

A large, metallic, saucer-shaped UFO is shown from a low angle, hovering over a dense forest. The UFO has a circular base with several small, dark, circular lights or sensors. The background features a sunset sky with scattered white clouds and distant mountains.

not alone

CRAIG A. FALCONER

NOT ALONE

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Not Alone

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The characters and events herein are entirely fictional. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. Some of the locations found in this book are also fictional while others have been liberally adapted.

Reader's note: Not Alone was written, edited and produced in Scotland. As such, some spellings will differ from those found in the United States. Examples of British English include using colour rather than color, organise rather than organize, and centre rather than center. An exception to this rule is the use of proper nouns, which retain their American spelling where applicable.



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*For all of those
who look up and know.*

Part 1

THE LEAK

*“There are risks and costs to action.
But they are far less than the long range risks
of comfortable inaction.”*

John F. Kennedy

FRIDAY

D minus 99

WINCHESTER STREET
COLORADO SPRINGS, COLORADO

Dan McCarthy's delivery route proved straightforward enough thanks to Winchester Street's proximity to the IDA building. The building wasn't particularly big, but it was a local landmark which Dan vividly remembered visiting on a school trip.

For Dan, obsessed with space since before he could remember, this trip to the IDA had been a dream come true even though he had been old enough at 13 to accept that he didn't have the aptitude for a career as an astronaut or even to fill any of the agency's less glamorous positions.

Eight years later, Dan's "career" amounted to serving fancy coffee to rich teenagers. And now, apparently, it also involved delivering rare books to people too lazy to drive four miles to the store. With the ever-rising cost of fuel having recently forced Dan to ditch his car for the journey to work, he hoped this first delivery would also be his last.

As Dan mentally relived his day at the IDA, the journey to

Winchester Street flew by. The one memory that stood head and shoulders above the rest in Dan's mind was the moment he met Richard Walker. More than anything the imposing man had said, Dan remembered trying not to look at the scar. He remembered not being able to look away.

Dan knew the story. Everyone knew the story. Richard Walker was a titan of American politics who had endured as a highly public figure for twice as long as Dan had been alive, and the ancient scar was no small part of his legend.

A voice from Dan's phone's GPS app told him to turn left, which he dutifully did. Seconds later, a new and more piercing sound filled the air. The deafening alarm hit Dan's ears suddenly and sharply enough for him to know that he hadn't cycled into earshot but rather that the noise had just begun.

It didn't sound like a car alarm. As Dan cycled closer and the volume kept rising, it didn't sound like any alarm he had ever heard.

Every twenty seconds or so, the sound changed. When it first rose and fell like a slow ambulance siren, Dan pictured a blue flashing light. Next came a bellowing ar-ar-ar which sounded like the warning system at a nuclear power station; its light would be orange, Dan imagined.

The third sound was the worst: a rapid shrieking ee-ee-ee-ee-ee that Dan could only compare to the snow monkeys he once saw at the zoo, who had taken exception to an uninvited bird landing in their pool. Only instead of the ten agitated snow monkeys that Dan had watched in fascination, the alarm sounded like ten thousand. This would definitely be a strobe light.

Dan felt relief when the alarm looped back to the ambulance style oscillation, a gentle lullaby compared to the angry snow monkeys.

After another left turn, the IDA building came into view in the distance. There was no flashing light but the acoustics convinced Dan that the alarm was coming from there. If he was right, the

streets would be crawling with police in minutes.

As Winchester Street drew near, Dan's phone instructed him to turn right in 200 yards. Dan looked ahead. There was no right in 200 yards.

"Display alternative route," Dan requested without slowing down, keen to get away from the alarm and whatever had caused it as quickly as possible.

"Turn right in 150 yards," his phone said, sticking to its guns.

Dan pulled it out of his pocket and looked at the map. The phone had confused a driveway for a throughway, but fortunately there was a real right turn not too far ahead.

Dan looked back up just in time to see a jet-black figure dashing onto the street from between two parked cars.

"Move," the man grunted.

Dan tried to turn his bike away but the man ran straight into the side of it, dropping everything in his hands and sending Dan crashing to the ground.

The man fell, too, but Dan cushioned his fall.

Through the intense pain of an impact that felt like it had scraped off half of the skin on his left side, Dan grabbed the man's legs and tried to push the bike aside with his body.

The man kicked free and stood up, creating a distance between himself and Dan.

Dan saw beyond doubt that the man was a robber, dressed head to toe in black with leather gloves and a ski mask that had no holes at the nose or mouth. As the man stared back, all that Dan could see were two cut-out circles of white skin around two green eyes, beady and startled. No amount of leather and wool could hide the man's fear.

After several seconds of tense eye contact, Dan's gaze shifted to the man's fallen loot. A tin the size of a shoebox had spilled open, revealing no fewer than six gold bars. Dan started to question whether the alarm really was coming from the IDA; this looked more like some kind of bank job.

Scattered on the other side of the man were four or five manilla folders. Dan's eyes fell on the only one that had landed face up. He could just make out the block capitals on its square white label: V. SLATER.

Dan safely assumed that V. Slater stood for Valerie Slater, and that the stolen folder either belonged to President Slater or contained someone's dossier on her. The IDA was making sense again.

The man saw Dan eyeing the folder. "You don't want to die for that," he grunted in the same gruff tone as before, clearly an attempt to mask his voice.

"What is it?" Dan asked, not knowing what else to say or do.

The man ignored the question and instead opened his coat, flashing the butt of a previously concealed weapon.

Dan almost fell over himself as he frantically lifted his bike, not even bothering to pick up his phone from the spot where it had landed after the collision.

"Don't move," the man said. Dan looked up and saw the man's hand reaching for the gun.

Dan dropped the bike and showed his palms.

With one eye on Dan, the man hurriedly packed the six gold bars back into their tin and gathered up the manilla folders.

Dan stood stunned as the man ran off in the direction he had been headed. After watching him take a sharp left, Dan heard the man's gruff voice shout "go, go, go!"

A door then slammed shut and the unseen getaway car sped away.

Dan crouched down to pick up his phone to dial 911, but something else caught his eye: underneath a parked car on the other side of his bike from where the rest of the loot had fallen, Dan spotted a manilla folder.

What stuck in Dan's mind was that the robber hadn't seemed to care when Dan eyed the gold bars but instantly flashed a weapon when he asked about the Slater folder.

Did Dan really want to know what was inside this folder? Did he really want to risk involving himself in whatever was going on here?

He stood up and scanned the street. Police sirens now joined the alarm — currently in the orange-light ar-ar-ar stage of its cycle — but there was no one else on the narrow street where Dan now found himself.

He crouched down again.

And then, after a few seconds of indecision, Dan McCarthy put his phone in his pocket and reached for the folder.

D minus 98

*IDA HEADQUARTERS
COLORADO SPRINGS, COLORADO*

Richard Walker stood in his ground floor office, staring ruefully at broken glass and scattered belongings.

The small safe built into his desk showed signs of forced entry as the thief's borer and crowbar lay abandoned on the floor.

The two police officers on the scene told Richard that the culprit had almost certainly smashed the large glass window as a means of escape when the alarm was already sounding. Though they offered no specific suggestion of how the intruder might have got in, the words "inside job" were spoken.

"It had to be someone who knew I was in a meeting," Richard agreed. He had a well-earned reputation for stoicism, but even his voice creaked slightly under the strain of what had happened.

"Can you tell us what this meeting was about?" one of the officers asked. His female colleague was taking notes.

"I don't know if you watch much news," Richard said, more than a hint of derision in his voice, "but I've had a lot on my plate this

week.”

“I’m sure you have. Who else was in the meeting?”

“That’s none of your concern.”

The female officer who had been taking notes looked up. “Sir, we just need someone to corroborate where you were at the time of the —”

“Why?” Richard interrupted. “In case I stole my own gold and smashed my own window? Do you know who I am?”

“We know exactly who you are, sir, and no one is suggesting anything like that.”

Richard took a deep breath and sat down in his chair, right beside the safe that had failed him so completely. “Okay. It was just me and Ben.”

“Ben Gold?”

Richard nodded. “We were in his office from 8:35 until we heard the alarm at 10:05. Ask him yourself.”

The officer jotted this down.

“And other than the gold you mentioned,” her colleague said, “was there anything else of value in the safe?”

Richard shook his head slowly, almost distantly.

“Anything sensitive?”

“It was a personal safe,” Richard muttered.

“So no classified documents?”

Richard looked at the man without speaking.

“Mr Walker, if there were, we have to inform the—”

“It was a personal safe,” Richard repeated without emotion. “Why are you wasting time asking me all of these questions, anyway? Why aren’t you out there looking for the thief? Do you even have a description?”

The police officers hesitated for a few seconds before the man spoke. “The only sighting we have is from a driver who saw an individual fleeing on foot,” he said. “The witness described a male of medium height, medium build and unknown ethnicity.”

“So basically you’ve narrowed it down to a human male,”

Richard said.

"We're doing what we can, Mr Walker," the man replied.

Richard stood up. Anger crossed his face. "Are you, though? Because I look outside and I don't see any roadblocks. I listen to all of your nonsense and I don't hear anything about a lockdown zone to contain the thief."

The officer gulped. "Mr Walker, for a personal theft, our response has to be, with respect... proportionate. You've told us that no IDA files or classified documents were taken."

"Documents can only be classified if the bureaucrats get their useless hands..." Richard stopped himself mid-sentence, deciding not to tell these incompetent public servants any more than he had to.

"Get their hands on them?" the woman asked.

"Never mind," Richard said. He walked to his door and pushed it open. "You can see yourselves out. I've got some cleaning up to do."

WINCHESTER STREET
COLORADO SPRINGS, COLORADO

Dan lifted the manilla folder out from under the parked car and read the single word on its label: KERGUELEN.

Since the only other folder Dan saw had President Slater's name on it, he assumed that Kerguelen was a foreign leader. He would search on his phone when it was safe to do so, but for now he tucked the folder into his backpack beside the undelivered book and cycled quickly to create distance between himself and the IDA building.

Dan was so caught up in the moment that he didn't notice exactly when the alarm stopped, only realising that the world was quiet when he reached a junction and listened for traffic.

After a few minutes of cycling through the pain of his earlier fall, Dan stopped outside a posh-looking café when he thought he had gone far enough to be safe.

He typed into his phone's search bar and immediately learned that Kerguelen was a place rather than a person.

More specifically, the island of Kerguelen was a grim rock that

lay more than 2,000 miles from civilisation, somewhere between Antarctica and Madagascar.

A quick scan of the top few encyclopaedia entries informed Dan that the main island was the largest of a small group which in turn formed part of the Kerguelen Plateau, a sunken microcontinent which now lay a mile underwater.

After being initially underwhelmed, Dan felt his interest pique with this last revelation. What did a sunken landmass have to do with the IDA?

A thousand thoughts ran through Dan's mind. Was it really possible that he might be holding in his hands suppressed evidence of an underwater discovery? If so, what kind of evidence?

Dan didn't know the answer to that, but the IDA's involvement gave him some clues as to what such a discovery might involve. The idea at the front of Dan's mind could be best summarised by the two words that his brother Clark had long ago pleaded with him to stop bringing up in regular conversation: alien visitation.

Unlike his brother and most other people he knew, Dan openly believed in intelligent extraterrestrial life, stubbornly insisting that the absence of proof did not equate to proof of absence.

With the lure of positive proof now weighing heavy in his hands, Dan checked once more that no one was watching then carefully opened the folder.

His eyes skimmed the first page and froze, stunned.

In handwritten blue ink, someone at the IDA had concocted a plan to discredit Billy Kendrick, a once-esteemed archaeologist who now held and espoused some highly unorthodox views on extraterrestrials and the more general truth-suppressing effects of "institutional ostrichism" in academia.

In this handwritten plan to discredit Billy, a shortlist of brainstormed bullet points such as "financial irregularities?" and "infidelity?" were followed by the words "false dawn" and an arrow indicating to turn overleaf. Dan followed the instruction.

The other side of the paper contained two thorough false-flag

schemes to “injure belief” in extraterrestrial life, both involving staged incidents intended to look real and create fervent interest before being explained away, thus making people less likely to believe next time around.

One idea was to create irregular lights in the sky — “to be seen by 10-20 credible & diverse individuals” — before sending a supposedly decisive image of a UFO to Billy Kendrick to create more buzz. “Kendrick will no doubt lead calls for government comment,” the plan continued, “until another eyewitness releases their own video proving that the lights were something unequivocally innocuous. Kendrick is humbled and the public’s belief threshold is raised.”

Dan scanned the second scheme more quickly, seeing that it involved hiring a “respectable married couple in their mid forties” to talk plausibly about an alien encounter. All going well, the couple would capture the public’s attention and gain their trust only to eventually admit to making the whole thing up out of financial desperation.

There was a brief list of pros and cons for each plan, along with a scribbled idea to “flood the media with discoveries of old pressure spheres to preempt hysteria in the worst case scenario.”

Dan paused to consider the final line. What was the worst case scenario, and what did it have to do with pressure spheres? Impatient to find out, he opened the folder fully and lifted out the loose pages. There seemed to be around seven or eight.

A car quickly but quietly pulled up across the street from Dan. Startled, he lowered the folder and pretended to be busy on his phone. An elderly couple stepped out of the car and walked into the small café behind Dan, waving to the driver as they went. Dan breathed a sigh of relief but knew he had to be more careful.

Dan raised the folder again to put it safely in his backpack until he was somewhere more private, but the briefest of glances at the next page revealed something big: as well as actively spreading lies, the IDA really was trying to cover something up.

Dan flicked to the next again page, which looked similar in style to the last. In contrast to the interesting but underwhelming scribbles about Billy Kendrick, both of these pages were printed and potentially verifiable.

The two documents were genuine-looking letters from government agencies in Argentina and Austria, consisting of courteous replies to IDA requests to block underwater excavations at Mar del Plata and Lake Toplitz, respectively. Both were dated 1989.

Another car pulled up to drop someone off outside the café, and this time Dan put the folder straight into his backpack and started cycling.

Dan now had no doubt that he possessed evidence of a major government cover-up. Fearful of being either physically spotted or digitally surveilled, he wanted to do two things: get the folder off the street, and get to a computer that wasn't his.

He gave his phone a command which could kill both birds with one stone: "Open map. Route to nearest library."

"Northlight Public Library, 600 yards," his phone replied.

"Route to alternative library," Dan said. 600 yards was far too close.

"Baker Street Public Library, 2.6 miles."

Dan took a sharp right turn and headed towards Baker Street, obediently following his phone's verbal directions. The route took him away from the IDA building and in the general direction of his workplace, which was a bonus.

As Dan pushed himself to go faster, the pain on the left side of his body flared up again. Only the river of adrenaline coursing through his veins made it bearable, acting as a mild but welcome painkiller.

But with adrenaline came anxiety, and Dan imagined the eyes of every passing driver sizing him up and piercing his backpack with their gaze.

Dan tried to shake these thoughts aside.

It's out of sight and safe for now, he told himself.

What he couldn't shake so easily was the troubling probability

that powerful people were already looking for the folder...
Powerful people who would stop at nothing to recover it.

*BAKER STREET PUBLIC LIBRARY
COLORADO SPRINGS, COLORADO*

Dan reached Baker Street Public Library without any further incident and secured his bike to the otherwise empty railing.

When he opened the door, it sounded more like a playground than a library. The source of the ruckus was a class of schoolchildren. The noise wasn't a problem in itself, but the class took up almost all of the library's computers and wouldn't give Dan the privacy he needed.

He walked to the reception desk, glad that he at least looked respectable in his work clothes, and asked the surprisingly young male librarian if there were any other computers.

"Only the chat booth," the man said, "but that's subject to a small charge. The kids will be leaving in a few minutes, anyway."

Dan could afford to wait a few minutes for the sake of privacy, but he liked the sound of the chat booth. He asked about it.

The librarian explained that the chat booth was exactly what it sounded like: an enclosed booth designed for video chatting,

primarily intended for members of the community without a computer and webcam of their own to conduct video interviews for jobs or college applications.

