‘What is?’

‘The change.’

That was enough for me. I had to get out. I was wasting precious time and I knew that I had to get back to Clare and Penny. But I couldn’t leave Rob. I reached out and grabbed his lifeless hand.

‘Don’t waste your time with Robert, there’s no point,’ the alien said from a position just inches behind me. ‘He can’t hear you. He can’t see you. And even if he could, he wouldn’t know who you were or how to talk to you.’

I squeezed Rob’s hand hard, hoping that I could force a reaction from him. There was nothing.

‘Come on,’ I pleaded. ‘If I can fuck their programming up then so can you. Come on!’

I slapped his face. Nothing.

‘This isn’t doing either of you any good, Tom. I suggest that you get...’

‘Fuck off!’ I spat, turning round and glaring at the alien who continued to talk unabated.

‘Do you want me to tell you exactly what’s happened to him? Shall I tell you which parts of his brain have been disabled and which parts we’ve left operational? Will it help if I...?’

The creature’s words trailed away into silence as I stood and stared up into his cold and emotionless face. His bright blue eyes stared back at me. He was on my property, how dare he tell me what to do? His kind had destroyed my brother, my girlfriend and just about everyone and everything else that meant anything to me. Memories of all that I’d lost clouded my mind. The loss of everything I had owned and everything I had been hurt like a thousand knives stabbing into my skin. And just for a second it was all this alien’s fault. Just for a moment all of my hate, fear, frustration, pain, rage and terror was directed towards this one, despicable alien bastard. In a single movement I launched myself at him and knocked him flying across the room. Overbalanced by his bulbous head and struggling to pick himself up with his long, flailing limbs, he lay at my feet, cowering.

‘Don’t do this,’ he pleaded as he slowly dragged himself back up. ‘Don’t waste your time.’

‘You take my life and now you want pity?’ I hissed, stunned by the creature’s gall.

‘I don’t want anything from you. You haven’t got long. Just get away from here and...’

I ran at him again, grabbed him by the neck and pushed him out into the hall. Still holding tight, I swung him round and slammed him up against the wall. I clenched my fist and hit him square on the jaw. He crumpled to the ground at my feet again and began to crawl towards the front door.

‘Fucking bastard,’ I yelled as I ran after him. He turned and looked back at me and I could see that there were tears running down his face. Thick, dark blood was pouring down his chin from a spit in his lower lip. The bloody thing was crying and begging for mercy.

‘Please,’ he sobbed. ‘This isn’t my fault. I didn’t plan any of this.’

For a fraction of a second I felt some pity, but all it took was for me to picture the friends and family that I’d lost to bring me back to feeling nothing but hate and despair.

‘What good is your perfect fucking society now?’ I sneered as I picked him up by the collar and held him against the wall again. I looked into his pathetic, whimpering face and then closed my eyes and concentrated my thoughts on all that had been taken from me. ‘Where are the others to protect you?’

‘Please...’ he croaked. ‘I’ve got work to finish...’

I was never going to hold Siobhan again or hear her tell me that she loved me. I was never again going to walk along the beach with her at dusk and make love all night. I would never go drinking with Rob again or run through the village or watch a film on TV or listen to music... One last look into the alien’s eyes.

‘You’ve taken everything I had,’ I hissed.

I lifted my right hand and covered the creature’s face with it. I squeezed tightly and could feel his chin, cheeks and forehead beneath my fingers. I squeezed hard, hoping that it was hurting. I pulled his head forward and paused for a second.

One last whimper.

Letting go of all my hate and anger, I slammed the fucker’s head back into the wall. He slumped. I pulled his head forward then smashed it back again. Forward then back again. Forward then back again and again and again until I felt the fucker’s skull crunching and splitting. I let the body go and it fell to the ground.

Back in the living room, Rob had rolled off the sofa and now lay face down on the carpet. I thought for a second that he had made a conscious movement but it was obvious that he had not. I owed it to him to make one last-ditch attempt to revive him and to try and snap him free from this dire lethargy. I picked him back up and sat down on the carpet in front of him. I looked up into his expressionless face.

‘Rob...’ I whispered. ‘Rob, it’s me, Tom.’

Still no response. With every second that passed so the pain I felt increased.

‘Can you hear me? If you’d just say or do something then at least I’d know you were there and...’

It was pointless.

‘I just wanted you to know that...’

I couldn’t even bring myself to finish my sentence. There was nothing I could do. My brother was gone.

Wiping tears of sadness, confusion and fear from my eyes, I walked towards the door. I stopped and turned back to take one last look at what remained of Robert Winter. I knew that Siobhan would be in exactly the same desperate condition, and that made the pain even worse.

I knew that I had to get back to Clare, and until I was with her I would be completely alone.

My family and my life had been taken away from me.

Rob and Siobhan had been the last ones to have mattered.

I threw open the front door and nervously tripped down the uneven pathway which spiralled back down towards the centre of the village. The gradient was steep and it was hard to control my speed. I wanted to sprint back to Clare but I knew that I had to conserve my energy. I just hoped and prayed that when I got back to her house she would still be there and that she'd be as alert, lucid and emotional as she had been when I'd left her.

It was nine o'clock.

I allowed myself to glance back over my shoulder at my cold, dark house and I was again filled with pain. I knew that I was walking away from the house, and from Rob, for the last time. As I stared another one of the huge black alien ships appeared and flew out from behind my home, over my head and then over the village and out towards the ocean. Then another ship, lower this time and slightly different. This machine had a rounder, more bulbous head than any other I'd seen before and the sight of this new arrival increased my anxiety. The words of the alien I had killed still echoed round my head and the thought that I was of no concern to the invading alien hordes provided little comfort.

How many other people nearby now remained to helplessly watch the alien invaders take hold of our planet and make it their own? Their occupation had been so quick, unexpected and perfectly planned and executed with such precision that there had been nothing anyone could have done to avoid our total domination. By the time that the alert had been sounded and the need for reaction had arisen, those left capable of free thought and rebellion had already been weakened, smashed and shattered to a point far beyond that at which any recovery might ever have been possible. No matter how I looked at it, I was in a hopeless situation.

The ship which had just flown overhead stopped.

Hanging high and motionless above the centre of the village it hovered ominously. It waited there, open and vulnerable but safe in the knowledge that there was nothing left of mankind to attack it. The bastard thing seemed almost to be lauding over the defenceless world that it had helped invade and capture. I, on the other hand, felt increasingly nervous and exposed out on my own. The alien had warned me to keep out of the way of the cull. Was this the beginning that he'd talked about?

I had no option but to keep moving, and whichever way I decided to go I would be walking further into the village and closer to the ship. From ground level it was hard to accurately judge the size and scale of the thing and I couldn't tell whether it was hovering a mile above me or ten. As I watched, a single opening silently appeared from the base of the rounded front end of the machine and, from that opening, a long, stem-like object appeared. From where I stood it looked to be about the length and width of a telegraph pole. I stopped walking and started running and then sprinting, desperate to get out of the way of whatever might come next.

Nothing.

I dared to look up again as I ran, just in time to see the stem retract back into the ship. Once it had disappeared inside and the hatch was closed the ship turned and moved on. Confused, I watched until the light from its silent engines had faded from view.

I carried on running.

It was about a minute later when it began.

I became aware of a noise. The world had been smothered by a dense, foreboding silence all morning but now, unexpectedly, I could definitely hear something. It was directionless. It seemed to be coming from all sides. It was the sound of footsteps.

And then I saw the people.