“How much is the charge?” Dan asked.

“Are you a member of the library?”

Dan shook his head.

“Are you a local resident?”

Dan shook his head again.

“In that case it’s \$5 for ten minutes, \$12 for thirty.”

Dan looked in his wallet. “How long can I get for \$10?”

“Just two ten-minute slots,” the man said. “The system only gives a discount for thirty minutes.”

“Twenty minutes it is,” Dan said, emptying his wallet.

The librarian took Dan’s money and handed him a small piece of paper which detailed the booth’s code of conduct. “It basically says keep your clothes on,” the man said with a smile. He walked round to the front of the desk and led Dan to the booth, unlocking the door when they got there. “The time you have left will be in the bottom corner of the screen. I have to activate the camera from my desk, so it’ll be ready in a minute.”

“I don’t need the camera,” Dan said. “Thanks.”

The man nodded and left.

Dan closed the door and opened his backpack, placing the folder on his lap. The computer’s webcam was clipped to the top of the screen rather than built in to the bezel, so Dan lifted it off and turned it to face the wall; better safe than sorry.

He then opened a new browser window and entered his first search term: Lake Toplitz.

As Dan already knew from the letter, Lake Toplitz was in Austria. Fully aware of the ticking clock, he persisted with his technique of scanning the top few results. Toplitz turned out to be located high in the Austrian Alps and was apparently best known as the place where Nazi officials dumped hundreds of millions of dollars worth of counterfeit British currency when they knew the war was lost.

There were also persistent rumours of grander treasures hidden in the lake's murky depths. The money story seemed to be public knowledge and proven fact, so Dan assumed that the IDA were trying to prevent the discovery of these "grander treasures", whatever they might be.

Next, Dan searched for information about underwater exploration at Mar del Plata. When no results of note came up, Dan read the Argentinian letter in full to see what it said. Frustratingly, there was no direct mention of the original sender's reasons for requesting the block on exploration. Dan knew a dead end when he saw one, so he swiftly moved the letter to the back of the pile and looked at the next document.

The Austrian and Argentinian letters had both been sent in 1989, just a year after Richard Walker assumed his position at the IDA. The third document was yet another reply, but this one was only eight years old and hadn't come from a government agency. Rather, this letter was from a still-active Australian company called 3-T.

Dan discerned from the company's logo that 3-T stood for Treasure Trawl Titans. He learned from their official website that the company's staff starred in a successful reality TV show centred around their quests for lost treasure. 3-T's letter didn't mince its words, defiantly insisting that they were going to proceed with their planned dive in Lake Toplitz despite the original sender's warning of "volatile materials" near the bottom.

The 3-T letter didn't add much, but Dan at least imagined that a team of media-savvy Australians would be more likely to comment than either of the foreign governments. All three replies were addressed to a "Mr Kloster", but Dan's brief search returned no record of anyone with that name ever working at the IDA. He could only hope that someone at 3-T would have a record of Kloster's address, or at least his first name.

The next document, preserved in a white envelope with a dark blue seal, contained around a dozen pages of handwriting so ornate that Dan couldn't even read it at first glance. He put the stapled-

together pages aside for now. He then looked at the folder's final sheet, which was a meticulous record of all authorised dives at Lake Toplitz and all recorded searches for scuttled U-boats off the coast of Argentina.

U-boats?

Already confused, Dan was now totally lost. Where did the IDA fit into any of this? And just as importantly, what did any of this have to do with the Kerguelen Islands?

Devoid of ideas, Dan picked up the long handwritten document again and made a more serious effort to read it. The longer he looked, the more indecipherable it became. This elaborate script was nothing like the other handwriting. It barely even looked like writing at all, striking Dan as something between calligraphy and cryptography; though impressive in its own way, the penmanship failed in its core task of being legible.

Dan intently scanned the lines like a child doing a word search, but with the distinct disadvantage of knowing neither what words he was looking for nor what letters he was looking at.

Several lines in, Dan spotted something: two floating dots above what might have been a U.

An umlaut, he realised. It's German.

This epiphany didn't make the writing much easier to read, but it gave Dan something to go on. He soon made out a few words like "bist" and "eine", but Dan didn't speak German and knew that the ridiculously ornate writing would have been almost as difficult to decipher even if he had.

Conscious of the clock ticking down, Dan decided to waste no more time on the German writing and to instead focus on contacting someone at 3-T. They were his best bet for identifying Mr Kloster, and Mr Kloster was the key to everything.

Dan's lap was a mess of assorted documents, so he began to put everything apart from the 3-T letter back into the folder.

The German document wouldn't go in properly, as though hitting against something. Dan looked inside the folder and saw a

folded scrap of white card. He lifted it out and noticed writing on one side.

Within seconds, Dan's heart was pounding.

The twelve lines on this piece of card provided the context he had been desperately lacking, and it was a context more explosive than anything he had dared imagine.

Dan McCarthy held in his hands physical evidence of the biggest cover-up in human history — not screenshots or scans of secret documents, but the actual files themselves, stolen from the IDA only minutes earlier. With proof like this, there could be no more lying.

Dan read the same dozen lines over and over again, as though expecting them to morph into something less incredible.

But however many times he looked, there it was. Right in front of his eyes, scrawled in the same handwriting as the plans to discredit Billy Kendrick, was a truth so momentous that Dan couldn't take his eyes off it:

"2/18 — The alien craft at Toplitz was sunk and destroyed. The empty Namtso, Bouvet, and New Swabia spheres were looted from Altaussee, apparently without raising suspicion. — My sole and great concern is the Kerguelen sphere, which was jettisoned in haste, intact, and with the two surviving plaques inside. If that sphere is ever recovered, whether by the Argentines, British, Americans, or anyone else, I fear that the global order we have worked so hard to establish will collapse overnight. If you see merit in trying to prevent such a night from coming, I implore you to focus your efforts on the Kerguelen sphere. I implore you to focus on the Argentine coast."

An inch or so below this message were two roughly scribbled circles, one containing the text "U-530" and the other "U-977".

Dan composed himself and stood up. He opened the door.

"Excuse me," he called to the librarian.

"Yes?"

"I'm going to need the camera after all."

"Sure thing," the librarian said.

Dan closed the door and sat down. This story wasn't going to leak itself.

D minus 95

MUSÉE DE L'ARMÉE
PARIS, FRANCE

Midway through the last appointment of her five-day visit, President Valerie Slater strolled gracefully through the Musée de l'Armée, flanked by her French counterpart on one side and security personnel on the other. A horde of invited photographers and reporters walked alongside them.

The same mild manner and outward-looking philosophy that led some in the American media to label Slater a weak president made her unusually popular in Europe. Foreign media always enjoyed the novelty of high-profile visitors and the only American press who had been invited along were those friendly to Slater's administration, so the President was making the most of a welcome reprieve from the difficult questions about China which were waiting for her at home.

During what felt like the tenth pause for photographs in as many minutes, President Slater noticed one of her aides waving frantically from the back of the sizeable press pack.

"A little to the left, Madam President," her official photographer said. Slater obliged, but her eyes kept flicking back to the agitated aide. When the procession continued on its linear tour and the press pack followed in parallel, the aide stayed put. It was Jack Neal, Slater's most trusted confidante.

Jack called Slater over with his hand, his eyes a picture of urgency. With nowhere private to go, Slater excused herself for a moment and walked to the edge of the security barrier. Some of the security personnel in attendance formed a makeshift cordon between Jack Neal and the intrigued press pack.

"What is it?" Slater whispered. Her voice was tense but not angry; she knew that Jack wouldn't be doing this unless there was something he absolutely had to tell her.

"There's been an incident at the IDA building in Colorado Springs," Jack said, leaning in close to the President's ear.

Slater leaned back and met Jack's eyes. "What kind of incident?"

"It's not terror related," Jack clarified, realising that he should have done so straight away.

Slater's expression relaxed. "So what are you telling me?"

"There was a major theft around fifteen minutes ago. The culprit got away."

"What did they target?" Slater asked.

Jack leaned in again. "Richard Walker's safe. They took everything."

President Slater stood in silence for a few seconds. "Has he said anything?" she eventually asked. "Do we know what he had in there?"

"The police said he was evasive and reluctant to cooperate, and that he stopped himself mid-sentence while talking about how documents can't be classified if bureaucrats don't know about them. He didn't explicitly say that he had anything like that — he insisted it was a personal safe — but he wanted roadblocks and a lockdown zone."

After another pensive silence, this one even longer than the last,

Slater thanked Jack and returned to her duties. She retook her place next to the French President, excusing herself and turning to face the press yet again. She tried to force convincing smiles at all the right times, but her usually bright eyes looked as though they hadn't got the message.

While her host enthusiastically pointed to one thing and another, President Slater's mind was 4,000 miles away. She had only known Richard Walker well for a few years, but this was long enough to know that he was a man with many secrets. Slater would shed no tears were these secrets indeed personal to Richard, but she suspected that a safe at the IDA would contain more than inane gossip.

The IDA was a political oddity and Slater's relationship with Richard boiled down to a tacitly understood "don't ask, don't tell" kind of deal. She knew that almost three decades as the autocratic head of an agency like the IDA didn't pass without a few incriminating secrets coming your way, and she vividly recalled a conversation with Richard in which he made clear his total contempt for cyber security.

The basis for Richard's technophobic stance, bolstered by the recent flood of leaks and whistleblowers, had been simple. He argued long and hard that all digitally stored government files would inevitably leak at some point and that there could never be any surefire way of spotting a breach until those files were splashed across the front pages. If your secrets were kept under lock and key, on the other hand, only one physical location had to be guarded. And should the worst ever happen, Richard said, at least you would know straight away.

Now that Richard Walker had been proven right and wrong at the same time, all that President Slater could do was put on a brave face as she wondered just how bad the worst might be.

D minus 94

BAKER STREET PUBLIC LIBRARY
COLORADO SPRINGS, COLORADO

Dan McCarthy didn't have time to worry about what kind of trouble he might be getting himself into by leaking the stolen documents. This was bigger than him, he decided. This was bigger than anyone. This was a truth that the world deserved to know, and Dan felt a responsibility to do whatever it took to get it out.

For two good reasons, Dan wanted to leak the files as anonymously as he could. Safety was at the top of the list, of course, but there was also the unavoidable fact that certain things about Dan would make people even more reluctant to believe an already far-fetched story if it came from someone like him.

Following a similar train of thought, Dan had already decided against including the unreadable German document in this initial leak. He didn't want the core truths to be at all clouded by the presence of anything that might take attention away from what really mattered: the explicit mention of an alien craft and the primary evidence that someone at the IDA was covering it up.

Happily, this evidence was written legibly in English.

Dan planned to take the folder home and work on the long German document when his mind was clear enough to look for patterns of letters that might enable him to make some sense of it all. Later. For now he felt sure that, even without this document, there was more than enough evidence to prove that the government was engaged in campaigns of both secrecy and disinformation. The motive was unclear, but Dan knew that the implications of his discovery could be earth-shattering.

Though he paid little attention to politics, Dan knew that governments had fallen over a lot less than this and that President Slater's honeymoon period would be over as soon as the electorate got hold of what was happening on her watch.

The dates in the files showed that the secrecy had been going on for decades, so Dan considered the possibility that Slater might be oblivious to what was going on under her nose. But as far as he was concerned, she was either involved or incompetent; complicit or complacent. Neither looked good for the tenability of her position.

The ticking clock in the corner of the screen prevented Dan from satisfying his curiosity over the four new locations named on the smoking-gun scrap of card: Namtso, Bouvet, New Swabia, and Altausee. He didn't recognise any of them but, like the German document, he could look into them later.

Dan was, at best, technologically proficient. He couldn't fix computers or do anything with code, but he knew his way around most systems and software. In any case, the plan he had developed for leaking the files involved only a few short steps.

First, he got himself a few disposable email addresses which were composed of randomly generated gibberish and would self-destruct in ten minutes. Next, he created some dummy accounts on the popular social media platforms where he would dump the files. He used a red exclamation mark as the profile picture for each account, hoping it might attract some eyeballs.

Dan then used the chat booth's clip-on webcam to capture clear

photographs of each English document.

Finally, he skimmed through new social media posts to see what terms and hashtags people were using to talk about the theft, which was bound to be big news by now.

The top rising trend was #IDArrobbery, with #RichardWalker in second place. Dan felt vindicated in his assumptions when he read “unconfirmed reports” that items had been stolen from Richard Walker’s personal safe.

The message that Dan plastered across multiple sites using multiple accounts was simple: “Secret documents found this morning, 1/4 mile from IDA. Files still in hand. 100% real. #IDArrobbery #RichardWalker #BillyKendrick.”

Dan included the Billy Kendrick hashtag because Billy happened to have been in the news for his own reasons over the last few days, so people were already talking about him. Piggybacking on Billy’s publicity was a no-brainer. The core of the plan to discredit Billy was nowhere near as explosive as the rest of the documents, but Dan figured that if Billy’s name made even one person curious enough to click his link then it was worth including. The dummy accounts Dan used to dump the files naturally had no friends or followers, so the hashtags were his only hope of being noticed.

Since Dan could only attach one image to his post, the image he used was a screenshot of two URL links to all of the photos which he had already uploaded to two different image hosts. His posts and uploads would probably be taken down before long, but Dan knew that whoever spotted one of his messages first would save and rehost the images.

The “Files still in hand. 100% real.” part of Dan’s post was intended to assure people that the documents weren’t just photoshopped scans or hoaxes. Had he been able to use more than 140 characters, he would have explained that fully. He didn’t even consider writing a longer explanation across multiple posts, though, because he knew that the key step in making something go viral was making it short and easy to share.

Dan leaned back and looked at the countdown in the corner of the screen. With just over a minute to spare, he had done everything he could. The documents were out there, waiting to be found, and Dan couldn't have taken them back now even if he wanted to.

Doubts entered his mind about whether the evidence would be as convincing to everyone else as it was to him. He knew the folder was real; he had seen the man who stole it from Richard Walker's safe and he had lifted it off the street himself.

But would Dan have been so quick to believe the story had someone else been telling it? Probably, he reflected without emotion.

With thirty seconds left, Dan closed everything on the computer and packed away his things. He looked at the documents one by one as he placed them inside the folder. When he saw them all again, he grew in confidence.

There were verifiable letters from government agencies in two countries. There were vindictive plans to discredit Billy Kendrick and "injure belief" in extraterrestrial life by "flooding the media with discoveries of old pressure spheres", which made sense now that Dan knew some kind of presumably alien sphere was lying in the ocean east of Argentina. This alone was a huge discovery. But even more importantly, there was a meticulous record of all searches in that region and also in Lake Toplitz, where an alien craft had been "sunk and destroyed" and where the mysterious Mr Kloster had failed to convince a team of Australian treasure hunters to avoid.

Despite the presence of letters from more credible government agencies, Dan felt that the Australian company, unbound by politics, presented the biggest hope for identifying Mr Kloster and decisively linking everything to Richard Walker and his IDA.

Dan stepped out of the chat booth as soon as his time expired and the screen locked.

\$10 well spent, he thought to himself as he left.

*WOLF & SONS TRADITIONAL BOOKSHOP
COLORADO SPRINGS, COLORADO*

Dan walked into his workplace oblivious as to how long he had been away.

“There you are,” Mr Wolf said when he saw him, sounding more relieved than angry. “Did you get held up by the roadblocks?”

Dan hesitated. He was terrible at lying but aware enough of this weakness to work around it. As long as he didn’t say anything false, he would be fine. “It was crazy down there,” he eventually said.

“So you didn’t manage to deliver the book?”

“No. Sorry.”

Mr Wolf nodded. “Don’t worry about it,” he said. Though not normally spoken of as a particularly kind or understanding man, Mr Wolf had known Dan for two years and could tell that he was shaken up. “Are you okay, though?”

“Well, I fell off my bike,” Dan said, lifting his shirt to reveal a scrape that didn’t actually look as bad as it felt.

“Ouch. Maybe you should take the day? I’m sure Clint could man

the counter by himself until Chelsea comes in.”

“No he couldn’t,” Dan said, more insistently than he had intended.

When people asked Dan where he worked, he always said a bookstore, but that was true only in a technical sense. Though Wolf & Sons had started out as a bookstore, it was now essentially a coffee shop decorated with books.

Dan originally worked three days a week sorting, pricing and selling books. He asked for more hours every week and eventually got his way when another staff member left and Mr Wolf offered him a further two and a half days on the coffee counter.

Now that the coffee counter brought in most of the store’s profits and Dan spent all but one of his days behind it, he couldn’t afford to be seen as expendable. The reason for this was simple: if Mr Wolf decided that one worker could man the counter for more than a few minutes, Dan’s job — the only one he had ever been able to hold down — would be in real danger. Dan had a great thing going with his five-and-a-half-day week, and he would be damned if a sore hip was going to jeopardise it.

“It’s only a few hours,” Mr Wolf said.

This was true enough, given that Friday was Dan’s half day, but he still didn’t like the idea. “I know,” he said, “but Clint can’t do it on his own and I need the money, anyway. A few hours is still a few hours. Besides, this is going to sting just as much if I’m sitting at home. At least here I’ll have something to take my mind off it.”

“Fine by me,” Mr Wolf said. “I’ll ask Clint to deliver that book once the roadblocks are gone. You’ll be okay by yourself behind the counter, won’t you?”

Dan knew that Mr Wolf was testing him. “For a few minutes, I guess,” he said, sticking to the line that all of the staff had agreed to use.

Mr Wolf grinned and walked away. He stopped after a few steps. “Say, what do you think someone would want to steal from the IDA, anyway?”

Dan didn't say anything.

"I bet it's something big," Mr Wolf said, mainly to himself, then continued on his way.

You have no idea, Dan thought.

You have no idea.

Part 2

THE LIE

*“There may be some career person
sitting around somewhere,
hiding these dark secrets,
even from elected presidents.”*

Bill Clinton

D minus 92

IDA HEADQUARTERS
COLORADO SPRINGS, COLORADO

Officially speaking, the Interspace Defense Agency existed to advise policymakers on the potential security implications of new astronomical discoveries. The truth was somewhat more complicated.

Nowhere were the lines between politics, science and war more blurred than at the IDA, and no one epitomised this blurring more than the agency's longtime head, Richard Walker.

Despite Richard's weekly press conferences rarely containing anything of interest to the general media, his name alone was still enough to command an audience. The turnout today was significantly larger than normal.

Many international outlets had come to hear the US government's first official response to the China issue, but a matter of even greater potential importance had arisen only a few hours before the start of this pre-scheduled press conference. Highly atypically, Richard's arrival came a full twenty minutes late.

Richard fought his trademark limp to take his place at the podium in front of the assembled press. Limp aside, he was as spritely at 68 as many men half his age, laughing in the face of the unfounded rumours of his death which had snowballed just a month earlier following a routine hospital visit. Even major media outlets like Blitz News had reported on the story, too busy keeping up with internet whispers to check for themselves.

The opening line of The Daily Chat's premature online obituary, which Richard had since framed and hung in his office, summed him up as "an idealistic patriot who abandoned a promising academic career to serve in Vietnam, flourished as a congressman on his return, launched a full-hearted but abortive bid for the presidency, and ultimately found a home at the IDA."

On the face of it, Richard's IDA years looked to have been the least eventful of his career, to the extent that many in Washington now openly questioned the need for such an agency. One particularly outspoken senator described the IDA as "the bastard lovechild of Cold War paranoia and outdated notions of American exceptionalism," though most were more measured in their criticism.

It was certainly true that the end of the Cold War presented something of an existential crisis for the fledgling agency, but Richard had adapted and survived as only he could. Though his IDA journey had been rocky from the outset — with accusations of nepotism and back-scratching politics surrounding his appointment — Richard's mark was indelible.

Legend had it that even the name had been Richard's decision. Supposedly offered a job as head of the Inner Space Defense Agency, which would have focused more narrowly on tasks like monitoring airspace and protecting satellites, Richard accepted on the condition that Inner became Inter.

Inter was a firmer sounding prefix, he argued, and the acronym ISDA didn't bestow the gravitas that such an agency deserved. Richard insisted that people inevitably tried to pronounce four-

letter organisations as single words, citing NATO, NASA and FIFA as but three examples. ISDA would soon enough be spoken as iz-da, which sounded too much like a cheap Japanese car. Three letters was the way forward, Richard said, pointing to the CIA, FBI, NFL and NSA.

This story came from the tell-all autobiography of a former political rival, whose account found few willing listeners when painting Richard Walker as a calculating politician who had little in common with the public's cartoonish conception of him as a flawless public servant.

Richard took private delight in his rival's version of the ISDA story, since it missed the real reason for the name change altogether. The term "inner space" carried a concrete meaning: it was the space between the Earth and outer space. This restricted the agency's scope. But interspace? Interspace was a relative term. Interspace meant the space between two objects. One of those objects, presumably, was Earth. But the other could be anything.

As such, the Interspace Defense Agency's remit theoretically extended to any conceivable extraterrestrial threat, be that a wandering asteroid, solar flares, or any of the alien nonsense that Richard preferred not to talk about. This flexibility was central to the IDA's survival.

The IDA and Richard Walker had grown so intertwined that it was now generally expected that the agency would be disbanded upon his eventual death. Other than maintaining its own observation network, the IDA's day-to-day operations largely involved collating data from a myriad of sources and acting as a middleman in discussions over funding for space-related projects. Several of the IDA's highest-profile personnel were experts who maintained their day jobs in academia or industry while acting as consultants when necessary.

Like the last few presidents before her, President Slater wisely deemed the political cost of making an enemy of Richard Walker greater than the meagre financial cost of an agency whose annual

budget never exceeded eight figures.

The two prickly space-related stories which had caught the public's imagination within the last few days left Slater relieved to have Richard as something of a buffer. Beijing's formal announcement of plans for a permanently manned research station on the moon and a manned mission to Mars was bad enough, but the second story — the one that had broken only a few hours before Richard was scheduled to address the media about the first — dealt with the only thing the American public had been conditioned to fear more than China.

Ben Gold, Richard's right-hand man and an accomplished physicist in his own right, reminded the press that flash photography was prohibited during Richard's speech. A joker near the back flashed his camera in response, drawing chortles from some of his colleagues.

Richard Walker stepped forward and cleared his throat.

The crowd fell silent.

"Does anyone still want to talk about China?" Richard asked, his voice effortlessly resonant.

Laughter filled the press room, puncturing the bubble of tension that had been circling. Most took it as a self-deprecating joke, but Richard knew what he was doing. Like every other, this crowd was putty in his hands.

"Seriously, though," he continued, raising his hand to quieten the laughter, "there's no such thing as aliens."

Richard took a few seconds to meet the gaze of as many reporters as he could. They hadn't expected him to say anything else, of course, but his assured tone and relaxed eyes were easy to believe.

"I want to be perfectly clear about this point: there's no "if there was...". Okay? But if there was an "if there was...", I would know about it, and I wouldn't be covering it up. I have spent my life digging for truth, not burying it."

Richard glanced at his notes, which were single-word bullet

points. After confirming that the next point was “Consequences”, he quickly resumed his flawless delivery of a speech he had rehearsed only once.

“I was ready to talk to you all about China’s aggression, and I’m sure you were all ready to listen. The theft this morning was a distraction in itself, but the loss of my personal heirlooms, whatever their monetary worth, is trivial compared to the risk posed by what has followed. Because as risible as it is, this nonsense about Kerguelen and Toplitz and wherever else was mentioned in this so-called “IDA leak” is not the kind of harmless tinfoil-hat ramblings that some of you might think. Baseless claims like this can have serious consequences.”

Richard’s eyes flicked down to his notes again. The next bullet point was “McCarthy”.



Richard told the press that had he not already identified the source of the fabricated leak as “an alien-obsessed loner from right here in Colorado,” he would have assumed the leak was a well-timed Chinese ploy to distract attention from their recent announcement.

After saying that he didn’t want to give the individual in question the oxygen of publicity, Richard seemed to hesitate. He turned to Ben Gold, who shrugged.

“His name is Dan McCarthy,” Richard said, very suddenly. Every reporter in the room scribbled this name down. Ben Gold looked to the floor. “And from what we know about Mr McCarthy, I don’t think that what he did today was an act of malice. I would actually like to retract what I just said about him being an alien-obsessed loner. I don’t want to make this personal.”

The corner of Richard’s eye caught Ben nodding in approval of this retraction.

“The only reason I have chosen to identify Mr McCarthy is to put this issue to bed. If I stood here and said “we know who it is, but we

can't say," the question would keep coming up. And let's step into the shoes of our allies. If other governments believed for a second that we were hiding something like this from them, they would have a right to feel aggrieved. The less said about our enemies, the better. But I'm sure you can see the national security implications of not nipping this thing in the bud. Now, onto China."

The crowd began to murmur. Questions came at Richard like bullets, and the barrage didn't stop when he raised his hands for silence.

"What about Hans Kloster?" someone yelled above the rest.

"Don't you dare drag Hans into this," Richard said angrily.

"What about Kendrick?" another reporter asked.

"Billy Kendrick?" Richard chuckled. His expression changed instantly. The crowd quietened down to hear him out. "Do you know what? We haven't ruled out the possibility that Mr McCarthy has been duped and actually believes that the documents he posted are real. Which none of them are, of course. And if you're asking me who else I think might have fabricated something like this, then Billy Kendrick is as good a bet as anyone. Billy has been ramping up his self-promotion recently, and you all know as well as I do that the man never met a spotlight he didn't like."

Most of the crowd were smiling again. But one man, standing near the front, wasn't.

The reporter spoke out of turn: "But McCarthy's post implied that he found the folder on the street this morning. Are you suggesting that Billy Kendrick knew you were going to be robbed and dumped a fake folder on the street for someone to find, or are you suggesting that Billy Kendrick carried out an armed robbery in a government building? Because someone is lying here, and if you're saying that McCarthy might think he's telling the truth..."

The silence was real now; almost oppressive.

Richard tried to keep a cool manner. "Well, we know for a fact that Mr McCarthy had nothing to do with the robbery. Medical records tell us that he's something of a beanpole at 6'3" while the

suspect is at least six inches shorter than that. To avoid any misunderstanding on this, the police have told me that Mr McCarthy is not a person of interest in their enquiry into the robbery itself. You do raise a good point, though, and in hindsight I accept that Billy couldn't have known what was coming. You're probably right in thinking that Mr McCarthy simply released his "work" at an opportune moment when he knew it would find an audience. One other thing that might be worth mentioning at this point is that Mr McCarthy has been clinically diagnosed with Schizotypal Personality Disorder."

Every reporter scribbled this down beside Dan's name, spelling it as best they could. Richard suppressed a smirk; he knew fine well that it had been worth mentioning.

"Now, I'm no expert, but I've been told that people with his condition often have odd beliefs and paranoid tendencies. Perhaps that might manifest itself in thoughts like, I don't know, "aliens are real and the government are lying about it." As I say, I'm no expert. And one final, final thing about Mr McCarthy: despite working as a part-time barista, he's a talented writer. I doubt many of you will have read his article in Blitz Digest last year, but he quite imaginatively linked the search for extraterrestrial life to a lake in Antarctica. I only mention this because it highlights his pre-existing interest in the subject at hand and shows that he has the capacity to create fantastical stories with almost-plausible sources. Now, I'd really like to say something about China."

The same reporter who had grilled Richard moments earlier had another question. This time he raised his hand.

"Very briefly," Richard said.

"Of course. Leaving aside the source and content of the leak, do you have any comment on the graphologist at Yale who is willing to stake his reputation on the assertion that all of the handwritten documents in the leak were indeed written by you?"

Richard snorted. "Graphologist as in handwriting expert? Okay, I'll play. How many people in this room can name a handwriting

expert? Go on, raise your hands.”

Most of the reporters did.

“Now, how many of you can name a handwriting expert apart from the charlatan in question?”

Every hand fell.

“And how many of you had heard of him before today?”

They all stayed down.

“As I thought. He’s an opportunist, just like Mr McCarthy.”

Richard’s expression then changed, as though one of his own thoughts had just angered him. “And look at the time frame McCarthy is using. “Looted from Altausee,” he says. That was 1945! Even if it took a decade for us on the winning side to learn about this truth that we’re supposedly still covering up, is there really a suggestion that every president since Eisenhower has been in on this? Are people really prepared to believe that none of them have ever slipped up? That someone like Valerie goddamn Slater is capable of keeping a secret like this from our nation’s finest scientific minds?”

The silence said it all.

“And that’s without even considering the thousands of everyday administrators who would’ve had to cooperate with this cover-up at some stage,” Richard went on, incredulity dripping from the words. “Or indeed the foreign infiltrators and domestic whistleblowers who have plagued our country in recent years. Why would they ignore the biggest story of all time if there was even a hint of truth to it? It’s just not credible.”

Ben Gold, sensing that Richard’s frustration was reaching the point where he might say something even more regrettable than his comment about President Slater, deftly stepped in front of him to address the reporters. Richard didn’t object.



“We only have a few minutes before five o’clock,” Ben said,

inventing the deadline as he spoke, “so we really must address the China situation.”

Beijing’s recent proclamation that Chinese astronauts would establish a research base on the moon within eight years and walk on Mars within twelve had caught the whole world off-guard. And, despite Richard’s best efforts, serious American investment in space had died with the Soviet Union. The price of this complacency was only now becoming clear.

President Slater and the rest of her administration understood that cold economic reality rendered an unplanned space race with China utterly unwinnable. And everyone with even a passing interest in military affairs knew that control of space — the ultimate high ground — would mean control of everything. The celebratory scenes which followed the announcement in Beijing turned as many stomachs in Colorado Springs as they did in Washington, and it took every ounce of Richard’s political experience to present a brave face.

Richard patted Ben on the back and took a few deep breaths. “I recognise at least one face who was in this very room on the day we opened the IDA’s doors,” he said, tipping his head to the smiling female reporter who remembered it just as well.

“I was a lot younger then, and certain memories were a lot fresher,” Richard continued. He then deliberately traced his finger along the prominent scar which ran from the inside of his mouth and stopped halfway to his ear.

Everyone knew the story. Everyone had seen the famous footage of Richard, then an unknown GI, being wheeled across the airfield, high on morphine, with a smile on one side of his face and a roughly stitched gash on the other. Everyone remembered the unseen reporter asking how he felt, and everyone remembered Richard’s response:

“Well, I might not be able to whistle like I used to or drink through a straw, but I’ll be damned if I don’t find some way that I can still serve my country.”

When the reporter asked what kind of accident Richard had been

in, his eyebrows lowered.

“Accident?”

“Your face,” the reporter clarified. “May I ask how it happened.”

“You may.”

“Uh, how did it happen?”

“Two Vietcong and six inches of cheese wire,” Richard deadpanned. “Don’t ask again.”

45 years later, no one ever had.

Richard had never spoken of his incarceration, even when unanimously advised to cash in on it when his presidential campaign began to falter. He sometimes said “don’t ask again” after dodging a particularly difficult question, but that was all. On the rare occasions when he was asked about his wartime experiences in general, Richard gave a stock reply that many American prisoners had been much younger and got it much worse than he had, especially those held prior to 1969.

Because of this unbroken history of downplaying the scar and its origins, the manner in which Richard was now drawing attention to it took everyone by surprise.

Ben looked more than a little concerned, worried again that Richard’s emotions might take him off-script. Ben stepped forward once more. This time, Richard pushed him back.

“You all know about the successes and failures that led me to assume my position here at the IDA,” Richard told the crowd, his expression hardening, “but some of you may be too young to remember what I said on the day I took charge. And although much has changed since then, such as the hammer and sickle of the Soviet Union being overtaken by the yellow stars of China as the greatest threat to our freedom, my commitment to this office remains as steadfast as ever. Our nation’s well-earned national security advantage is something I take very seriously. I don’t care how many billion of them there are; the United States of America will not... back... down.” Richard thumped his podium with each of the last three words.

“So with that in mind,” he continued, “allow me to reiterate what I told the world back then: There will be no red flag on the red planet. Not today and not tomorrow. Not on my watch.”