As if they had been perfectly choreographed, the front door of every occupied building for as far as I could see suddenly opened and the people inside stepped out onto the street. They waited outside their homes until, taking their mark from the figures nearest on their left, they walked out into the middle of the street, turned to face the centre of the village and began to march. In less than a couple of minutes a vast column of silent figures had formed and was making its way deep into the village with an unnerving military precision. I stopped running and stood and watched and was ignored.

The endless queue of people that walked past me was geometrically accurate. Evenly spaced groups of four individuals that moved in perfect step and perfect time with all the others. Their faces were blank and expressionless – the same vacant look as that I'd seen on Rob's face when I'd left him and just the same as Penny earlier this morning. From side-streets and alleyways more and more people appeared and joined the march onwards.

Instinctively I reached out and grabbed the arm of the nearest figure and pulled it out of formation. It was an elderly man who's body felt withered and dangerously aged. He stopped walking but remained facing in the same direction as the rest of the people. No-one seemed to have reacted to his sudden disappearance.

'Can you hear me?' I hissed, afraid to talk too loudly. The man didn't react. I took hold of his chin and turned his head so that he was facing me. The second I let go he turned back again. I did it again, and again he turned back to face the direction of the snaking column of people. Knowing that it was pointless I let go of him and the man, who was in his late seventies or early eighties at a guess, sprinted back to take his place among the faceless crowd with the speed of a man half his age. Within seconds he was back in formation – in perfect position and faultlessly matching the speed and pace of the others.

I climbed onto the top of a parked car and, from there, clambered onto a skip and then onto the roof of a truck. From there I had a clear view of most of the village ahead and much of the surrounding area. I felt uneasy and vulnerable up there. I couldn't see them, but I could sense thousands of aliens nearby. The fact that the creatures were nowhere to be seen intensified my desperate anger and contempt. It was one thing for the despicable bastards to have taken my home from me, but to have done it from a distance was something else. They hadn't even had the decency to show their faces and allow the few of us that remained the chance to exact some ultimately useless but momentarily gratifying revenge.

The level of noise in the village was still low but had increased noticeably over the last few minutes. As I looked down from on high, I saw countless columns of people converging on the centre of Thatcham from all directions. Along every street they marched keeping perfect time. When they reached the exact centre of the village the individual queues stopped and combined to form one single immense formation of

empty, expressionless souls. Turning back to face my home I watched sadly as still more figures spilled down the hill. I knew that Robert had to be among them but there was nothing I could do. He was already dead, as were Joe Porter, James, Stephanie and all the other people I knew. Each one of them would now be just another face in this massive crowd or, I presumed, in another similar crowd elsewhere. Even my precious Siobhan would be in there somewhere.

As quickly and unexpectedly as the movement in the village had begun, it stopped. And as soon as the movement stopped, so the sound also died. The entire population of Thatcham now stood in front of me, standing to attention – motionless but for a few unsteady movements and sways – and completely devoid of all emotion. I stood my ground for a couple of minutes and continued to watch before deciding to move on.

I jogged back along the road that led to Clare's and tried desperately to keep calm and in control. I knew that what I had just witnessed would surely be happening in every town, city and village throughout the entire country, probably the world. And it was obvious why the people were being rounded up in this way. This was the beginning of the cull that the alien had spoken of. Millions of people were being rounded up to die and there wasn't a bloody thing I could do to help even one of them.

So how were they going to be killed? With thoughts of nightmare weapons of mass destruction racing through my mind I forced myself on towards Clare's house. The only thing that mattered was getting back to her and finding her safe.

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It took me the best part of an hour to get back to the little house on the other side of the village. I had given up running soon after leaving the centre of Thatcham. I had travelled the distance once already this morning and I guessed that before the day was out I would be running again. Panic and fear seemed to constantly be forcing me to move faster. It took more determined effort and self-control than I would ever have thought necessary just to keep my pace level.

I walked slowly down Clare's street with my heart thumping in my chest. It was as cold and empty as it had been when I'd left earlier. Looking anxiously from side to side I made my way down the short path to the front door and rang the bell. Fucking idiot. There was no power. I knocked but there was no response. Nervous and feeling increasingly uneasy I tried to force the door open but it wouldn't move. I knocked again and pressed my face to the glass, hoping that I would be able to see Clare walking up the hallway to let me inside.

The house was silent.

I ran my fingers anxiously through my hair and looked around. I felt more exposed and vulnerable than ever. But I wasn't concerned about my safety, instead I was worried that my presence outside the house might alert the aliens to the fact that Clare and Penny were hiding there. And I knew that they were

as insignificant as I clearly was, but that didn't stop me worrying.

Still no response from inside.

I walked across the front lawn and peered in through the living room window. I couldn't see anything much through the lace curtain but it was clear that Clare wasn't there. I banged on the glass with my fist and glanced back over my shoulder, frightened that the sudden noise might attract unwanted attention. Lifting my hands to my face to block out the glare and reflections from behind me I stared inside again. Nightmare images of Clare and Penny buried deep among the faceless crowd I'd just seen flashed into my mind.

I climbed over the low gate at the side of the house and crept cautiously into the back garden. As I passed I peered in through the kitchen window but still neither Clare or Penny were anywhere to be seen. Reaching out a cold, trembling hand I tried the back door handle but it was locked. That was a good thing, I decided, because if both the front and back of the house were locked, Clare was most probably still in there somewhere. I took a few hesitant steps onto the back lawn before dropping my shoulder, running at the house and charging into the door. It shuddered and rocked but didn't open. Rubbing my stinging arm, I walked back and tried again. Still nothing. On my third attempt the wood around the lock splintered and cracked and the door flew open, crashing into the inside kitchen wall. I rushed inside and blocked the door shut by dragging a heavy pine table across the room.

After waiting for a second to catch my breath and calm my nerves, I began to walk further into the cold and silent house. Hesitant and reluctant at first, I was almost afraid of what I might find.

'Clare?' I hissed. 'Clare, where are you?'

There was no reply. My voice echoed eerily around the empty and lifeless rooms. I checked the kitchen, the living room, the hall and even the cupboard under the stairs but I couldn't find any trace of either Clare or Penny. Was I too late? Dejectedly I began to climb the stairs.

'Clare?' I hissed again.

Penny's room was empty. I stood next to the little girl's bed and surveyed the devastation around me. In spite of all that I had seen and heard already this morning, I still found it hard to believe that Penny had done so much damage last night. While I was standing there I heard the sound of muffled crying coming from the other end of the landing.

'Is that you, Clare?' I shouted.

Not waiting for an answer, I turned and ran, desperate to see my friend again. Her bedroom was empty, as was the bathroom. I eventually found her sitting in a crumpled heap in the shadows in the darkest corner of the darkest room in the house. She was leant against the side of an empty wardrobe, wrapped in an old picnic blanket. When she saw me she stopped crying momentarily and dragged herself up onto her feet. She staggered over and fell into my arms, collapsing in a mass of bewildered tears.

'Come on,' I whispered softly as I held her tight against me and gently stroked her hair. 'It's okay...'

'I didn't think you were coming back,' she sobbed, forcing out her words between breaths. 'I thought something had happened. I thought I was going to be left on my own here and...'

'I said I'd come back, didn't I?' I smiled, doing my best to hide my own fears from her. 'Where's Penny?'

At the mention of her little girl's name Clare immediately began to cry again.

'She's gone,' she said, her voice full of confusion and desperate emotion. 'I don't know where she went. I was sitting next to the bed waiting for you to come back and...'

'And what?'

'She'd been lying there for ages and she just got up and walked downstairs. I tried to stop her but I couldn't. I asked her where she was going but she didn't answer. She just kept walking...'