Ben’s face now left no doubt that Richard had said something he wasn’t supposed to, and the fact that Richard began limping to the door immediately after saying it only added extra emphasis to his already inflammatory remarks. Ben stood awkwardly at the podium for a few seconds before joining Richard on his way out.

Reporters fired questions from all angles — “alien” this and “China” that — but Ben followed Richard’s lead in ignoring them all.

As the door swung closed and the two men reached the relative peace of the building’s main corridor, Ben voiced his anger. “What the hell was that?” he half-whispered-half-shouted. “I know you wanted a soundbite to shift attention away from all this McCarthy talk, but are you trying to start a war?”

Richard’s face was a picture of serenity. “Life is chess, Benjamin,” he said, and he limped away.

*McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO*

Dan McCarthy sat on his couch in silence, utterly stunned by Richard Walker's press conference.

Although the initial shock of hearing his own name had been tempered slightly by Richard's confirmation that Dan wasn't a "person of interest" in the police investigation, the whole thing was overwhelming.

After posting the contents of the Kerguelen folder online, Dan had spent a busy half-day at work looking fearfully over his shoulder. The police would be on his case in no time, he thought, or maybe even government agents. But no one had come, and Dan arrived home just in time for the press conference about China, feeling like he had gotten away with it.

Oblivious to the whirlwind fallout from his own leak, Dan expected to have missed the beginning of Richard's speech when he got home and turned his TV on. He smiled gleefully as his eyes scanned the screen and took everything in. The presenters were

talking in excited tones, with words like “Toplitz” and “cover-up” written in sub-headlines to the right of the main picture.

“Richard Walker is already five minutes late,” one of the co-hosts said to the other. “Is there a chance that he might be switching out his speech about China for an impromptu disclosure of something even more significant?”

Dan couldn’t help but wonder if he was imagining things or if he really had just heard the D-word spoken on a mainstream news network in the context of this kind of government cover-up.

Sarah Curtis, host of the Blitz News 4 O’clock Bulletin, pressed a finger to her ear at 4:18. “I believe we now have none other than Billy Kendrick on the line,” she said. “Are you with us, Billy?”

“I sure am, Sarah,” Billy said. But as soon as he appeared in the shadow of an arena somewhere in Nebraska, the feed abruptly cut to the IDA’s press room.

“It looks like this is it,” Sarah Curtis commented over the footage. “Richard Walker is about to address the media. Hopefully Billy Kendrick will bear with us for his reaction in a few minutes, but for now we’re going to fade over to the IDA for this historic moment.”

Richard then embarked on his marauding speech, grabbing Dan by the collar and dragging him through a labyrinth of emotions. First came the shock of hearing his name; then the relief that the police weren’t interested in him; and ultimately the hope that people would see through Richard’s overt attempt at a character assassination.

Dan’s earlier fears of being held accountable for some combination of publishing stolen documents and leaking government secrets no longer existed, because Richard Walker had just publicly denied that either of those things happened.

Richard’s decision to instead dismiss “Mr McCarthy” as a mentally ill self-publicist struck Dan as an act of desperation. And by focusing on Dan rather than the content of the leak, all Richard had really done was drawn more attention to the whole issue. He

hadn't quite made a martyr out of Dan, but he had certainly turned him into a lightning rod for the already captivated media.

As if to prove this point, the headline on Blitz News now read: "Source identified only as Dan McCarthy of Colorado."

Even Sarah Curtis, a host with more experience than anyone else at Blitz News, didn't know where to start. "Is Kendrick still waiting?" she said to someone off camera, breaking the cardinal rule of news broadcasting.

The feed cut back to Billy Kendrick as abruptly as it had left him a short while earlier.

"Oh, I'm here," Billy said, beaming so broadly that it looked like the wind had changed and frozen his smile in place.

D minus 90

*LEXINGTON ARENA
LINCOLN, NEBRASKA*

If anyone could relate to Dan's current position as the subject of a campaign of ridicule, it was Billy Kendrick.

Currently in the middle of a 52-date coast-to-coast speaking tour, Billy Kendrick was without doubt the most prominent UFO researcher of his generation. Billy objected to the "UFO researcher" moniker — clarifying at every opportunity that UFOs were only one small part of the picture, and a relatively unimportant one at that — but he always took care not to appear angry over what most casual observers saw as a minor detail.

*When asked, Billy usually described himself as a Disclosure Activist. Eleven years had now passed since the publication of his seminal work, *How And Why: Five Scenarios For Disclosure*, and sales of the recent paperback reprint continued to surpass all expectations.*

Never had Billy's work been more relevant than in the wake of Dan's leak, which caused the same news networks that normally

treated Billy as a figure of fun to fall over themselves in trying to secure an exclusive interview for his first reaction. Billy opted to speak first on Blitz News, who enjoyed a regular viewership larger than that of their four nearest rivals combined.

At 55, Billy's hair was already greyed to near whiteness, but he kept it short and fashionably styled. His facial hair was also carefully curated, with tapered sideburns and a fine stubble. Somewhat ironically, Billy looked a lot more polished in his fitted grey suit and white shirt than he had during his time as a respected professor of archaeology, back when he sported the ponytail, beard and jeans uniform so common among those in his new field of alien studies.

Billy still stood smiling into the camera, waiting for a question.

"Your thoughts, Billy?" Sarah Curtis eventually asked.

"Well," Billy said, "forgive me if I'm lost for words. I'm just not used to saying I told you so."

Billy's voice was gentle but authoritative — like a therapist, or a good teacher — and tailor-made for the radio show with which he had first found an audience. He moved into podcasting when everyone else did and now hosted a hugely successful podcast featuring celebrity guests whose fans followed them everywhere. Utilising the power of such mainstream crossovers, Billy had built a fanbase of his own. Dan McCarthy was one of more than 300,000 twice-monthly listeners.

With Sarah Curtis still faltering in her own hosting duties as too many voices fed suggestions into her earpiece at the same time, one of her co-hosts spoke up: "Hi Billy, Shawn Pike here. Are you telling us that you take the word of this Dan McCarthy character over Richard Walker's?"

"I don't know much about Dan McCarthy," Billy said, "but Walker has spent half his life lying for a living. So yeah, that's what I'm tell—"

"Those are not the views of Blitz News," Sarah interrupted. "Richard Walker has served—"

This time it was Billy's turn to interrupt. "Look," he said, pointing diagonally into the camera. "There are four other news vans parked right across the street. If you don't want to let me talk, you might as well say so now so I can walk on over there and your viewers can change the station to follow me."

Dan nodded at the screen, glad that Billy wasn't taking any of their crap. For once, Billy held all the cards. For once, the truth had a chance.

After a few tense seconds, a small disclaimer appeared underneath Billy: "Views expressed by interviewees do not reflect the views of Blitz News or Blitz Media."

"Okay," Sarah said. "But moving away from Mr Walker, what are your views on the content of the documents? It must have been a surprise to see your own name in there."

"That's the least important part," Billy said, echoing Dan's thoughts. "I don't want to talk about that. If you want to talk about what's interesting, what about Hans Kloster? I won't pretend to have known too much about him before today, but if the "Mr Kloster" who sent the requests to block exploration at these sites is the same Hans Kloster that people are talking about, then I really think this might be it."

"This might be what?" Sarah asked, back in command of her role.

"Pants-down disclosure," Billy said. His beaming smile returned. "The fourth of my five scenarios. I expected it to start with a whistleblower on the inside rather than the way it's turned out today, but I predicted that pants-down disclosure could occur if the truth found its own way out and the government was eventually forced to admit it. This is the scenario they've always feared more than any other, because the only thing a politician hates more than being wrong is being embarrassed. Just look at what happened in London a few hours ago!"

"Hmmm," Sarah said. "Richard Walker didn't sound like a man with anything to admit from where I was sitting."

Wary of being dragged into an argument, Billy opted to ignore Sarah entirely and say his piece while he had the biggest audience he likely ever would. “If we can get back to the point,” he said. “Someone who works at the IDA has said that there’s a picture of Richard Walker shaking hands with Hans Kloster hanging in one of the building’s corridors. Now, it turns out that Hans Kloster was one of the Nazi rocketeers our government recruited in Operation Paperclip. They tried to lie about that, too, by the way. Anyway, when we have evidence of a Nazi-era scientist trying to block exploration at two locations which we already know as the sites of suspicious Nazi activity, and when this evidence turned up in a folder that belonged to Richard Walker, right beside a note about an alien craft...” Billy paused for a deep breath. “Not to mention the names of two U-boats which we know for a fact surrendered on the wrong side of the world three months after the war was over! That’s what we should be focusing on: the evidence. We should be analysing the replies to Kloster’s letters.”

Sarah tried to interject: “But one point that we should remem—”

“And that’s the beauty of this leak,” Billy continued, unfazed. “For the first time, we have official-looking documents that are as verifiable as they are falsifiable. I don’t want to hear any more from Richard Walker; I want to hear from Argentina and Austria, and I want to hear from these Australian treasure hunters.”

“But don’t you think it’s a little suspicious that these documents are all printed or handwritten?” Sarah asked, repeating the lines she was being fed. “If we were dealing with a digital leak — something like a stolen hard drive or a hacked email account — then we would have metadata and creation dates. There would be a trail of evidence across different government systems. In short, the letters would have provenance.”

“It’s a fair point,” Billy conceded. “But Walker has spoken out against the inherent risk of trusting digital systems more than once. You know that as well as I do. Besides, the two government replies are from the late ’80s, and you’d have to be extremely naïve to

believe that all sensitive mail gets scanned on receipt.”

Sarah hesitated. “If you can bear with us for one second, Billy, I believe we have a positive ID on Dan McCarthy.”

An image of Dan appeared on the left of the screen. From his couch at home, he shook his head in disbelief. He had known it was coming, but that didn’t make it any easier.

“Is that him?” Billy asked, walking to the wrong side of the camera and looking at the cameraman’s feed. “Definitely?”

“We’re being told yes,” Sarah said, still trying to relay what she was told while listening for the next part. “Based on the name and Richard Walker’s description of a 6’3” part-time barista from Colorado. In fact, this has now been confirmed by our colleagues at Blitz Digest, where Mr McCarthy has written in the past, as Richard Walker said.”

On the screen, Billy saw a young man with unkempt curly hair and square-framed glasses that looked a size too small. Billy didn’t usually judge books by their covers, but Dan McCarthy didn’t look like a self-publicist.

Billy returned to his position in front of the camera. “I believe him,” he said. “Dan, I mean. Cards on the table: I think this is it.”

“Really?” Sarah said, only slightly masking her incredulity. “You don’t think the diagnosis of schizophren... uh, schizotypal personality disorder serves to, well, harm his credibil—”

“No,” Billy interrupted, a flash of anger crossing his face for the first time. “I don’t know what that condition entails and I don’t even know if he really has it. But either way, to stoop so low as to use it as a stick to beat someone with... I didn’t expect that, even from Walker. And I want to make the point that Walker is not just cashing in on the stigma of mental illness — a stigma I’ve felt myself, as you’re probably about to remind everyone — he is in fact actively reinforcing it.”

Sarah paused. Words like “sensitivity” and “backtrack” came through her earpiece. “Well,” she said, buying a few more seconds, “the thing is... I think Mr Walker mentioned this reluctantly, and

only to highlight the fact that we might not be dealing with the most reliable of sources.”

“But why do we care about the source?” Billy snapped. “I’ve put up with this crap for fifteen years: when they know they can’t deny the claim, they attack the guy who’s making it. What we have to concentrate on is this folder. Everything boils down to the folder, which is either real or it’s not. If it’s not, prove it. Don’t dismiss it; address it. Talk to Argentina, talk to Austria, talk about Kloster. Or how about Walker talks to me? Let’s see how his lies hold up when he’s not reading from a script and you’re not soft-balling him easy questions. We don’t have to keep talking about the kid. He’s done his part.”

As instructed, Sarah homed in on Dan. “Come on now, Billy,” she said condescendingly. “If someone is prepared to make these kinds of claims, then they have to expect scrutiny. And if Dan McCarthy is going to stick to his story, he’s going to have to get used to being questioned.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll see to that,” Billy said. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten about the intimidation and harras—”

“I’m sorry, Billy,” Sarah interjected urgently. “We’ve run out of time.”

“Of course we have.”

“Would you like to give out any information on tickets for your little show tonight?” Sarah asked, abandoning all efforts to hide the derision in her voice.

“Don’t do that,” Billy said. “You know I’m not here to promote.” He then briefly turned to face the arena behind him before looking back at the camera. “And hey, if you did your research then you’d also know I sold this place out weeks ago.”

“Is there anything else you’d like to say to our viewers?” Sarah asked, parroting the line through gritted teeth.

“Yeah,” Billy grinned, unclipping the microphone from his collar. “Change the channel.”

“Billy Kendrick,” Sarah said as she and her co-hosts returned to

the screen. “Such a shame there’s no one else like him.”

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

Dan's laptop and phone were chiming and ringing and buzzing like an orchestra as a tsunami of notification alerts gained pace by the second. His name used to be mentioned around once per week when someone — usually a bot — commented on one of his articles. But now that he had been identified as the source of the leak and his sparse social media accounts had been located, it was more like once per heartbeat.

He disabled all notifications as quickly as he could and fell back onto his couch. Though immensely grateful for the way Billy defended him, Dan couldn't help but wish that Billy had more decisively steered the conversation away from Dan and the personality disorder that he didn't even have.

Richard's chosen phrase — “clinically diagnosed” — was a blatant misrepresentation of the truth. Three years earlier, when Dan reluctantly accepted his father's well-meaning assertion that it was time to see someone, a local doctor had indeed identified STPD

as a possibility. But fewer than a third of the symptoms were decisively present, and both Dan and his father agreed that the doctor's conclusion came from an over-reliance on a glorified flowchart of ridiculously loaded questions.

When they sought a second opinion, the psychiatrist in Denver agreed with the McCarthys without qualification. Her confident diagnosis of a mild anxiety disorder — which she described as “half a world away” from the first opinion — was more along the lines of what they had expected. Dan's older brother Clark still didn't agree there was anything “wrong” with Dan at all, but Dan didn't let any of it bother him and quietly took the pills. There was no denying that they made his life easier.

Dan hadn't even heard the word schizotypal since then until Richard Walker used it as a thinly veiled slur. He had no idea how Richard could have found out about the initial misdiagnosis given that it was never officially recorded.

Dan's phone chimed and vibrated again. He reached out to shut it up but stopped when he realised that it was the tone for an incoming voice call. Dan couldn't think of any way that a journalist would have found his number, so it had to be someone else. He felt a surge of comfort when he saw the name on the caller ID.

“Clark,” he answered. “Where are you?”

“I'm still in Basra. Are you at home?”

“Yeah. I guess you saw the news?” Dan said, noting the concern in Clark's voice.

“Dan, this is serious.”

“I know. That's why they're trying so hard to discredit me. They'll say anything. Did you hear Richard Walker talking about STPD?”

Clark was quiet for a few seconds. “You have been taking your pills, right?”

“The one person in the world I thought I could count on,” Dan sighed, “and you say that?”

“It's not like that. I'm not saying you faked it. But what if you're

like the farmer who thinks the crop circles in his field are real, and then a week later someone admits to doing it as a joke?"

"But I saw the guy who dropped the folder! He literally bumped into me. He spoke. He had a gun."

"Did he hurt you?" Clark asked, more worried than before.

"Well, he knocked me over, but it wasn't like he was trying to hurt me. He just wanted to get away."

"Can you remember everything that happened? Did you see his face? Tell me everything."

"I was delivering a book near the IDA building when someone stole everything from Walker's safe. Ask Mr Wolf, he sent me. He knows I fell, too, but I didn't tell him the rest. Anyway, the guy who had just stolen everything came out of nowhere and knocked me off my bike. He dropped his stuff then picked all of it up apart from that one folder. It fell the other way from the rest of the stuff, so he didn't see it. The only other folder I could read said it was about President Slater."

Clark sighed through the phone. "And you didn't think to tell the police any of that? You just decided to put the stuff you found online?"

"The police are basically the government," Dan said, like this should have been as obvious to Clark as it was to him. "They would have buried it."

Clark didn't reply.

"Did you not hear what Billy Kendrick said about Kloster and the U-boats?" Dan continued. "Or what the guy at the press conference said about the handwriting? This is real evidence. Billy said this is really it."

"Billy Kendrick, Dan. The guy's a nutcase."

"When will you be home?" Dan asked, deciding there was no sense in arguing with Clark since he was one of the many who would only accept the truth when it could no longer be feasibly denied.

"I'm trying to switch some things around. Next Sunday at the

latest.”

“Nine days?”

“I’m supposed to be here for another three weeks,” Clark said. “I’m only able to get home so soon ’cause I’m calling in a few favours. Do you want me to call Mr Byrd to come over? You could stay with him, or he could stay with you.”

Dan knew that Clark couldn’t get out of his assignment at the drop of a hat, even though his private security work offered much more leeway than the tours he’d been part of before a respiratory problem ruled him out of active duty. But still, he had hoped for something sooner than nine days.

“I’ll be fine,” Dan said. “If they wanted to take me in, they wouldn’t have named me first.”

“I know. I just meant so you’re not on your own while all this is going on.”

“Seriously, I’ll be fine.”

“As long as you don’t say anything to anyone. I don’t care how hard they push you to comment... don’t say a word until I’m there, okay? Keep your guard up and your mouth shut. Do you hear me?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. I’ll be home as soon as I can. Sunday at the latest. I promise.”

“Okay. See you later.”

“Dan, wait.”

“Yeah?”

“How’s Dad?”

Dan paused. “I haven’t been in a while. They said he’s just the same.”

“Better than worse, I guess.”

“Yeah,” Dan said flatly.

“Anyway, like I said: guard up, mouth shut.”

“Yup.”

“See you soon,” Clark said, and he hung up.



Curiosity got the better of Dan before he put his phone away, so he looked to see what all of the people mentioning him were saying. About half of it looked to be positive, but the positive comments and posts were the ones with the most activity. The pros were more passionate than the cons, which were mainly one-line dismissals calling Dan a retard or a basement-dwelling virgin.

Dan had never had to apply the old adage “never read your own press,” but he decided now that it was good advice. He put his phone in his pocket.

Almost as soon as he did, it rang again.

“What is it?” he said. “Are you getting home sooner?”

“Dan McCarthy,” a female voice said; it wasn’t a question, and the voice was high pitched but powerful. “Who was on the line a minute ago?”

“Who the hell is this?” Dan asked.

“Emma Ford, XPR.”

“What?”

“Xanadu Public Relations,” Emma said. “I know, I know. I didn’t pick the name.” She had a fairly strong southern accent and spoke with what Dan considered an annoyingly chirpy cadence.

“I’m not going to make any kind of comment,” Dan said. Guard up, mouth shut.

“No no no, I’m not trying to get you to say anything. My job is to control what other people say. My job is to manage your brand.”

“Well I’m not a brand, so...”

“The media are going to talk about you even if they can’t talk to you,” Emma insisted. “You don’t have a choice in that. The choice you have is whether you would rather take control of the agenda or be a passenger in your own life. And let me tell you, I don’t know where this ride is gonna take you unless we grab the wheel right now. What do you say?”

“Bye,” Dan said.

“Speak soon,” Emma replied as chirpily as ever.

Dan turned his phone’s wifi off and put the handset into VIP mode so that it would block all calls that weren’t from either Clark or the hospital.

Sarah Curtis and the rest of the Blitz News team were still talking about Dan and Billy and Richard Walker, deliberately focusing on the characters rather than the plot. Dan turned the TV off and stood up.

At lonely times like this he felt glad that their house was so small. Dan never went into his father’s bedroom and had promised to stay out of Clark’s, so there was nowhere else to go but his own.

He threw himself onto the bed and looked at his aquarium. It was Clark’s aquarium, really, in the sense that Clark had bought it with the first of his danger pay to keep Dan company while he was off earning more, but it had always been in Dan’s room. The cold-water tank, designed for easy maintenance despite its impressive appearance, occupied half of the wall from the door to the corner of Dan’s small room.

Its most interesting-looking fish, who Dan and Clark had collectively decided was a boy-fish called Skid, had the weirdest looking brown and grey face that either of them had ever seen. Dan often thought that the first person to see one of Skid’s family in the wild must have thought they were looking at an alien.

But Dan sometimes also wondered how Skid must have felt when he saw his first human, and even more so how the first wild-caught member of Skid’s family must have felt when an alien invader in a diving suit arrived in the lake’s depths, shining a bright light all over the place and thrashing a net around.

This thought was in Dan’s mind again now, and the events of the day made it more pertinent than usual.

As Dan thought about the alien fish in the lake being disturbed by the human explorer, he also thought about the alien craft in Austria being destroyed by the human fools.

The more Dan considered this comparison, though, the less it

held up. Weren't the humans more like the fish whose home was invaded, he wondered?

Who found who first?

And who ends up in a tank?

GRAVESEN HOTEL
PARIS, FRANCE

Valerie Slater stood by the window of her Presidential Suite on the top floor of the luxurious Gravesen Hotel. She looked absently down to the city below as a steady stream of tourists and locals wandered by, moonlight catching the Seine to complete the picture-perfect scene of Friday night in Paris.

“So much for blowing over,” she said without prompt, as much to herself as to Jack Neal, the only aide who hadn’t yet been dismissed for the night.

“I didn’t expect Richard to make a celebrity out of the kid,” Jack said. “I don’t even think Ben Gold knew what Richard was going to say, and he never leaves his side.”

President Slater walked away from the window and sat on the edge of the king-size bed, pushing the mountain of decorative pillows to the floor with her arm in a rare display of frustration. It was bad enough that Richard had gone off-message regarding China, but his ham-fisted attempt to nip the so-called leak story in

the bud had been nothing short of disastrous.

In theory, Slater understood why Richard thought that diverting the domestic media's attention to a conspiracy theorist whose lies would unravel soon enough might have been preferable to leaving them to focus on the harder-to-solve China problem. But for all the world, she couldn't understand why he had structured his speech the way he did. If the goal was burying the China talk by focusing on Dan McCarthy, why end with such an incendiary comment about red flags? And if the goal was burying the leak by ending with the flag comment, why devote so much time to Dan McCarthy in the first place?

No small part of President Slater believed that Richard Walker, a 68-year-old political veteran with a machiavellian streak and very little to lose, simply enjoyed making her life difficult.

She had agreed to let Richard give the first official reaction to China's new plans for a lunar colony and Martian visit largely because she was in France and he was the obvious choice. The IDA very rarely had to deal with tangible threats to national security like the one posed by Chinese control of space.

Richard was popular at home — inexplicably, as far as Slater and the rest of her political generation were concerned — but no one abroad considered him a serious spokesman for the United States. President Slater had hoped that Richard's inevitably brash response would placate the element of the domestic media that demanded a stronger reply than anyone with real power could responsibly make. It had certainly done that, but Richard went so far that Slater would probably now have to apologise on his behalf; much to the delight of Richard and his cheerleaders, she imagined.

Even worse, the international headlines about an American cover-up of alien evidence, however far-fetched, were already writing themselves.

President Slater had woken up with one big problem and was going to bed with two huge ones, both of which had been made worse by Richard's alleged efforts to contain them.

Jack Neal walked towards the door, taking President Slater's sitting down as a sign that their turbulent day was finally over. "Try to get some sleep," he said.

"Jack, wait."

He stopped and turned his head. "Yeah?"

"Get me Walker on the line."

*STEVENSON FARM
EASTVIEW, COLORADO*

Quietly pleased with his performance a few hours earlier, Richard Walker sat in his kitchen with only his 11-year-old cocker spaniel, Rooster, for company.

As was usual for a Friday night, Richard was enjoying some downtime in his second home, the old cottage where he planned to see out his eventual retirement. Once known locally as Stevenson Farm, this property had been in Richard's hands for several years since he discreetly purchased it from a hard-up farmer for next to nothing. Richard now spent as many weekends there as he could, equally fond of the isolation and the cornfield vistas. Rooster, too, preferred the cottage to their weekday home in the city.

Only Ben Gold knew about Richard's idyllic second home. Ben had been awfully twitchy all day, so Richard was unsurprised to hear his phone ring. It wasn't the landline, at least; that would have been a real concern.

"It's okay, Rooster," Richard said, calming the easily frightened

dog. He picked up his phone without looking at the screen. "What's bothering you now, Benjamin?"

"Are you alone?"

Immediately recognising the voice, Richard grinned. He detected a pronounced weariness in Slater's tone, which caused his smile to widen further.

Valerie "goddamn" Slater evoked feelings of despair rather than disdain in Richard. He didn't hate Slater in a personal sense, he just hated living in a political world where someone like her could be deemed worthy of representing the United States on the world stage.

When Richard thought of Slater he thought of words like incompetent, misguided, and populist. She was nothing more than an effective career politician; a strong campaigner but a weak leader; a president who lacked both physical stature and political gravitas. To Richard and many others, Slater was embarrassingly outmatched by other world leaders, particularly William Godfrey, the British prime minister who Richard had just been reading about and who he admired for being able to maintain an air of authority even in the middle of his own full-blown domestic crisis.

Godfrey was among the finest orators Richard had seen in his own lengthy political career; erudite and articulate, he struck Richard as a relic of a bygone era when leaders spoke from the heart instead of an autocue. Though the two men's paths had never crossed, Richard envied Godfrey's classical schooling in the lost arts of rhetoric and debate. More than anything else he felt about William Godfrey, though, Richard felt relieved that he hailed from an allied country. Any leader who fell into a verbal spat with Godfrey would likely be humbled, but Richard knew that Slater would be positively eviscerated. The main difference between the two, as far as Richard could tell, was that Slater — like her recent predecessors — made pains to come across as the public's friend rather than their leader.

None of Richard's despair over Slater's position came from her

gender. She was the second female president, and Richard had been as friendly with the first as with any of the incompetent male ones he'd had to put up with over the years. Rather, the core of Richard's mismatch with Slater was generational; as well as being the second ever female president, Valerie Slater was also the second youngest elected president having entered office at just 42. As Richard dismissively said during Slater's campaign, she had less life experience than the scar on his cheek.

All of this made Richard loath to explain himself to Slater, which was surely her reason for calling.

"I'm a very busy man, Valerie," he said.

"Listen, Richard—"

"Mr Walker," Richard interrupted.

President Slater looked at Jack Neal, who encouraged her to keep her cool. She didn't say anything for a few seconds.

"What do you want, anyway?" Richard continued, satisfied to have knocked her off track so easily.

"I don't like this focus on the individual who posted the files," Slater said. "What were you trying to achieve with the personal comments?"

"Do I really have to spell it out for you? It's not my job to hold your hand and show you how the world works, Valerie. Don't you have Jack for that?"

Slater hesitated. She hated him. "Richard, I'm ordering you to refrain from making any further comment about Dan McCarthy. Is that understood?"

"Anything else?" he said noncommittally.

"One more thing. How sure are you that Hans Kloster didn't send letters about underwater exploration to any foreign governments?"

"What the hell are you talking about? Of course he didn't. McCarthy wrote those letters on his computer, added some crap about Billy Kendrick, then seized his opportunity to post it all when we had just been robbed. He piggybacked on a real story and it

worked. That's why I had to go after him. People don't care about the truth these days, they care about the story."

"But can't you see why people might find that a little far-fetched? The idea that he had all of this ready and waiting to post within twenty minutes?"

"Far-fetched?" Richard scoffed. "Compared to little green men? Hmm? Compared to secret Nazi discoveries? Compared to me covering the whole thing up, right under your nose? Come on, Valerie. Listen to yourself."

Jack Neal nodded to President Slater, indicating his feeling that Richard was right.

"So when do you think this will blow over?" she asked. "Bearing in mind that you won't be commenting any further."

"Three or four days," Richard said with confidence. "You see, a lot of what I said about McCarthy was the opposite of the truth. He doesn't really want to be famous. Why else would he have tried to post his fake documents anonymously? That's not what attention-seekers do. He'll probably admit his lie before long, and the media will lose interest when they realise there's nothing to see. I just felt it was better for me to talk about him before they had a chance, so it didn't seem like we were hiding anything."

President Slater had heard enough. She accepted Richard's reasons for naming Dan McCarthy and didn't want to give him the satisfaction of a rebuke over his China comments or his overt display of personal disrespect during the press conference. "Fine," she said. "Just remember not to make any further comment about McCarthy. I'll be home tomorrow and I'll take care of this as soon as I land."

"What are we going to do about China, anyway?" Richard asked out of nowhere.

"With the greatest of respect, Mr Walker," Slater said, sarcastically emphasising his name, "there is no we." She hung up.

Richard put his phone down on the table, almost proud of himself for baiting some fight out of Slater.

He poured a triple shot of whisky and slowly walked towards the kitchen window, looking out at the endless rows of knee-high corn. Rooster followed him and tried to see outside, too.

“You see those clouds, boy?” Richard said. “Looks like we’re in for a storm.”

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

After lying in his bedroom for a few hours, Dan heated up a packaged meal and sat down to eat it in front of the TV. He was glad to see that Sarah Curtis and her afternoon co-hosts on Blitz News had been replaced by the evening team.

Dan caught all but the first few seconds of a recurring feature called Blitz The Deetz, “a rapid breakdown of the hottest topics right now” which was more useful than the cringeworthy name and hollow tagline suggested. The focus of this episode, if you could call it that, was the series of locations named in Dan’s leak.

Though a little disappointed in the apparent lack of progress in tracking down the senders of any of the three printed replies, Dan paid keen attention to this feature. He hadn’t had time to do much research in the chat booth at the library and the coverage he had seen so far focused almost entirely on him and Billy Kendrick, so a brief rundown sounded good.

Billy had mentioned a few bits and pieces about “suspicious Nazi

activity” at Toplitz and off the Argentine coastline, but Blitz The Deetz provided more details and did so in a surprisingly non-dismissive way. Dan learned from the segment that Lake Toplitz had been the site of Nazi “naval testing” which included powerful detonations deep in the mile-long lake.

Dan knew nothing whatsoever about New Swabia and was intrigued to hear that it was already a much-discussed topic in conspiracy circles. New Swabia was a region of Antarctica named after the German ship that brought a large crew there in 1939, ostensibly to source whale oil and scout potential locations for naval bases. Many had long speculated about the true motives for the trip, their curiosity piqued by the fact that Germany made no formal territorial claims and established no whaling stations or naval bases in the wake of the expedition.

Blitz The Deetz continued, telling Dan with the aid of glitzy graphics and sound effects that the German crew who visited New Swabia conducted tests around Bouvet Island on their way home. Bouvet was another incredibly remote island, measuring six miles on its longest side and lying almost 1000 miles from land in any direction.

Dan already knew about the even more remote Kerguelen Island, having looked it up when he first found the folder. Continuing with a theme that was becoming unsettlingly clear, Blitz The Deetz revealed that a Nazi crew had visited Kerguelen in 1940.

The final location was Namtso, a lake in Tibet. By this point there were no prizes for guessing who launched an expedition into Tibet in 1938.

The next few minutes of Blitz The Deetz touched on Hans Kloster, the scientist who had tried to block underwater exploration at Toplitz and off the coast of Argentina. Dan already knew what Billy had mentioned about Kloster being recruited by the US after the war, but it now emerged that Kloster came from a lauded political family. His grandfather was a turn of the century parliamentarian and, though their father died young, Hans Kloster’s brother Wilhelm

went on to become a successful politician in West Germany where he was considered a strong future leadership candidate before his own untimely death in 1988.

A short but intriguing clip from the time of Hans Kloster's death in 2007 then played, in which Richard Walker described him as a "woefully under-appreciated father of rocket science" and "one of the most important but for some reason least revered of the German pioneers."

Several of Hans Kloster's newspaper obituaries were displayed, each of which quoted Walker's immediate description of him as "a titan of science and a patriotic immigrant". Kloster's Nazi past received no more than a fleeting mention.