'What about the door? I told you to keep it locked, didn't I?'

'It was locked. The key was in the lock and she opened it. Christ knows how she did it, Tom. She's never been able to turn the key before. It's always been too stiff for her.'

'And what happened then?'

'There was nothing I could do. I kept trying to stop her but I couldn't. I shouted and screamed at her but she didn't even hear me. I grabbed hold of her arm but she was too strong for me. I followed her out of the house and it was the craziest thing I've ever seen. Everyone was out there. Everyone who lives in the road just walked out of their houses and went down towards the village. And you should have seen it. They were in perfect fucking formation! Penny just joined the line and marched with them like she'd been rehearsing for bloody days.'

'When was this?'

'About an hour ago,' she replied. She was beginning to sound calmer and more lucid. 'Did you see anything while you were out there? Do you know where they went because we might be able to...?'

I shook my head sadly and Clare's voice trailed away.

'I saw the same thing in the village. That's where they all are, but there's nothing we can do...'

'There must be something?'

'There's nothing. Believe me.'

The conversation died, and for a while the only sound was that of Clare's constant tears.

'What's wrong with your car? Why did you walk?' she suddenly asked.

I shrugged my shoulders.

'Don't know. Wouldn't start.'

'Did you see Siobhan?'

'How could I? I couldn't get to her house without the car. It was all I could do to get back home.'

'And what about your brother? Was he there?'

I nodded but didn't want to speak.

'Why didn't you bring him back with you?' she pressed.

'Because he was in the same fucking state as Penny,' I interrupted. 'He was just a fucking shell. And now he's stood there in the middle of Thatcham with the rest of them and they're all fucking comatose.'

Silence.

‘What’s happening?’ Clare asked minutes later, finally plucking up the courage to ask the ultimate obvious question of the morning.

‘Don’t know,’ I answered awkwardly. Much as I didn’t like lying to Clare, I couldn’t see that any good would come of her knowing the truth. She was terrified and heartbroken already and there didn’t seem to be any point in adding to her pain and confusion. In many ways I wished that I hadn’t spoken to the alien and that I was still ignorant to the hopelessness of our situation. It reminded me of something I remembered reading at school that said animals don’t fear death because they don’t know it’s coming. I wished I knew less than I did.

‘I want to go and look for her,’ she said suddenly. ‘I want to go and find Penny and bring her back here.’

‘There’s no point,’ I replied.

‘But I can’t just leave her out there, can I? She’s just a child, for God’s sake. She’s on her own.’

I shook my head and held her tight.

‘Believe me, Clare,’ I sighed, ‘there’s no point. If we find her we won’t be able to do anything. You won’t be able to bring her home, she won’t come. You’ve got to accept it, Penny’s gone.’

‘But she’s still out there...’ she sobbed.

‘Penny’s long gone, Rob’s gone, Siobhan’s gone, they’re all gone. We’re just about the only two left.’

I knew that I would have to explain everything to her at some point, but my instincts told me to delay the inevitable for as long as possible. I wrapped my arms around her as tightly as I could and stood there with her while she tried to make some sense of our nightmare. My loss was still raw and painful. I couldn’t even begin to imagine the level of torment and anguish that Clare was suffering. She had been Penny’s sole guardian and the care of that little girl had been the prime focus of her life from the moment she’d been born. Now, through no fault of her own, her precious daughter was lost forever.

For a long time we held each other and silently remembered all that we had lost.

We did nothing for almost three hours. Just under one hundred and eighty minutes of silence which felt like one hundred and eighty years. I felt like a convict sitting on death row, waiting for the execution order to come through. And there was nothing I could do. And there was no point in doing anything.

Clare and I sat together in a corner of the spare room. From our position we were able to look out of the window but it was impossible to see very much of what was happening to the world outside. I could see the tops of trees being blown around in the breeze and, occasionally, birds would fly in and out of view. With increasing regularity I also watched countless silent alien ships busily drifting to and fro through the swirling clouds.

Shortly after three o’clock an unexpected noise came from outside the house. Clare was the first to react.

‘What was that?’ she asked, jumping up anxiously.

‘Don’t know,’ I answered truthfully.

‘Sounded like a gunshot,’ she whispered. She walked away and I followed as she crept through the silent house towards one of the front bedrooms. Taking care to hide behind the curtain at the side of the window, she peered down onto the street below.

‘Bloody hell,’ she hissed. ‘Come here and look at this, will you?’

I stood behind her and looked down over her shoulder. A single figure was stumbling breathlessly down the dotted white line which stretched along the middle of the road below. It was a ragged man, perhaps in his late-thirties, and as he moved he looked constantly from side to side. In his arms he held a heavy rifle. It was obvious that, like Clare and I, here was another human who had refused to succumb to the subliminal alien reprogramming that had systematically destroyed the rest of mankind. I wondered how much he knew.

A silver shuttle craft flew overhead. The man lifted his rifle to the sky and fired off a single badly-aimed shot.

‘Come on you fuckers,’ he shouted, his voice dry and hoarse. ‘Show yourselves. Fucking show yourselves!’

‘I know him,’ Clare mumbled.

‘What? Where from?’

‘I’ve seen him before. He’s here every Saturday afternoon with his family. I think he visits his parents over the road.’

She jumped with surprise as he fired another shot. As I watched the man picked up his pace slightly and jogged towards a house a few doors up from Clare’s. Still looking around nervously, he pushed the door open and disappeared inside. For a minute or two there was silence and, occasionally, I could see his shadowy figure moving from room to room, obviously searching for missing relatives. Surely he knew as well as Clare and I did that they wouldn’t be there.

‘Should we call him over,’ she wondered. ‘The house is empty. His family will have gone wherever Penny went to...’

I watched with mounting unease as the man ran from upstairs to downstairs and back again, eventually stopping in the front bedroom corresponding to the room in Clare’s house where we were standing. He staggered back and leant against a wall, holding his head in his hands. As we watched he loaded the rifle, put the barrel into his mouth and fired.

Clare slid down the wall next to me in disbelief and sat on the floor with her head held in her hands. It seemed to take forever for the sound of that final gunshot to fade away.

She was crying again.

‘What’s going on?’

I sat down next to her and held her tightly. It was against my better judgement but I felt that I had to say something. It wasn’t fair to keep her in the dark any longer. Another ship passed overhead, casting an ominous shadow over the house. I waited until it had disappeared before speaking.

‘I know what’s happening,’ I whispered.

‘So why didn’t you tell me?’ she sighed, looking up at me with red, stinging eyes.

I shook my head and shrugged my shoulders.

‘Didn’t want to,’ I answered. ‘There’s nothing either of us can do so I didn’t think it would do any good to...’

‘You should have told me,’ she sobbed. ‘You should have fucking told me.’

I nodded, closed my eyes and cleared my throat before starting to explain.

‘When I got back to my house this morning, that alien was there. Remember, the one that Rob hung around with?’

‘I remember. Why?’

‘Said he was recording.’

‘Recording what?’

‘My home, the way we lived. For their history books I think.’

‘But we haven’t seen another one of them all day...’

‘I know. Makes me wonder whether it was more than coincidence.’

‘So what did he tell you?’

‘He told me everything.’

‘And...?’

‘And it’s too far-fetched to believe. I’ve been thinking about it for hours and I still can’t get my head around it all...’

‘Will you just tell me what the hell is happening?’ she demanded.

‘Okay. Since they found us, they’ve been reprogramming the entire population of the planet.’

‘Reprogramming?’ she laughed. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘Sounds stupid I know, but it’s true.’

‘Sound fucking ridiculous...’