Finally, the quick-fire rundown briefly discussed Ben Gold, understandably assuming that everyone already knew all about Richard Walker. Ben was a regularly published astrophysicist whose presence at the IDA brought legitimacy in an era when there was no accepted need for space-based weaponry and when there had been no declared progress in the ambitious search for alien signals.

Well mannered and uncontroversial, Ben was the go-to guy whenever a news network needed a credible talking head for serious stories about runaway comets, newly discovered planets, solar flares and any other celestial issues deemed worthy of a few minutes' airtime. Most of those who had known Ben at all prior to his appearance at Richard's press conference remembered him from an incident a few years earlier when he announced the discovery of Kolpin-6b, the most promising candidate planet for advanced life yet detected.

Ben's active involvement in the search for alien life made Dan doubt his knowledge of the cover-up. If not simply blinded by trust in his longtime colleague, Dan expected that Ben was perhaps putting on a united front in public while grilling Richard behind closed doors.

When Blitz The Deetz ended, an infographic with the title "STPD — myth vs fact" filled the screen. It proclaimed that, "where

present, hallucinations and psychoses are likely to be briefer and less pronounced than in schizophrenic patients.”

Dan didn't think many viewers would care for such nuance, and he knew that being dissociated from schizophrenia merely by degree could be fatal for his credibility. There was nothing he could do, though, so he rose again from the couch, muted the TV, and elected to do the only productive thing he could think of.

With a new-found determination, Dan fetched the folder from under his bed and lifted out the unreadable German letter. All of the talk about wartime activity led Dan to think that this letter might be from the 1940s. It would almost explain the stupid writing, he thought.

With that in mind he ran each of the letter's pages through his scanner and looked at the images on his computer, zoomed to a size that helped him identify some of the calligraphic touches as particular letters. The first complete word Dan found — aided initially by the umlaut — was, ominously, Führer. He then successfully identified a few more words from the first page, becoming quite good at spotting instances of “ein” and “eine”. Further progress was hard to come by, though, and Dan soon couldn't help but feel like he was running through treacle; getting nowhere despite applying himself totally.

Dan looked at the time in the top corner of his computer's screen and did a double take when he saw that more than 90 minutes had passed since he turned it on. He saved his annotated progress and decided to call it a night.

The computer chimed as it powered off, which struck Dan as odd, but he shrugged it off. As he walked to turn off the TV — now replaying Billy Kendrick's tenacious interview from immediately after Richard's press conference — Dan heard the chime again.

Doorbell, he realised.

Dan stayed still. In the unlikely event that Mr Byrd had come to check on him this late, he would say so. He usually called through the door.

No voice came.

After a long gap that left Dan thinking that the caller had gone, he heard three rushed knocks on the window.

"Dan McCarthy," the visitor shouted at the glass. The high-pitched voice sounded vaguely familiar but was heavily muffled by the window.

Beginning to realise that the visitor wasn't going away any time soon, Dan walked towards the door. When he got there he heard footsteps on the other side, and then someone lowering themselves to the ground.

"Dan McCarthy!" a chirpy voice called through the gap at the bottom of his door. He recognised it now.

After a few seconds, Dan opened the door and saw a smartly dressed young woman crouched to the ground with her head on his doormat. She jumped to her feet, smiling warmly.

"Dan McCarthy," she said, holding out her hand. "Emma Ford. From the phone, remember?"



"Why do you keep saying my whole name?" Dan asked.

"Dan McCarthy is the name on everyone's lips," Emma said, "and I'm going to make sure it stays there. So can I come in, or are we gonna stand out here all night?"

Dan shook his head. "Neither."

"Please? I really need a coffee. I had to fly normal class, and I hate flying anyway."

"You flew here?" Dan said, genuinely amazed. "Where from?"

"Vegas."

"You came all the way from Vegas since we spoke on the phone?"

Emma nodded. "Two-hour flight. See, I was at the airport when I called, because I was supposed to be going home tonight. I've been working in Vegas since Sunday and this was my weekend off until

you came up. Not that I'm complaining," she smiled. "This is big."

"Where's home?" Dan asked, not knowing where else to start.

"Well, I'm from Georgia, but home is New York."

"That's a long way from Birchwood."

"What can I say? I go where the action is. But speaking of Birchwood... where are all the trees? The name promised trees."

"The town is named after a guy whose last name was Birchwood. It's nothing to do with trees." Dan shifted uncomfortably in the doorway. "Look, I don't know if someone told you I would be interested in any of this, but I'm not. I didn't ask you to fly all this way."

"No no no, I know that. And I know it's late. By the way, you look way more normal than I expected. I was reading about the disease you have and it said—"

"It's not a disease," Dan said. "And I don't have it." He didn't normally make a habit of interrupting people, but Emma brought it out of him.

"Okay, well, people are saying that you do, so we should probably address that first. It is a strong hook, though, so there might be some merit in letting it sit."

Dan didn't quite know what "letting it sit" meant, but he remembered Clark's words: guard up, mouth shut. "No one is addressing anything," he said.

Emma stared deeply into Dan's eyes. "Just hear me out, okay? The choice you have is whether you would rather take control of the agenda or be a passenger—"

"No," Dan said. "I won't hear you out, because that's the exact same crap you were trying to sell me over the phone."

Emma looked around at the parts of Dan's house she could see: ripped doormat, streaky windows, peeling paint, a gap at the bottom of the door. The place wasn't in total disrepair but it certainly didn't scream wealth.

"Don't let this blow over," she said. "There's too much money on the table."

"I'm not in this for the money."

"Is anyone else home?" Emma asked, changing the subject.

"That's none of your business."

"Fine. But back to the money. Even if you're not in this for the money, other people are. And if someone is going to make money off your name, it might as well be us, right?"

"Us?" Dan said.

Emma's face strained in thought. "I don't want to fight," she eventually said. "Here's my card. I'm staying at the Gravesen. I'll be there until you change your mind."

Dan took the card to be polite. "I hope you didn't pack too light," he said.

Emma laughed. "Goodnight, Dan McCarthy."

"Bye."

"Hold on," she called as Dan started to close the door. "If we do end up working together, I need to know that you won't back down."

"We won't be working together."

Emma continued as though Dan hadn't spoken. "What I mean is: can you take the heat? Or are you going to crack and say you made it all up?"

"I didn't make anything up."

"Good," Emma said. She winked.

"No, seriously. I'm telling the truth."

"Yeah... say it like that. And do that face. Perfect."

"I didn't make it up," Dan repeated, quickly losing patience.

Emma kept nodding. "Just like that. Game face." She started to walk down the driveway.

"I'm telling the truth!" Dan called after her.

Emma turned round, pointing her finger at Dan and smiling. "Keep something in the tank, Dan McCarthy. We're just getting started."

Dan stood in the doorway wondering what had just happened. There was something about Emma that was just... exhausting. She

had an intensity that Dan couldn't place, and at the end of a long day he was glad to be rid of it.

He locked the door, tossed her business card on the floor, and went straight to bed.

D minus 85

10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON, ENGLAND

Long past midnight in London, Prime Minister William Godfrey's eyes remained glued to his television. Unlike in the United States, he was the main story here.

Both of the UK's 24-hour news channels had been talking about Saturday's protest march all day, only occasionally stopping to replay Godfrey's humiliating incident from Friday morning.

Godfrey watched as though looking at a car crash, unable to tear his eyes away despite the unpleasantness of the sight. He sat alone in the harsh light of the screen as the kind of Z-list talking heads who were called upon at 3am lined up to kick him while he was down; as studio guests made their gleeful predictions for the protest's turnout; as unprofessional newsreaders hardly even tried to hide their amusement at the humiliating images from Friday and the security breach that had enabled them in the first place.

It had been like this all day and all night. Snippets about the theft at the IDA and Richard Walker's ill-judged remarks about

China aired for a few minutes every hour, but the backlash against Godfrey's recent moves to begin a sweeping privatisation of the National Health Service remained the overwhelming focus of the British media.

Not a day went by when Godfrey didn't long for the easy out his American colleagues had on the issue of healthcare; he would have given anything to operate in a political landscape in which all it took to disarm anyone who got too protective of their free health care was to shout "communists!" and wax lyrical about the wonders of the free market.

"When we're looking at pictures like this," a jumped up student leader told the chair of the late-night discussion panel, "when the police are expecting a turnout in the millions, and when the country is bracing itself for a wave of general strikes, how can anyone sit there and tell us with a straight face that Godfrey's position is at all tenable?"

Godfrey hated it all. He hated the picture on the screen and he hated the layabout student politician commenting on it, but what he hated more than anything else was the lack of respect shown in referring to him as "Godfrey". His PR team had succeeded in replacing "William Godfrey" or "the Prime Minister" with the grander-sounding "Prime Minister Godfrey" as the standard term used by British media personnel, and he knew that this privately educated student leader understood as well as anyone that surnames were for subordinates.

Though the semantics of the name issue may have seemed trivial to anyone else, Godfrey considered it symptomatic of a society full of over-privileged and under-worked brats. Wherever he looked, he saw people who demanded to be heard but had nothing to say. But while Godfrey had made a career out of refusing to pander to empty vessels, even he privately conceded that he had bitten off more than he could chew with the fast-tracked health proposals.

While he would never say it publicly, Godfrey knew he had made a mistake. He had of course known that emotions about healthcare

ran high, but he hadn't quite appreciated how high.

What William Godfrey wouldn't even speak aloud to his most trusted advisors was that he wanted a way out; a way to back out without being seen to back down. But Godfrey had nailed his colours to the mast and left no room for manoeuvre, so finding such a way out at this late stage seemed beyond unlikely.

At half past the hour, when one of the British news channels cut to ads and the other was busy reviewing Friday's tennis results, Godfrey flicked to Blitz News for a few refreshing minutes of hearing about problems that weren't his.

Godfrey's eyes were met with a face he didn't recognise: a young man named Dan McCarthy. He shuffled in his seat and turned up the volume.

The Blitz News half-hourly bulletin spoke at length about this Dan McCarthy character and the documents he had posted online hours earlier. Godfrey had been briefed on the so-called IDA leak when the story first broke and had seen a few brief snippets here and there, but he had no idea that it had gained such momentum in the meantime. During this five-minute bulletin, the China issue — an international powder-keg which was patently more newsworthy than this nonsense about aliens — was mentioned precisely zero times.

Godfrey shook his head and smirked. It was genius.

President Slater deserved credit if she had put Richard Walker up to it, but Godfrey doubted she could have been so farsighted. Richard, on the other hand, was a man Godfrey had long admired and whose once-upon-a-time presidential campaign he had openly supported.

Unsurprisingly to Godfrey, Richard's party had tossed him aside in favour of a more presentable candidate and since left him to waste his potential on the three-decade vanity project that was the IDA. In an age where every utterance was combed through by the professionally offended, Godfrey understood why there was no room in frontline politics for an idiosyncratic figure like Richard Walker.

But if the media fervour over Dan McCarthy proved one thing in Godfrey's mind, it was that Richard still had the touch.

Richard had been around long enough to know that politics was more magic than science, and he had been around long enough to perfect the magician's most important trick of all: diversion.

Godfrey could think of absolutely nothing more capable of capturing the public's imagination and attention better than the idea of the American government suppressing evidence of extraterrestrial life.

It was the time-tested plot of a dozen movies and a hundred books, and as William Godfrey prepared for the most testing day of his political life, it gave him an idea.

He tiptoed through to his bedroom, careful not to wake his wife. The only reason Godfrey opted to sleep at all was to avoid total wipeout; he had slept for no more than four of the last 48 hours and had a hellacious day ahead of him, so he knew it was necessary to get whatever sleep he could before following through on his idea.

Godfrey looked at the time — 3:41 — and sighed. He lay down. After a few seconds, he rolled over and adjusted his alarm from 5:45 to 5:00.

Exhausted or not, he had a speech to write.

D minus 84

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

In the early hours of Saturday morning, while floating somewhere between sleep and consciousness, Dan McCarthy was startled upright by a loud bang.

Dan walked to the front window and looked outside, where the noise seemed to have come from. He saw three news vans parked across the street. A sliding door slammed on the gaudily painted Blitz News vehicle, making the same bang as before. Dan didn't know how long any of the news vans had been there, but the Blitz News crew were the only people to have exited their vehicle. Even as the Blitz News cameraman set up a mobile lighting rig and the presenter obsessively fixed his hair in the car's side mirror, the other news crews remained inside their respective vans.

Dan recognised the ACN logo on one of the occupied vans — it stood for Action Central News, perhaps the closest thing Blitz News had to a viable challenger — but he had never heard of the name on the third van. All he could make out from his angle was “Blue Dish

Ne”, which obviously had to be Blue Dish News.

The cameraman switched his light on, sending an impossibly powerful beam straight towards Dan’s window. It was like a car aiming its headlights straight towards him, so he instinctively turned away to protect his eyes.

Dan walked away from the window. Clark would have told him to ignore the light and wait for them to film their stupid segment, no doubt about it, so that was what he did.

Before he could even turn on the TV to see what they were going to say about him, Dan heard another noise outside, this time even louder. But rather than a bang, this was a voice. An angry voice.

Dan looked outside again and saw his neighbour remonstrating with the two men from Blitz News about the stupidly bright light they were shining on a quiet street in the middle of the night. The Blitz News crew paid no attention to him. Dan’s neighbour, Mr Byrd, briefly said something to the people in the other vans. They opened their windows to talk and seemed to be on his side of the argument.

The three vans were parked right outside Mr Byrd’s house. But rather than go back inside, he crossed the street towards Dan’s.

Dan unlocked his door and opened it slightly to let Mr Byrd inside without revealing himself to the cameraman.

“Since when did you have paparazzi?” Mr Byrd said, trying to inject some humour into the situation. He offered Dan his hand to shake, as was his way. Mr Byrd, long retired, had lived across the street since before Dan was born. He looked younger than his 66 years and had really stepped up to help out with things that Dan couldn’t handle on his own after his father's accident.

“I didn’t mean for any of this to happen,” Dan said. “I tried to do it anonymously, and I’ve been keeping my head down all day. This isn’t what I wanted.”

Mr Byrd had known Dan for a long time. He had seen Dan reluctantly posing for photographs on the doorstep before his first day of school; he had seen Dan wrapped up in a sleeping bag,

huddling beside a barrel fire, fighting to stay awake for a midnight meteor shower in the middle of winter; and he had seen Dan trying to tell Clark what happened in the aftermath of their father's accident. But in more than twenty years, he had never seen Dan look as helpless as he looked right now.

"I know, son," Mr Byrd said, pulling Dan in to pat him on the back. "So do you want me to call the boys at the station? There has to be a public nuisance law about this kind of thing."

Dan shook his head; the last thing he wanted to do was make a bigger scene. "Let me try Clark first."

Mr Byrd encouraged him to give it a shot.

Clark's phone rang and rang but eventually went to voicemail. Whatever was about to happen would be over by the time Clark got the message, so Dan decided there was no point in worrying him with it.

"Oh, great," Mr Byrd said from the window, where he stood peering out at the news vans. "Old Mrs Naylor is out giving them a piece of her mind. We're going to have to do something, son."

"Clark didn't pick up," Dan said.

Mr Byrd turned to face him. "Call the boys?"

"Give me one more minute," Dan said. He searched frantically for the business card he had tossed on the ground a few hours earlier. He found it in the shadow of the couch and dialled the number.



"This is Emma Ford," the voice on the other end of the line said, nowhere near as chirpy as it had been earlier.

"I know. This is—"

"Dan McCarthy!" Emma said. "The only man I don't mind being woken up by at 2am." Dan could almost hear the smile on her face.

"There are news people outside my house with a really bright light," he said, wasting no time on niceties, "and they're waking up

all of my neighbours and I don't want to have to get the police."

"Yeah, you definitely don't want to do that. Will I come over there and get rid of them?"

Dan hesitated, still cautious of striking up any kind of formal relationship with a PR firm. "Uh, I was hoping that maybe you could just tell me what to do?"

"Okay," Emma said, not sounding too affronted. "First of all, do they definitely know you're home?"

"Yeah."

"So I guess now you understand that keeping a low profile really isn't an option."

"Can you just help me to get rid of them?" Dan said, impatience turning to frustration.

"Okay, okay. Would you be okay with talking to them tomorrow? Just the ones that are outside?"

"I don't want to talk to anyone," Dan said. Guard up, mouth shut.

"I'll tell you exactly what to say. I can maybe even say it for you, as long as you're there. And we'll do it on your terms, wherever you want. It's either this or that; their terms or ours."

Dan looked over at Mr Byrd, who was still shaking his head as he watched the events transpiring in their normally peaceful community.

"So how do I get rid of them?" Dan asked.

"You'll talk to them tomorrow?"

"Fine, whatever. Just tell me what to do tonight."

"Okay, here's what you're going to do: you're going to go outside and tell them that if they leave now, they can have a world exclusive statement at 5:40."

"Why 5:40?" Dan asked. It struck him as a strangely random time.

"The breakfast cycle starts at 6."

A few seconds of silence passed as Dan realised that Emma meant 5:40 in the morning. He barely even knew there was a 5:40

in the morning.

“What about 8:40?” he suggested.

“6am here is 8am in New York. That’s the latest we can go. It’s just a one-time thing.”

Dan hesitated again. “Maybe this isn’t such a good idea. There must be another way?”

“Not really,” Emma said. “It’s quid pro quo. Those guys outside aren’t running a charity. They don’t want to be outside some guy’s house at this time of night any more than you want them to be there.”

Dan sighed and held the phone against his chest. “Mr Byrd,” he said. “Can you give them a message for me?”

“Sure thing.”

“Thanks. Could you tell them that I’m not talking to them in the middle of the night or the middle of the street, but that if they leave now and don’t come back, I’ll talk to them at 5:40 down at the old drive-in. Say it’s a world exclusive. Do you want me to write that down?”

Mr Byrd shook his head. “No problem. Consider it done.” He went outside.

“Who’s Mr Byrd?” Emma asked. “Have you signed with someone else?”

“He’s my neighbour.”

“Oh. Okay. So is he doing it?”

Dan walked to the window and pulled back the curtain. “Looks like it.”

“Which vans are there, anyway?”

“Blitz, ACN, and I think the other one says Blue Dish News.”

“Blue Dish Network? That’s not a station. They just beam clean feeds to other outlets. They’re pretty small fry. ACN in Colorado is probably Maria Janzyck, but Blitz could be anyone. I’m guessing it’s not Maria and her team who are shining the light?”

“It’s Blitz,” Dan said.

“Figures.”

"Hold on, he's coming back." Dan held the phone to his chest again and greeted Mr Byrd at the door. "How did it go?"

"They're leaving. Do you want me to come with you to the old drive-in? The media can be snakes, son."

"It's okay, Mr Byrd. I appreciate the offer, but someone from a PR firm is going to be doing the talking for me, anyway."

Mr Byrd nodded slowly, like he wasn't too hot on the idea of PR sharks sniffing around but knew that Dan needed someone on his side with expertise in this kind of thing.

"I'll be careful," Dan said, sensing the concern.

"Okay, well, you should get some sleep." Mr Byrd stopped at the door. "And listen, Dan: I know you too well to think you're making all of this up. But I don't want to see them chew you up and spit you out. Does any part of you think that this whole folder thing could be someone's idea of a joke?"

"Goodnight, Mr Byrd," Dan said.

Mr Byrd took the hint and left. The ACN and Blue Dish vans were already gone, and the Blitz News light was out.

Dan stepped back inside without showing himself and put the phone back to his ear. "Are you still there?"

"Yup," Emma said. "But he's right: you better get yourself some beauty sleep. These Ultra HD cameras can be pretty rough."

"You're doing the talking though, right?"

"We'll iron out the details when I come over," Emma dodged. "Will we say 5:15?"

"I guess."

"Great. See you at 5, Dan McCarthy."

"I thought we said 5:15?" Dan protested, but the line was dead. He shook his head and locked the door.

SATURDAY

10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON, ENGLAND

“I’m not going to say I believe the guy,” William Godfrey explained to a roomful of concerned ministers on Saturday morning. “I’m simply going to issue a call for openness on the matter. Maybe aim a few barbed words at Slater while I’m at it, to give the press something else to talk about.”

No one said anything. Eyes looked at feet, reluctant to meet Godfrey’s gaze for fear of wordlessly conveying dissent.

“It’s zero risk,” Godfrey insisted. His confidence of this was unwavering; even though the “special” transatlantic relationship of the early 2000s had been cooling for a decade, the Prime Minister knew that the two countries’ broad cultural overlap and their ever increasing trade links meant that no amount of personal animosity between their leaders could possibly spill over into any kind of hostility. In short, he felt he could say whatever he wanted about President Slater without recourse.

Finally, someone spoke up. As Godfrey’s Deputy Prime Minister,

Diane Logan was theoretically the second most powerful person in the room. Others had been eyeing her tentatively, encouraging her to say something against Godfrey's planned "call for openness" on the IDA issue. When she did, the message was simple: "Aliens? It's suicide, William."

"As opposed to what?" Godfrey snapped. "Death by a thousand cuts? Death by a million bloody latte-sipping sociology students with nothing better to do than shut down my city for the day?"

Diane Logan shrugged her shoulders. "Perhaps the last thing you need right now is more enemies."

Godfrey counted to five in his head. Embittered by prior experience, he had his own understanding of how the world worked these days, suspecting that any rebuke he gave Diane would quickly find its way into the papers under headlines about "sexist bullying" and whatever other buzzwords the outrage police wanted to pummel him with this week. Godfrey had been burned by that kind of thing before, and it really was the last thing he needed right now.

"And just think about how you'll look when they prove it's a hoax," Diane tried to reason.

"Why," Godfrey said, "because I look so commanding right now?" He picked up the newspapers on his table and threw them down again.

The front pages all displayed the same picture: William Godfrey standing stunned in the street with red paint splattered all over him. The so-called "blood drones" had been at it for days, attempting to drop water balloons filled with paint on Godfrey whenever he appeared in public. After a few close calls, they finally got him on Friday morning. The low-flying drone's missile had missed his head — a small consolation, at least — but the balloon landed on his shoulder, splashing flecks of paint onto his face and causing the rest to run down the front of his Italian suit. Too shocked to even rub the paint away from his eyes, Godfrey stood dumbly for several seconds as media flashbulbs went off to capture the image and a million internet posts went out to share it.

The blood drones were intended to be a protest about the health reforms, with the red paint symbolising the blood of the future victims of privatisation. As far as Godfrey was concerned, however, the populist media's jovial reaction to a physical attack on the nation's elected leader summed up everything that was wrong with the modern world.

The blood drones had returned overnight, leaving a message right in front of Godfrey's window. The message amounted to a coarse winking face: three balloons had been dropped in a vertical line for one eye, three in a horizontal line for the other, and eight more for the curved-line smile. These fourteen paint bombs presented the most flagrant and worrying breach of Downing Street's security in Godfrey's memory, but no one seemed to care. The fervour against his drive for "health efficiency", which he insisted was largely manufactured by the "antagonistic leftist press", apparently rendered him a fair target for the blood-drone piloting vandals.

"I think it's a great idea," a confident voice said from the side of the table. The voice belonged to John Cole, Godfrey's highly controversial Immigration Minister. Cole's BNU party — British Nationals United — had won a game-changing 24 seats at the last election and propped up Godfrey's Conservatives in a flimsy coalition.

Although originally formed as a single-issue party to tackle what Cole saw as an unchecked migrant invasion, the BNU soon opted to present itself as the true representative of Britain's working poor. Those working class voters knew that they would find themselves more affected by health privatisation than anyone else, causing many BNU supporters to feel utterly betrayed by John Cole's vocal support of Godfrey's plans.

Cole insisted that compromise was necessary and claimed the recent ruthless crackdown on non-EU migrants as a victory for his party. But with Cole's true colours having been revealed by his decision to choose a cosy cabinet position over keeping his electoral

promises, most of the voters who had bought into his slickly worded vision of “a fairer Britain for working Britons” now regretted falling for the spin.

“At least someone sees sense,” Godfrey said. He liked Cole, even though thousands of the protesters already descending on London were BNU members coming down from the party’s northern base. Godfrey was far more perturbed by the thirteen slimeball MPs from his own party who had announced overnight that they would be participating in the protest march. He could only hope that they would be stupid enough to try to mingle with the masses.

“It’s a mistake,” Diane Logan insisted.

“John,” Godfrey said, looking straight into Diane’s eye as spoke. “How would you like to stand beside me when I make the speech?”

“I would like that very much, sir,” John Cole said, like the opportunistic sycophant he was.

Godfrey smiled at Diane. “Excellent. Everyone else can leave.”

As the room emptied, John Cole walked over to the Prime Minister. “How hard are you planning to go at Slater?” he asked.

“Hard,” Godfrey replied.

An intense look filled Cole’s eyes. “You hard, or me hard? Because if we’re going to do this, we might as well go for it.”

Godfrey couldn’t help but grin. John Cole was a weasel, a chameleon, and a snake. Hell, he was every animal in the damn zoo. But what Godfrey admired most about Cole was his undying ability to generate controversy. For while Godfrey had spent the last few years quietly lamenting the rise of hyper political correctness, Cole had been busy defining himself in opposition to it, steering into the skid all the way to the House of Commons.

Put simply, John Cole’s uncanny knack for provoking controversy was the reason that this overweight white-van man from Sheffield was now advising the Prime Minister on what could prove to be the most important speech of his reign.

Godfrey leaned towards him. “I’m listening.”

D minus 82

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

At 4:58, two minutes before Dan's alarm was set to rouse his motionless but awake body to life, a ruckus outside beat it to the punch.

What now?, he thought.

Dan heard Emma's voice as soon as he opened his bedroom door. She was outside, arguing with someone on the phone, as far as Dan could tell.

"I'll make the call," Emma said forcefully, the intensity in her voice rising more than the volume. "Don't think I won't."

Dan opened the door just in time to see a Blitz News van driving away.

"Fucking parasites," Emma said, turning to face him.

Dan flinched at Emma's language, which didn't seem congruent with her soft southern accent and the sugar-sweet appearance she cultivated. He also found more than a hint of irony in a PR rep taking such a stance against the media, but noted that Emma

seemed genuinely enraged by something. "What's going on?" he asked.

Emma walked inside for the first time. "You haven't seen it?"

"Seen what?"

She sighed. "Blitz Online. It's probably better if you don't look."

Dan immediately walked towards his computer.

"We don't have time for that," Emma said, stepping in front of him. She took her phone from her pocket and navigated to the story. "Basically, they published a story about you and your family, with pictures of you and your neighbour from last night. That guy Mr Byrd. And I just found them back here again, taking photos of the inside of your car."

Dan looked at Emma's phone and saw a picture from the night before of him peeking out of his window. He scrolled down. Sure enough, the next picture was a clearer image of Mr Byrd.

This picture was the first Emma had seen of Mr Byrd. Instead of the older-looking gentleman with thin grey hair she had expected, she saw a well-built man with short reddish curls and a firm expression. "Some moustache, huh?" she said. "They sure as hell don't make them like that anymore!"

"Are Blitz doing this because we told them to leave?" Dan asked, for once more focused than Emma.

She shook her head. "No. Well, maybe. But I don't think they could have researched and written it all so quickly. It went up less than ten minutes after their van left."

Dan took the phone to see exactly what Blitz News had "researched and written" about him. A lot of it had no basis in fact, and the parts that did were heavily distorted. The article's unnamed author described Mr Byrd as Dan's "surrogate guardian" — a huge stretch in itself — who had to play such a role because Dan's mother "abandoned him as a child" and his father "was critically injured in an accident and remains in a coma."

"He's not in a coma," Dan said, tellingly ignoring the other part. "He came out of it two weeks ago. So much for doing their

research.”

Emma didn't say anything. Dan kept reading. Though he didn't appreciate the general insinuation that he needed someone around to take care of him, Dan took most exception to Blitz Online's comments on why Clark couldn't do the job.

“My brother is not a mercenary,” he said angrily, as though Emma was the one who wrote the article. “He had to go into private security. He got sick. And he would be here if we didn't need the money.”

“They have a narrative they want to get across,” Emma said. “If the facts don't fit, the facts change.”

The article's conclusion made the incredible jump that Dan had created a vast conspiracy to combat his loneliness. The final line of baseless psychobabble said that Dan's actions fell “within the broad expectations of schizotypal personality disorder, a condition which McCarthy, like many other sufferers, stubbornly insists he does not have.”

Dan took his eyes from the phone and looked at Emma. “Did you have something to do with this?” he asked, laying his suspicions right out there.

“Of course not,” Emma said, taken aback. “Are you talking about... because they're saying you said you don't have the disease? You think I told them that?”

“How else would they know?” Dan asked, too focused to bother reiterating that the thing he didn't even have was a disorder rather than a disease.

“How am I supposed to know how they know?” Emma fired back. “How did Richard Walker know anything about it in the first place? It must be on your record or something. And if Walker can get to it, so can Blitz. Trust me on that.”

Dan considered this.

“Look,” Emma said, “if this thing is going to work for either of us, you have to believe me.”

“You don't do irony, do you?”

Emma's face gave nothing away. "I know you probably think PR is a shady world full of liars and charlatans, and that I'm going to tell you what you want to hear. And guess what? All of that is probably true. But you have to think of me as being like a lawyer. I might lie, but not to my client. If I'm lying, I'm lying for my client. I'm lying with my client."

Dan didn't have the energy to dispute his position as Emma's client, but he couldn't let the other point slide. "I'm not lying," he said. "So if you're lying, you're lying to me. And you say I have to believe you — right? — but you don't believe me. So why should I believe you?"

Emma didn't respond. Helpless was too strong a word, but she looked far more beleaguered than Dan had seen her so far, even through the immaculate facade of perfect hair and makeup that he found begrudgingly impressive for this time in the morning.

"Okay," she eventually said. "Look me in the eyes and tell me that you found that folder with everything in it and that you didn't make any of it up."

"It's 100% true," Dan confirmed. "If I was lying, you would be able to tell."

Ordinarily Emma would have taken such a comment as an attempt at flattery; a classic application of the "appeal to ego" tactic that was so central to what she did in her daily work. But something about Dan's expression seemed unusually uncomplicated, like he really did believe what he was saying.

"And there's no way that the folder could be someone else's idea of a joke?" Emma asked.

Dan sighed, fed up of hearing that stupid line. "I saw the guy who dropped it. He had Walker's gold bars and everything."

Satisfied that she had enough plausible deniability to do her job well, Emma sent Dan to get ready for their brief press statement. "Wear something smart," was her only instruction. Dan went into his bedroom to follow it.

Emma took the opportunity to perform a quick survey of Dan's

house. After the way Richard Walker painted Dan in his press conference, she had half-expected to find a dimly lit bedsit with newspaper clippings about aliens all over the walls and pizza boxes strewn across the floor. The house wasn't much larger than she had imagined, but the similarities ended there.

Although Dan's TV looked around ten years old, the glass unit it stood on was spotless. The rest of the living area was small but uncluttered, and the floor — which looked like real wood — was so polished that it gleamed.

"You keep this place pretty clean," Emma said through Dan's door.

"The cleaners do that," he replied.

Emma walked towards the kitchen, exercising her eye for detail as she went. Although the place was clean and tidy, there were still clear signs that money was tight, as she had inferred from the outside when she first arrived. There was a caterpillar-shaped draught excluder beside the front door, for one thing, indicating that the small gap at the bottom wasn't a new problem. The kitchen door didn't have a working handle, either, and the lightbulb on the ceiling was exposed.

"Can I have a drink?" she called to Dan, looking for an excuse to nose around in the cupboards and refrigerator.

"Yeah."

Emma opened the fridge and found three neat rows of packaged meals, all in identical narrow trays with a sticky label on the cellophane. The labels were all branded with the same logo: Houghton's Home Fresh. Emma had seen ads for Houghton's before so knew these were the kind of meals that were delivered by the company each week. The service didn't come cheap. She took a glass bottle of expensive looking lemonade — again, Houghton's Home Fresh — and went back through to wait for Dan.