‘The alien told me that they’ve been using television, radio and just about every other medium you can think of to brainwash the whole bloody human race. He told me weeks ago that their technology was so advanced they can do virtually anything. The aliens themselves didn’t know why they were here at first.’

‘You mean the story about the damaged ship was bullshit?’

‘That’s what he told me.’

‘But what about us? What about you and me? How come we’re so different?’

‘He said that it didn’t work on everyone.’

‘So how many are left?’

‘Don’t know.’

‘Well is it a hundred or a thousand or...?’

‘He said half a million.’

She looked up to the ceiling and rubbed her eyes.

‘I always knew you and I were different. I never trusted those bastards and neither did you. I always thought something wasn’t right.’

She stopped speaking and asking questions for a couple of seconds to take stock of all that I had told her. Once she had taken it all in and made as much sense of it as she could, she began to ask more.

‘So why have they done this?’

‘That’s the killer, isn’t it?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘They want the planet. Their population is too much for their own planet, so they’re moving on. And it looks like our planet is just what they were looking for.’

‘And how are they going to take it?’ she asked, an expression of utter disbelief fixed on her face. ‘What are they going to do with the billions of people here? Use them for slaves or...?’

I knew full well what was going to happen but I couldn’t bring myself to tell her and I answered with a dumb shrug of the shoulders. She was an intelligent woman. She’d work it out for herself eventually.

‘So what are we going to do?’

‘I’m not sure,’ I sighed. ‘Don’t know if it’s worth doing anything. The alien told me that we’re not a threat so they’ve got no interest in us. He told me we could watch.’

‘Watch what?’

‘Watch them take the planet.’

‘But we can’t just sit here and wait. There must be something we can do?’

‘What? Where can we go? They’re everywhere.’

Clare remained surprisingly calm. Maybe she had picked up on the hopelessness that I felt and which I’d obviously failed to hide from her. She cuddled up close to me and buried her frightened face in my chest. I gently kissed the top of her head and wrapped my arms around her.

Our options were limited. We could stay where we were and wait or we could run and run until it was over. The end result would inevitably be the same. But it wasn’t like either of us to just sit still and wait.

By eight o'clock the autumn light had gone and the world had been smothered by the cold, inky blackness of early evening. I had watched the last minutes of the day disappear from the bedroom window. Now the only lights to be seen anywhere came from the powerful engines of the countless alien machines that continued to busily twist and glide silently through the skies overhead.

Through the long hours just passed both Clare and I had finally accepted that whatever we chose to do next didn't matter. The ultimate fate of our friends, families and, most probably, our own lives had been predetermined and there was nothing that either of us could do to alter the course of events. It was now just a question of finding somewhere safe and remote to hide for as long as possible. The alien had warned that if we kept out of the way we might still have some time. And the more I thought about it, the more I realised that could be longer than I'd dared to imagine at first. We could have ten minutes left, but then again we could evade the alien hordes and live in hiding for the next seventy years. With the realisation that all might not be lost after all, something of my desire to go on slowly began to return. Clare remained unconvinced but as far as I was concerned there was still a faint glimmer of a chance, and no matter how slight, it was a chance that I was more than ready to take.

My confidence was increasing. I went outside when, without warning, the overpowering and all-consuming silence had been shattered by the dull sound of hundreds of marching feet. Instantly recognisable as the same sound I'd heard in Thatcham earlier that morning, I stood at the end of Clare's road and watched as yet another orderly file of emotionless figures trooped by. But this time they were walking away from the village and out towards the coast. They were gone in minutes and I ran back to the house, concerned and unnerved.

'We should move,' I said breathlessly as I let myself back in. 'I think we need to get out of here.'

'Why?' she asked.

'The people I saw earlier are leaving the village.'

'So?'

'So I don't feel safe here. What if the aliens are about to start work on the village? They might be about to demolish the whole fucking place and I don't want to be sat here when they...'

'Where are we going to go?' she interrupted.

'Don't know. The alien told me that we'd be safe if we kept out of the way. They're not interested in us.'

'And where exactly is out of the way? Bloody hell, those ships are everywhere. There's nowhere they can't get to.'

'I know,' I snapped, frightened and trying hard to think.

'What we need,' Clare said quietly, 'is somewhere remote. We need a bloody island in the middle of the ocean. Somewhere where there's nothing they could want. Nothing there for them to destroy.'

Her train of thought was logical and it led me to an answer.

‘What about the Devil’s Peak?’ I said, remembering the small collection of water-worn rocks just off the coast. ‘If we could get out there we should be safe for a while. Joe Porter told me there’s a cove round the back where you can moor a boat. Told me he used to go there when he was a lad.’

‘But is there any point?’

‘Probably not. It’s worth a try though.’

‘Suppose, but how are we going to get there?’

‘I can think of at least three places down the coastal path where there are usually boats moored at this time of year.’

‘Can you sail?’

‘No but I can row. Come on, we’ve got to try, haven’t we? Bloody hell, if we just end up floating miles out to sea it couldn’t be any worse than sitting here and waiting for something to happen, could it? And if those bastards really do have plans for this place then...’

‘Okay,’ she mumbled, sounding far from sure.

‘We’ll get a few things together and get moving. The quicker we get out of here, the better our chances are.’

We were ready to leave in minutes. We silently worked together in the shadowy gloom of the kitchen, packing all the food and supplies we could find into two light and waterproof rucksacks and a battered sports holdall. I was distracted by the sound of sudden rain clattering against the window. I looked up and watched the clouds rush by with an ominous speed. A swirling, racing darkness only interrupted by the alien ships burning their way through the sky.

‘You all right?’ Clare asked, her voice little more than a tired whisper. She had noticed that I’d stopped. I nodded instinctively.

‘I’m okay,’ I lied. ‘What about you? You about ready?’

‘Just about,’ she mumbled as she struggled with one of the straps on her rucksack. I stared into her face. She was a million miles away and I guessed that she was thinking about Penny and everything else that she had lost. The thought of her pain reminded me of my own. It all felt as cold, empty and hopeless as the day Mum and Dad died.

Without warning the room was filled with brilliant blue-white light. I lifted my hand to shield my eyes and turned away from a sudden wave of heat. It faded away to almost nothing again in seconds and I stepped out into the back garden to see the disappearing engine-light of a low flying silver shuttle. The aliens seemed to be getting lower. Perhaps they were about to put in a long-overdue personal appearance on the land that they had taken from us.

Clare came out to me. She was struggling with both the rucksacks. She handed one over.

‘Let’s get moving,’ she said, managing a fleeting smile.

My legs suddenly felt weak and heavy. I didn’t want to leave the house but I knew we had little

choice.

‘It’ll be all right,’ she whispered. ‘Well that’s what you keep telling me, anyway.’

I nodded, fastened my coat and pulled the rucksack onto my shoulders. I stepped back into the house momentarily to collect the holdall and then returned to stand by Clare’s side. It was bitterly cold and already I could see that her teeth were chattering.

‘So which way do we go?’ she whispered.

I wiped spitting rain from my face and looked around. The world suddenly seemed uncomfortably huge.

‘Straight across the fields I think,’ I replied, pointing beyond the low stone wall at the bottom of the garden. ‘If we keep heading that way we should hit the main coast road before long.’

‘And then what?’

‘Don’t know. Depends where we pick it up. We’ll just head up or down the coast until we find a boat.’

‘Sure? You don’t sound it?’

‘I’m not,’ I answered honestly. ‘But I don’t think that...’

I stopped talking when another shuttle appeared. It flew directly across our line of vision from right to left, hugging the ground and dipping and rising with the troughs and peaks of the land. It was gone in seconds.

‘Let’s move,’ Clare said quietly.

I hitched the rucksack up into a more comfortable position on my back and began to walk down the garden path. We clambered over the stone wall and then, holding one of the holdall’s handles each, we began to make our way nervously through the fields behind the house and down towards the ocean.

We moved at an uncomfortably relaxed pace. Our world had been invaded and taken from us and yet we didn’t seem to be in any immediate danger. I felt as if we should have been sprinting and running for our lives but there wasn’t any apparent point or, bizarrely, anything much to run from. The aliens were still very visible in the skies over our heads for sure but, fortunately, that was where they seemed to be staying for the time being. Instinctively we still took care to keep ourselves hidden as much as possible. We walked in the shadows of hedges and fences as often as we could, hoping that we would soon find

the winding coast road.

The day now moving towards its end had been so long and painful that it felt as though weeks, not hours had passed by. All that had happened today seemed so ludicrous, far-fetched and unreal and yet, in a peculiar way, the lost normality of the life I'd lost seemed even stranger than the twisted present. I guess it was because I knew there was no going back. Everything I had classed as normal before was now gone forever.

I was conscious that Clare was beginning to tire and lag behind.

'You all right?' I asked, turning round to face her. I struggled to keep my voice at a volume that was sufficiently low and yet which could still be heard over the howling wind. She nodded.

'Fine,' she grunted.

Yet another enormous ship powered overhead. We both stopped moving instantly and pressed our bodies tight against the brittle hedgerow which ran alongside us. No matter what we had been told, instinct forced us both to try and get out of sight when the aliens were close. The massive machines were so quick, powerful and quiet that we had no way of knowing when one was nearby until we saw it like this, vast and impervious. Once it had gone I gently pushed Clare forward again.

'We must be close to the road now,' I whispered. My breath condensed in cool clouds around my mouth. My face felt battered and raw in the cold autumn air.

'You've been saying that for the last half-hour,' Clare hissed. 'Still think we're heading in the right direction?'

I shrugged my shoulders and swapped the heavy holdall from my left to right hand.

'Don't know,' I replied truthfully.

'Still think we're doing the right thing?'

'Don't know,' I said again. 'Do you?'

'Not sure.'

'Got to have been better than just sitting there and waiting for something to happen though?' I suggested. Who was I fooling? At that moment I would have given anything to have been sitting back in Clare's dark house again. It seemed the easiest option but I knew there was no going back.

It began to pour with rain. It had been spitting since we'd set out but this was much worse. A cold, hard downpour. Icy, relentless and showing no signs of stopping. There were low, heavy clouds all around us.

'Fucking hell,' Clare cursed. She stopped walking.

'What's the matter?'

'What do you think's the matter?' she snapped. 'Fucking hell, Tom, I'm cold, I'm frightened and now I'm fucking wet. What in God's name are we doing out here?'

She wiped dribbles of water from her face and stood and stared at me. I stared back. Her body was hunched forward, and it seemed as though everything required more effort than she could muster.

‘Come on,’ I insisted, trying to calm and reassure her. ‘The road’s not far ahead now. All we need to do is...’

‘Is what? What’s the point? What are we going to achieve?’

I couldn’t argue and I couldn’t answer. I felt as dejected, empty and frightened as she obviously was. I turned my back on her and walked away. It was easier than trying to reason with her.

‘Just keep moving,’ I shouted. ‘The aliens aren’t interested in us. We’ll be all right.’

‘But what about the others?’ she yelled back at me angrily. ‘What about Penny? I don’t know where my little girl is. I’m out here with you, walking through the countryside in the middle of the fucking night, and my daughter’s out there somewhere on her own. I should be with her.’

I shook my head and kept going.

‘There’s no point.’

‘Why not?’

‘Just trust me, will you?’

‘But I want to see her, Tom. I want to go back to the village and see if I can find...’

I stopped walking and turned around to face her again.

‘There’s no point,’ I repeated.

‘But why?’

‘Because...’

At the last second I stopped myself from telling her about the cull. I couldn’t bring myself to break the news to her. She still believed that Penny was alive and I didn’t want to be the one to shatter her illusion. I was sure she knew in her heart that she wouldn’t see her little girl again, but if she admitted to herself that Penny was gone she wouldn’t have any reason to keep moving.

Like a coward I just kept walking. I turned my back on her again and kept walking.

‘Tom!’ she screamed after me. ‘Tom! Come back you bastard!’

I ignored her and walked, hoping that she would follow. Almost a minute had passed before I heard her footsteps at my side again.

‘Just trust me, Clare,’ I whispered, wiping drops of rain and tears of frustration from my eyes. ‘Please just stay with me.’

Clare said nothing.

The hedgerow we were following gradually grew taller and taller. I stopped for a second when something caught my eye. Dense and tangled for the most part, there were other parts where the hedge seemed thinner and almost passable. Crouching down on my hands and knees in the mud, I pushed my head and shoulders through at one of the thinnest points.

‘What is it?’ Clare asked from behind me.

‘The road,’ I grinned, standing up again.

‘Which road?’

‘Haven’t got a fucking clue. But it’s a road, and that’s all that matters. I’m sure we’ll recognise it if we follow it for a while.’

‘You’re completely sure?’

‘Not completely sure, no. But...’

‘Christ, Tom,’ she moaned. ‘I’m sick and tired of...’

‘Listen,’ I said quickly, covering her mouth with a muddy hand and silencing her. ‘It doesn’t matter what fucking road this is, the point is we’ve found it. We’ve been travelling in the right direction and we’ve found a road. If this isn’t the road I was thinking of, then there’s a bloody good chance that this is the road that will take us to it. Understand?’

I dropped my hand away to give her a chance to respond.

‘I just want to stop walking,’ she whined. ‘I’m cold and I’m tired and I’m scared. I...’

‘Shh...’ I soothed, pulling her closer to me. ‘Let’s just get down there and see where we end up.’

I slid the holdall over to the gap in the hedgerow and kicked it through, listening out for the heavy thump as it hit the tarmac. It sounded as if there was a drop of a few feet from the bank down to the road. I took Clare’s rucksack from her and pushed that through before doing the same with my own.

Crouching down on my hands and knees, I shuffled backwards until my feet were through the hedge. I felt my way down the bank.

‘Come on,’ I whispered, looking up at Clare who stood watching me. ‘Follow me and keep close. There’s a bit of a drop from the field to the road but I’ll help you down once you’re through.’

She nodded. Once I was sure that she was ready to push her way through the hedgerow after me I scrambled down onto the road. Seconds later the soles of Clare’s muddy boots followed me through. I grabbed her legs and guided her down.

‘Got you,’ I said quietly.

I looked up and down the narrow, twisting lane.

‘Well,’ she asked, ‘know where we are?’

‘Not sure,’ I answered truthfully.

‘Brilliant,’ she sighed.

We picked up our rucksacks and the sports bag and walked on.

Footsteps.

Not ordinary footsteps – footsteps that were synchronised and regimental in their pace. Footsteps that were programmed, planned and controlled. Thousands of involuntary footsteps directed with a cold, emotionless precision. Footsteps that were getting closer by the second.

The ominous marching sound could clearly be heard through the churning, blustery air and I knew immediately what was coming towards us. Clare looked confused. She'd heard me talk about the vast columns of people I'd seen but she hadn't seen much of them yet for herself. It was what couldn't be heard that unnerved me. Other than the muffled sound of countless pairs of feet dragging themselves over the hard ground there was nothing else. Not even a single whimper or moan of protestation could be heard.

Just ahead of us the road curved round tight to the right.

'Wait here,' I whispered and I gestured for Clare to press herself against the hedgerow and camouflage herself as best she could.

'Where you going?' she asked nervously, her face suddenly filled with fear and uncertainty. 'What's the matter?'

I shook my head.

'It's nothing,' I lied. 'Look, I just want to check round the corner. I'll be back in a couple of seconds.'

I was gone before she had chance to protest. I sprinted a short way further up the road. There was nothing there – the road straightened again and seemed to run on for another half mile or so – and I quickly turned back. I ran past Clare, doubling-back on myself, and carried on back down the road until I could see the heads of the first few approaching figures. The hedge was low at that point and I was able to see a fair way into the distance. A seemingly unending line of figures were moving towards us relentlessly, still marching in their unnaturally precise formation. I had seen all that I needed to see and I ran back to Clare.

'What?' she demanded. She was standing in the middle of the road with her hands on her hips. 'What's going on?'

'It's like I saw earlier,' I replied. 'Bloody hundreds of people heading our way.'

'What are they doing out here?'

'No idea. There's nothing round here for miles.'

She wasn't listening. I glanced back over my shoulder and saw that the beginning of the vast column of people had come into view. Four figures with their faces fixed dead ahead, followed by four more,

then four more and then more after that... I could tell from the expression on Clare's face that she knew something was wrong.

'Just keep out of the way,' I whispered. 'They won't even notice us. Just get back against the hedge.'

This time she did just as I asked and she shuffled back into the undergrowth. I stood in front of her, trying to block and protect her from the advancing people. They began to pass us.

'Can you stop one of them?' she asked from behind me.

'Not worth it. I tried earlier. Pull one out of line and they'll just merge back into formation as soon as you let go.'

'Is this what you saw in the village this morning?'

'Similar. Same formation.'

'But why?'

She knew I couldn't answer.

'Don't know.'

'So where are these people from?'

'Don't know.'

'Where are they going?'

'Don't know,' I snapped, now not bothered if any of the bodies heard me. 'Fucking hell, how am I supposed to know the answer to that?'

'I'm sorry,' she mumbled. 'I just needed to ask. I've got a thousand and one questions in my head and I just needed to...'

'Forget it,' I interrupted, turning round to face her. 'Just forget all your questions because there's no point. There's nothing we can do about any of this.'

'But why are they out here? There must be a reason...?'

'What does it matter?'

I turned back to look at the bodies walking down the middle of the road. By now the first few were following the tight curve of the road perfectly.

'But what about Penny?' she asked. I could hear her sniffing back more tears. 'What about Rob and Siobhan and...'

'Gone,' I replied, trying desperately to hide my emotion and disguise my pain. 'My guess is they're all in one of these queues somewhere. Might even be here for all we know.'

'Do you think so?' she said, suddenly more alert. I instantly regretted my words.

'Forget it,' I said again as the vast procession continued past us.

‘There must be something we can do.’

‘Like what? What are we going to do to help the millions of poor bastards like these?’

‘I just can’t believe that there’s nothing we can do.’

‘Get it through your head, Clare,’ I sighed, ‘it’s too late. The time to act was months ago when those fucking aliens first arrived here.’

Another wave of brilliant light distracted me. An alien ship appeared overhead. It was flying ominously low.

‘Shit,’ I hissed.

‘What?’

‘That thing,’ I said, glancing up at the massive black machine.

‘We’ve seen a hundred of them. What’s different about this one...’ She was silenced when her question was unexpectedly answered. The ship suddenly stopped dead. It hovered low in the sky just a short distance away.

‘I think we should get out of here,’ I mumbled nervously.

‘Which way?’

‘Back.’

We turned and ran in the opposite direction, retracing the route of the bodies in reverse. We sprinted for all we were worth until we couldn’t go any further and then stopped. The road had climbed slightly and from our elevated position the alien ship didn’t seem to be any further away.

Clare was fighting to catch her breath. She retched with exhaustion, fear and mounting panic. Doubled-up with pain, she dropped to her knees.

‘You okay?’ I asked, crouching down next to her.

‘Sorry,’ she wheezed. ‘Can’t go any further.’

I stood and turned back to look towards the ship. I could see the part of the road we’d just run along and, further in the distance, I could see the tight corner and the stretch of straight road beyond that. I could also see the bodies. Clare dragged herself back onto her feet and stood next to me.

‘What the bloody hell is happening now?’ I heard her ask although I did not answer.

As we watched the crowd of figures left the road and entered a large square field through a single narrow gate. Bizarrely, they then formed themselves into perfectly straight lines across the width of the field. With equal distance between the bodies on all sides, the people stood motionless. Many of them were half dressed, and all of them were soaked to the skin. But still they didn’t move. Each individual remained upright and impassive. In just a couple of minutes the field was full. I quickly counted thirty-two rows of thirty-two people.

The alien ship was hovering directly above the centre of the field. A single opening appeared towards the front of the vessel and from it emerged a long, dark stem. This ship was identical to the one I’d seen in the skies over Thatcham hours earlier.

‘What’s that?’ Clare asked nervously, grabbing hold of my arm.

I was about to tell her that I’d seen something similar when it happened. In a fraction of a second the field (and just the field – not any of the surrounding countryside) was filled with a precise square of intense blue-white light. Far brighter than the light from the engines of any of the alien machines, it scorched our skin. We turned away instinctively. Another fraction of a second and it was over. The world was suddenly drenched in a deeper darkness than before.

Almost too afraid to look, I cautiously stared into the field again. The alien ship was already on its way, soaring effortlessly above the countryside.

The field was empty.

Clare and I walked back down the road and cautiously approached the entrance to the field. As we walked I tried to explain to her the little I understood of what had just happened.

‘It’s a cull,’ I said simply.

‘What?’

We stood at the edge of the field and stared at the empty space where just over a thousand people had been standing minutes earlier.

‘I said it’s a cull,’ I repeated. ‘I found out about it this morning. I didn’t bother telling you...’

‘You didn’t think you should tell me that those bloody things up there are planning to get rid of us all? You didn’t think that I might have needed to know what’s going to happen to...’

‘I didn’t tell you because there’s fuck all you or me or anyone can do about it. The aliens need the planet but they don’t need us. It’s as simple as that.’

‘But they can’t. They just can’t...’

‘They already have.’

Too tired to argue I dropped the heavy sports bag and leant against a metal gatepost.

‘But those people were...’

‘Save your breath,’ I sighed. I pointed up into the sky. ‘Go and tell them how pissed off you are about the whole thing if you want to, but it won’t do you any good. You do well if you manage to find one of those cowardly bastards.’

I picked up the bag and started to walk again.

‘We’ll be okay if we keep out of their way. We’ll keep our heads down and keep out of their way.’

I took one last look at the field as we carried on down the road. It looked perfectly normal - untouched and unspoilt as if no-one had ever been there. One thing was certain, there were no hidden escape routes and no alternative explanations.

Over a thousand people had been destroyed in seconds.

Part V

CULL

36

The driving rain and bitter, swirling wind continued with an increased ferocity. The desperate conditions only served to add to the confusion and disorientation of the night. Despite knowing full well that every step we took was pointless, Clare and I continued to press on. More than anything it was the only sensible option - we could keep moving or we could sit and wait for the apparently inevitable. As the world around us began to change and be adapted by the aliens for their own use, I was thankful that I was finally able to recognise the stretch of road that we followed. I knew that it would only be a short while before we reached the ocean.

We eventually left the relative certainty of the road and began to walk along a muddy, uneven and well-used public footpath. We found ourselves walking across the exposed peak of a high hill and, momentarily, we paused to try and get our bearings. I turned to look back towards Thatcham and could see the exact point on the coastline where I had stood and witnessed the arrival of the first alien ship last summer. The village itself - normally an obvious bright cluster of street lamps, car headlights and homes - was hardly visible. Thatcham was as black and lifeless as the rest of the beaten world around it. Save for the gusting of the wind through the trees, the only visible movement came from the alien ships powering through the turbulent sky. The only light came from their brightly burning engines.

Christ, seeing the shell of the village was painful. I felt the same cold and inescapable fear and uncertainty then as I had when I had stared into Rob's dead eyes earlier that morning. Obviously feeling as battered and hurt as I was, Clare moved closer and gently took hold of my arm.

'Come on,' she shouted, struggling to make herself heard over the driving wind and rain. 'Let's keep moving.'

Ahead of us was the ocean. The often still and placid waters were churning and vicious waves

crashed against the shore. I could just about make out the shape of the Devil's Peak in the near distance. Although closer than it had been all night it still seemed a million miles away.

'Not far now,' I said, trying to keep us both motivated. Clare's face suddenly froze with fear and I span around to look at whatever it was she had seen. A massive alien ship was drifting over the rolling hills and towards the ocean and, from its vast and sleek belly, a phalanx of silent shuttles dropped into the night sky and tore through the air towards us. We held each other tightly and instinctively braced ourselves for attack. Seventeen ships raced through the sky less than fifty feet above our heads. Within seconds they were gone. We watched them disappear into the distance.

'Jesus...' Clare sobbed, shaken by the alien's sudden closeness.

For the first time that night the myriad of machines around us seemed to have a visible purpose. Rather than just appearing to drift aimlessly to and fro, many now moved with definite and easily identifiable patterns. The fleet of shuttles that had just flown overhead could be seen splitting and either becoming part of one of countless vast convoys or docking with other colossal motherships.

The point on the hill upon which we were standing was one of the highest and most exposed points along that particular stretch of coastline. From our elevated position we were able to look back over miles and miles of undulating countryside. Everywhere we looked we saw the same thing - inky black skies swarming with alien activity. Like deadly beetles, bugs and ants crawling hungrily over a plate of sugary food, the silent machines scurried through the darkness, moving like predators from the stripped carcass of one dead village or town and onto the next. The largest ships - the ones with the rounder, more bulbous fronts - occasionally stopped and hung motionless in the air. Then, just like the machine that had passed us on the road a short time earlier, a single searing strip of concentrated incandescent light and energy would pour down on the defenceless land below. All across the visible landscape this was happening. At one point I counted fifteen such ships firing at the ground at the same time and, if they were all destroying crowds of a similar size to the one we'd seen, then I estimated that I had just witnessed the death of well over fifteen thousand innocent people. And that was only what I could see from where I stood. This relentless cull would surely be happening all around the world. If that many people were being destroyed in a matter of seconds, then how many would be killed in an hour? How long would it take for our entire race to be eradicated?

I grabbed hold of Clare's hand and tried to move. She stood her ground, transfixed by all that she could see. Her face was full of cold pain and utter disbelief and I could see that she felt as empty and betrayed as I did. Was she wondering which one of the mighty machines had killed her daughter? Was it the same machine that had taken Robert and Siobhan from me?

'Come on,' I hissed, yanking her towards me. Hanging onto Clare with one hand and the heavy sports bag with the other, I tried to sprint away. The grass was waterlogged and I slipped, sending both of us careering down the treacherous, greasy hillside. I couldn't stop, and I didn't dare let go of Clare. Out of control we tripped and fell until we reached the bottom of the slope where the ground finally levelled off and we were able to slow ourselves down again.

'You all right?' I wheezed breathlessly as I caught Clare in my arms. I looked her up and down to check that she was okay. She nodded and pushed past me and walked down towards where the sea met the land. The grass beneath our feet gradually began to thin and to become more sparse. Soon it had given way completely to the crunching pebbles of the shingle shore.

'Made it,' Clare gasped.

'Told you,' I smiled. 'I knew we'd do it.'

She looked around anxiously.

‘So where are we? Where are these boats?’

I looked up and down the length of the dark and desolate beach, shielding my face from the driving rain and sea spray. I didn’t know exactly where I was, but I felt confident that we were close to a bay a short distance up the coast where one or two boats were always moored.

‘This way,’ I answered, pointing up the shingle shore.

‘Are you sure...?’ she began.

‘Just move,’ I snapped, sensing that we were wasting precious time.

Together we tripped through the shale and cold waves as we made our way towards a dark and shadowy headland which jutted out into the ocean. As we neared I knew that there was no way we could climb over the massive obstruction. We had little option but to work our way around the side, staying as close to the water’s edge as we dared. I dropped the sports bag and clambered up onto the rocks. Turning back, I hauled Clare up after me. She clung onto the slimy, mossy-covered rocks for dear life and followed me as I began to shuffle around the headland. A momentary distraction and I was knocked off my feet by a sudden icy wave that crashed over me, soaking me to the skin and forcing the air from my lungs with shock. In a fraction of a second I was under.

‘Tom!’ I heard Clare scream. Instinctively I reached up towards where I thought she was and she grabbed hold of my arm. As the water washed away I managed to scramble back onto my feet, frozen, shocked and with salt stinging my tired eyes. Clare pushed me on.

With my hands numb with cold I carefully felt my way along the precarious rock face. In daylight it might have been easy but tonight, with the wind and the rain and the fear to distract me, every shuffling step took real effort and determination. I could see it in Clare’s face too. When I dared to look back at her I saw that she was struggling to keep moving forward just as I was.

We slowly rounded the most exposed part of the headland. The dark had exaggerated the size of the rocks.

‘Over there!’ Clare yelled. I looked back again and saw that she was pointing past me. ‘A boat!’

She was right. There, just a few hundred yards away, was a small rowing boat. Hardly the fishing boat that I had hoped to see, but I knew that it would do. It didn’t have an engine or a cabin for shelter but it would be enough. With a renewed energy and determination I forced myself along the last few feet of the rock face and then jumped down onto the sandy beach below. Clare wasn’t far behind.

‘Nearly done it!’ I yelled, virtually dragging her along the sand. ‘One last push!’

Together we ran on, fighting against the bitter gale and icy, spiteful rain. But then it stopped. Like someone had flicked a switch, the wind and the rain just stopped. Dumbfounded, we stood motionless and looked at each other. Bizarre as it seemed, it also began to get lighter. It was still dark, but I was sure that it wasn’t as dark as it had been a few minutes earlier. It wasn’t even midnight. How could it be getting lighter?

‘What the fucking hell is going on?’ Clare mumbled.

‘No idea,’ I replied quickly. ‘Come on!’

Grabbing her hand again I ran with her to the boat. We threw our bags into the little vessel and began to push it down the beach towards the sea. Now that the wind had died it was quieter. In fact it was too quiet. I looked up and saw that the ocean had suddenly become as flat and calm as a boating lake in summer.

We ran through the still water until it was deep enough for the boat to float. Clare jumped inside and I continued to push for a little longer until I was sure that we wouldn't be grounded. I dragged myself up and in and steadied myself as the boat lurched and rocked from side to side.

The biggest alien ship I had ever seen suddenly appeared on the horizon. Easily ten times the size of most of the other ships, this one was moving slowly and methodically across the water. As it moved a steady stream of light trickled down from its immense belly - like a brilliant curtain of energy - and I guessed that it was cleansing the land. The machine seemed to be acting like a cleaner of sorts, burning away every last trace of mankind from the surface of the planet. Although all I could do was guess that this was its purpose, I didn't want to take any chances. The ship was moving towards us with an ominous speed.

There was a single oar on the floor of the boat. I grabbed it and began to dig into the water, on one side and then the next, one side then the next. The ship and the curtain of burning light was getting closer by the second. Clare lay slumped at my feet, her head buried in her hands, waiting. I looked up again and dived over to the right. I shoved the oar down and pulled hard against the still water, forcing the little boat to turn and lurch over to the side. Again and again I dragged the oar through the water, watching over my shoulder constantly as the alien ship approached. The curtain of light was now painfully close. For all I knew it would just wash over us but I couldn't take the chance. With the muscles in my arms screaming for me to stop I rowed further and further away. The light passed us by, just missing the end of our little boat by inches.

'It's gone,' I spat, gasping for breath as I collapsed down next to Clare. She looked up but her face was expressionless, drained of all emotion. I watched the alien craft continue on its way towards the shore.

A little victory was mine.

It wasn't much - it wasn't anything in the scheme of things - but I had managed to avoid the aliens and get off the mainland.

For the first time that day I felt almost alive again. It didn't matter how long we had left, we were still ourselves and we still had some control. It was getting hotter by the minute. I stood up and took off my jacket. A single alien shuttle swooped down over the water just a short distance ahead of us.

'Tom!' Clare screamed. 'Get down!'

I didn't move. A single little act of defiance which meant everything now that I had nothing. I stood there and stared at the ship which turned and began to fly right towards me. It ducked and bobbed and flew over me just a few feet above my head but still I didn't flinch. I wanted the alien bastards to know that I wasn't afraid. They didn't care about me and I didn't care about them. I wanted them to know that they'd never be able to control me or frighten me or reprogram me or twist or manipulate me.

I am Thomas Winter. I will always be Thomas Winter.

Batter me and beat me and wear me down for a hundred fucking years and I'll never give up. I'll never give in.

The Devil's Peak had always seemed to be a short distance away when I had looked at them from the mainland but, out here on the water, the jagged rocks didn't seem to be getting any closer. The light continued to improve and the temperature continued to rise. By half-past one it felt less like a winter night and more like a gentle summer morning.

Clare was asleep. With no other distractions I divided my attention between getting to the rocky outcrop and keeping a close watch on the skies overhead. There was still an incredible amount of activity taking place above the countryside that we had left behind. I wondered how many people were left alive there. An hour or so ago I had stood and watched thousands upon thousands of innocent lives being ended in seconds. It seemed possible - no, it seemed probable - to think that the land we were running from might now be devoid of all human life.

As if to reinforce their complete and unarguable domination of the planet, as I watched the heavens above me I saw countless new ships arrive. Different in shape and size to those I had seen before but somehow still familiar, I guessed that each one would have a specific part to play in the alien's work to change, modify and mutate the land which I had once called home.

Clare began to stir. She sat up and rubbed her eyes.

'Okay?' I asked. She shrugged her shoulders.

'Suppose,' she grunted.

I stopped rowing and sat and watched her.

'Sure you're okay?'

She nodded, looked at me, and then looked away again.

'I'm fine...' she began.

'But...?'

She took a deep breath and sighed.

'What are we doing, Tom?'

'Making the most of what's left,' I quickly replied.

'But why? What good is it going to do?'

I didn't answer. We both knew that we were just delaying the inevitable.

‘Where are we going to shelter on these rocks?’

‘Joe Porter said that...’ I started to say.

‘I know what Joe Porter said,’ she interrupted, ‘you’ve already told me. But what are we going to do long term? What are we going to do for food? Where are we going to sleep? There’s nothing there.’

‘We’ve got supplies in the rucksacks, that should be enough for a few days at least.’

‘Okay so we can eat for a day or two. What next? What if we’re still alive and all the food’s used up? Then what are we going to do?’

‘We could fish,’ I said, instinctively and foolishly.

‘You going to make yourself a bloody rod and sit on top of the rocks fishing are you?’

‘If I have to, yes.’

‘Oh, come on...’

‘What’s the matter with you?’

‘What are you going to make this rod from?’

‘What?’

‘There’s no fucking wood on the rocks. What are you going to make the rod from?’

‘Don’t know. I’ll use this paddle if I have to.’

‘And if you catch any, how are you going to cook the fish?’

‘We’ve got matches, we could...’

‘I know that,’ she snapped, ‘but what are you going to do? Burn the fucking boat?’

She was right but I couldn’t bring myself to respond. I picked up the paddle and began to dig deep into the water again. We’d find a way to survive. We had managed so far.

Joe Porter had been right.

We eventually reached the rocks and, just as he’d told me, on the farthest side of the largest rock we found a small shingle shore, no more than fifteen feet square. I dragged the boat as far up the shore as I could and wedged the hull between two large boulders.

Clare and I found a little sheltered area where we could sit and wait together and watch.

After we had been sitting together for a short while I asked her how she was feeling. She shook her head but didn’t answer.

By three o’clock that morning it was as light as day. I watched hundreds of alien ships crawling high through the perfect clear blue sky like ants. Hundreds more were working tirelessly close to the surface of the planet.

I saw more ships like the one that had flown close to us while we had been in the boat. Even though it was light I could clearly see that they were each dragging behind them a brilliant curtain of energy. I saw several of them flying together in slow unison. Their purpose was clear. They were cleansing the face of the planet. Burning away the last traces of man. Sterilising the land.

Epilogue

Epilogue

Over the next nine days Thomas Winter watched the world around him change.

The morning after reaching the rocks, Clare and Tom watched the sky change colour. The familiar icy blue slowly became tinged with purples and pinks. The atmosphere gradually thinned. By midday on the third day thousands of stars were visible. As the day wore on the sun too changed colour from deep orange to light yellow, to white and finally monochrome grey.

Over the next three days the tide went further and further out until the water had completely disappeared. Where once there had been cold ocean there was now nothing - just a vast and silent tundra.

The temperature increased.

The air became drier and started to taste and smell different.

On the sixth day every alien ship drifted upwards into the sky and hovered silently at an unimaginable height.

On the eighth day Tom left the rocks in search of food. He ran across the dry sea bed from the island to the shore. Tired and weak, his fear kept him moving forward.

Once I was running I was fine.

The nervousness, the trepidation and apprehension all disappeared in seconds. I just kept putting one

foot down in front of the other.

I knew that they were watching me but I didn't care and I knew that they didn't care either. I was of no interest to them.

I ran back towards Thatcham but I couldn't find it. The whole village had just disappeared, as had every road, building, animal, car, tree and person. In its place I found an unending blue-green blanket of what looked like grass. It was finer though, and shorter - almost a moss of sorts.

I was there for just over an hour but I couldn't find anything to eat or drink. I knew it was pointless to keep searching and so turned to head back to Clare.

I stopped for a while when I was up high on the hills again. I looked down over where the ocean had once been and watched the moss which had covered the land slowly spreading out over the drying seabed. It was moving as I watched - creeping out towards Clare.

I rested for a minute or two.

Looking up above me I could see thousands of alien ships just sitting and waiting. I didn't dare think about what they might be waiting for.

I ran back to Clare and sat with her.

We held each other and talked about all that had happened and all that had gone. She went to sleep that afternoon and didn't wake up again.

No matter what they had done to the rest of the human race, they hadn't beaten me. I hadn't fallen in line with their program. I had kept control. I knew that it wouldn't be long before I died, but I would die knowing who I was and why.

For another seven hours Thomas Winter was the last man alive.

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