"I'll be a few more minutes," he said, hearing the bottle fizz as Emma opened it right outside his door.

Next to the door, she noticed a framed cheque for \$85 made out

to Dan. "What's with the cheque?" she asked.

"That was for the first article I ever sold. The one about Lake Vostok that Richard Walker sort of mentioned. I never cashed it."

"Why?"

"Because the cheque is worth more to me than the \$85 I could swap it for."

Emma didn't reply for a few seconds. She was getting a sense now that what Dan had said the previous night about not being in it for the money was more than a platitude. "Have you never needed the \$85?" she eventually asked.

"Loads of times, just never enough to actually use it."

"So how can you afford the cleaner and all of the fancy food?"

"Clark pays for that stuff. With him in Iraq and my dad in the hospital, he wanted to make sure I eat right and that the place won't be a wreck when he gets back."

"Does he make good money?" Emma asked, talking more quietly now that she was right beside the thin bedroom door.

"Not good money," Dan said. "Crazy money. That's why he's out there. But listen, I'll be ready a lot quicker if you could just give me a few minutes."

"Sure."

Ten seconds later, the chime of a text message notification filled the air. Dan's head automatically shot to his bedside table even though he knew it was the wrong tone for his phone.

"Dan McCarthy!" Emma called through the door, her excitable and chirpy voice from the night before suddenly back in operation.

"What?"

"How do I switch on this crappy old TV? Someone tracked down those Australian treasure hunter guys, and they're saying the letter's legit."

DRIVE-IN
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

Emboldened by the news that the folder's letter from the Australian company 3-T really had been sent by the firm's founder, Dan drove the short distance from his house to the old drive-in with a smile on his face. Even though the Australians didn't have the original letter from Mr Kloster nor a record of the address they had sent their reply to, Dan and Emma were both delighted with the development.

As Dan said: "If everyone knows that one of the documents is real..."

Dan was so energised by 3-T's announcement that he agreed without argument to deliver Emma's pre-prepared statement himself. He ran through it before leaving and agreed that it was a measured and sensible way to "open a dialogue," as Emma put it. The extra few lines they added to touch on the significance of 3-T's announcement made it even better.

They pulled up at the old drive-in to find the same three news vans that had been at Dan's house the previous night. At first Dan

was surprised that there weren't more, but Emma explained the basic concept that a story became less valuable to each reporter as the number of reporters increased. It was in their interests to keep the interview quiet.

The old drive-in had only actually functioned as a drive-in for seven years of Dan's life, but nothing else had ever filled the lot for long without going out of business. Because of this, even newcomers to Birchwood knew the lot as the drive-in. There was no screen, of course, just a desolate site that looked more like an abandoned car dealership. Dan had a few vague memories of watching movies with Clark, fighting over their laser pointers and toy binoculars from atop the small overlooking hill where other like-minded kids used to gather to avoid the entrance fee. That probably played a part in the drive-in going out of business, he reflected only now.

Dan parked his car and sat quietly for a few seconds in the dimly lit lot. "I'm not talking to Blitz," he announced.

"You already told them that you—"

"And now you're going to tell them that I'm not," Dan interrupted.

Emma looked out at the same Blitz News reporter she had chased away from Dan's house less than an hour earlier. "Dan, sometimes you have to work with assholes. That's just how it is."

"Maybe for you. What were you threatening the Blitz guy about, anyway? Outside, when you said you would 'make the call' if he didn't leave. What call?"

"I was just going to call his boss," Emma said. "Well, I was going to call my boss and get her to call his boss's boss. The ultimate threat would have been that we would freeze Blitz out of everything going forward, but I can't make that kind of threat by myself. And we made a deal, anyway. So unless you want to start a war with the biggest news network around, we have to do this. Just concentrate on the other two cameras. You can ignore Blitz if you want."

Dan was still shaking his head. "The deal was clear: they got an interview here if they left me alone at home. They didn't keep their

side of it. They published the photos they took right before the deal and they came back right after it. Go out and tell them the deal's off."

"Dan..."

"I can sit here all day," he said.

Emma stepped outside and made a phone call. Dan rolled his window down to listen.

"I know, I know," Emma said. "That's what I told him. But we did make an explicit deal with them, and they did break it."

Dan couldn't fault her for doing as he asked.

"Okay," Emma said. "And you're giving me the authority to tell them that? Okay. Bye." She gave Dan a thumbs-up, but the look on her face suggested that the call had been the easy part.

Emma then walked towards the Blitz News van. Dan couldn't hear what they were saying even with his window rolled all the way down, but the Blitz reporter was laughing about something. After a few minutes, a woman walked over to join them from the ACN van. She stood beside Emma.

Almost immediately, the Blitz News van drove away.

Dan stepped outside and Emma introduced him to the two remaining crews. Maria Janzyck from ACN was the only on-air talent on the scene and had fallen into quite an exclusive. Dan didn't catch her cameraman's name. The two people from Blue Dish Network were a husband and wife team; Trey and Louise. Dan would later learn that Trey had launched Blue Dish a few years earlier, hoping to fill a gap in the market somewhere between the big networks and the citizen journalists who recorded shaky footage of developing stories. Their two-person operation couldn't be everywhere, but Trey and Louise had developed a decent reputation as the first responders of Colorado's media world.

Trey looked to be in his early to-mid thirties. He had dark skin and an athletic build; not as tall as Dan, but more aesthetically proportioned. He did the talking for Blue Dish. "This is some secret you've dug up," he said to Dan, smiling as he firmly shook his hand.

Dan liked Trey right away. He turned towards Emma, gloating that Trey so readily believed him.

Maria seemed more reserved and businesslike. As Dan had already considered, this was surely going to be the biggest break of her career. Her faintly Asian features displayed a tension Dan could easily understand.

Emma explained what was going to happen: Dan would read out his statement and accept a few questions. He would answer only the ones he wanted to. Nothing would be broadcast live, and nothing that Emma didn't sign off on would be broadcast at all. No one argued. Dan couldn't help but be impressed by the effortless air of authority Emma exuded. At first glance she didn't look very imposing; she was blonde, textbook pretty, short and slender. Her accent had a certain tenderness to it, too, but an intangible "It Factor" made sure that Emma was always heard when she wanted to be.

Maria quietly but firmly made clear that Trey couldn't use any footage containing her voice for strict contractual reasons beyond her control, so Emma agreed that any questions Maria asked would be repeated by Trey prior to Dan's answer. Maria agreed, since it would be as trivial for her cameraman to cut Trey out of their footage as it would be for Trey to cut her out of his.

"Uh, I don't usually talk," Trey said to Emma. "Can you repeat it?"

Emma shook her head. "I'm working under a strict NPA clause. No Public Association. I can't be on screen in any way. And obviously none of you can tell anyone I'm here."

Dan made a note to ask her about this.

"I'll do it," said Trey's wife Louise. She climbed out from their van, where she had been doing something with all of the cables. Louise spoke with the same focused and professional air as Maria from ACN, unlike the more animated Trey who seemed excited by Dan's story on a more personal level. Louise was also heavily pregnant.

With the cameras and lighting set up, Dan read his statement flawlessly. The ACN cameraman put it on a real autocue for him, which made it much easier to look towards the cameras.

The statement was very straightforward. Dan explained for the first time that the IDA thief dropped the folder in a collision, and he succinctly defended his decision to leak the documents rather than take them to the police by saying that he didn't think they would take him seriously. He then said that he was willing to engage with the media if they kept a respectful distance, stopping short of naming Blitz but leaving little doubt over who and what he was talking about.

Dan ended by touching on the Australian letter, thanking 3-T for coming forward and urging any in-the-know government workers from Argentina or Austria to do the same.

After a few questions from each team, all of which were fairly soft and most of which Dan could answer without having to consult Emma, Louise asked Dan if the old drive-in would be a regular interview spot. Dan didn't know how often he would want to give interviews or statements, but he confirmed that this would indeed be the chosen spot whenever he did.

As soon as Emma announced that everything recorded so far was fair game, Louise and the ACN team retired into their respective vans to prepare their footage for immediate broadcast.

Emma stepped away to make another phone call, leaving Dan and Trey alone.

"This is real," Trey said. It wasn't a question.

"This is real," Dan echoed.

"So what happens when they eventually have to admit it? The government, I mean."

"Hopefully we'll find out soon," Dan said. He checked that Emma wasn't looking then leaned in towards Trey's ear. "Listen, could you get something for me without telling anyone? I can't stress how important that is. You can't tell anyone, not even Louise."

Trey nodded enthusiastically. His eyes lit up.

"And you can't ask any questions."

"Yeah. No. Totally."

"Okay," Dan said. "I need a little electronic thing that translates German to English. I don't want to use anything online or any apps on my phone... nothing that could be traced. They probably sell something like this for tourists. But I need one that does phrases as well as words, so it's not too literal."

"Done," Trey said, impressing Dan by not asking any questions.

"And this is more out-there, but there's a really old book about calligraphy at Wolf & Sons. I can't remember exactly what it's called, but I stacked it last week. Do you know Wolf & Sons? It's just past the bowling alley on the way into the city."

"I know the bowling alley," Trey said.

"Good. The book was still there yesterday afternoon, so you should be able to get it."

"How much will this stuff cost?"

"The book is \$40," Dan said. "I don't know about the translator, but I can get \$85 by tonight. That'll be enough, right?"

Trey nodded. "Meet back here at six?" he suggested. "P.M., this time."

"Yeah," Dan smiled. "Thanks." He shook Trey's hand again.

In Trey's eyes, Dan saw a look of total excitement mixed with desperate restraint, like a puppy staring at a treat and being asked to wait.

"Fine," Dan conceded. "One question."

"Is the handwritten thing about the spheres a translated extract of something else?" Trey asked without missing a beat. "Because if it is..."

Dan was silent, grasping only now what he immediately realised should have been obvious from the start.

Emma finished her phone call on the other side of the lot. "We should get out of here," she called to Dan, slowly walking over as she fiddled with her phone.

“I won’t tell anyone,” Trey promised, looking right into Dan’s eyes.

Dan flicked his eyes towards Emma and then back to Trey. “Neither will I,” he whispered.

D minus 80

10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON, ENGLAND

William Godfrey emerged from his front door to greet a small and impatient press pack. The first surprise for the reporters was the presence of John Cole, who stood next to Godfrey like a spare part.

None of the reporters had any idea of what was coming.

Godfrey's original plan had been to raise the British public's awareness of Dan McCarthy and the American government's supposed cover-up of the evidence he had posted online.

The first draft of Godfrey's short speech included a handful of barbs at President Slater, but John Cole had since risen to the occasion and suggested that Godfrey should not only go hard at Slater but also attack what Cole genuinely perceived as American hypocrisy over China.

Now, Godfrey held a new speech in his hand.

In their hour-long discussion, Godfrey and Cole ultimately decided to abandon the original plan of homing in on the headline-grabbing alien issue, opting instead for a scattergun approach

intended to hit as many touchy subjects as humanly possible. Both knew that even if Slater addressed almost all of their points when she responded, there was bound to be at least one that she missed which Godfrey could then pounce upon to accuse her of being evasive. As Cole said: "If we fire ten bullets, she can't dodge them all."

Crucially, Godfrey felt confident that he could make such a series of outrage-inducing statements without it seeming too forced.

A fourth-generation Old Etonian who openly described himself as "posh and proud", Godfrey had once been accused of harking back to the days of the empire when making sweeping statements about other countries and cultures. He hadn't shied away from this, boasting in parliament that his ancestry could be directly traced to a viceroy on his father's side and a line of admirals on his mother's. Even as recently as his first election campaign as party leader, Godfrey raised eyebrows on both sides of the Atlantic by voicing his desire "to return Britain to its rightful place as leader of the free world" during a press address in which he was standing side by side with President Slater's predecessor.

Given his history of making these kinds of "gaffes", which were in fact carefully calculated political moves, a three-minute rant brought on by the pressure of the moment wouldn't be seen as particularly out of character. Godfrey had even broken the golden rule of European politics on more than one occasion by mentioning the war, so nothing he was about to say would raise suspicion over his motives.

And really, the crux of the matter for William Godfrey was that he had absolutely nothing to lose. Even as the reporters aimed their eyes and camera's at Godfrey's front door, two workers behind them were still scrubbing away the last of the paint dropped by the blood drones hours earlier.

Godfrey felt like a prisoner in his own home; a punch line in his own realm; a jester in his own court. He straightened his new handwritten notes and thanked the press for coming.

No one would be laughing in three minutes.



“Dan McCarthy,” Godfrey began.

Confused reporters looked at each other, having expected a comment on the 3pm protest march whose participants could already be heard in the distance.

“That’s the name they don’t want us to say. We’ve had Assange, we’ve had Snowden, and now we have McCarthy. But just like the other two, the American government doesn’t want us to take him seriously. Richard Walker wasted no time in going straight to a character assassination, bringing up irrelevant medical conditions and assuming an even more condescending tone than usual. I don’t want to lionise Dan McCarthy or stand here and tell you that he’s telling the truth, but, well... what if he is?”

John Cole looked straight ahead and nodded along with Godfrey’s words.

“Maybe we shouldn’t laugh at this “IDA leak” like the American government wants us to,” Godfrey continued. “Maybe the only thing Richard Walker was right about is that we and America’s others allies should indeed feel aggrieved by the idea of the Americans hiding something to do with aliens. I’m just saying: maybe.”

Cole nodded again, but everyone was looking at Godfrey. None of the press could remember a prime minister ever saying the word “aliens”. There had been abstract talk of potential “extraterrestrial intelligences” and “habitable planets”, and even the occasional declassification of militarily recorded “UFO phenomena”.

But aliens? No one said aliens.

“I’ve been told in the last few minutes that at least one of the letters in McCarthy’s leak has been verified,” Godfrey said, “but I’m not jumping to any conclusions. All I’ll say for now is that I and many others in high positions have previously noted, in private, that

Nazi rocket technology advanced inexplicably suddenly in a period that corresponds with the dates of their expeditions to the obscure locations mentioned in McCarthy's leak. The only other thing I'll say is that over 65% of the American public believe in intelligent extraterrestrial life, so I would advise President Slater to be less dismissive of her electorate than Richard Walker was yesterday."

After a brief moment of silence, John Cole furtively nudged Godfrey's arm. "Say it," he muttered under his breath.

Godfrey looked at his notes and hesitated before the line that would light the touchpaper underneath his already flammable speech. He looked up at the cleaners scrubbing blood-drone paint from his own street and decided to go for it.

"Why should we automatically believe the American government on this issue?" Godfrey asked with more than a hint of contempt in his voice. "They lie about everything else."

Had the reporters and cameras not been fixated on Godfrey, they would have noticed the roguish grin spreading across John Cole's face.

"And as for their hypocrisy on China!" Godfrey chuckled. Now committed to the speech, he threw himself headfirst into a convincing delivery. "Do they forget that they literally locked Chinese scientists out of any kind of space cooperation? This was their doing, and no one else's. Who can blame China for seeking new frontiers? If we had the money, we would be doing the same.

"And speaking of space... do Richard Walker and the puppets who applauded his "red flag" jibe also forget that they are the ones who defiled our moon with a national flag? While we're on it, let's consider why they were able to go to the moon in the first place. Perhaps because they were so cash rich with the money they plundered from Europe under the Marshall Plan's indefensible terms? With our continent flattened by the fight against fascism, they arrived just in time to claim the credit and then proceeded to bill us for their help!"

Godfrey shook his head, selling his annoyance well. The next line

was another that came verbatim from Cole, but Godfrey put his own spin on it with some derisive emphasis: “And if you want to know how they get on in the wars they fight without our help, well, just ask Richard Walker. Cheese wire, anyone?”

Cole pretended to scratch his forehead in an effort to hide his gleeful amazement that Godfrey had actually said it.

“But as for Slater,” Godfrey sighed, bringing his voice down to indicate that he was almost finished, and being very deliberate in referring to the President by her surname only. “Whenever she gets home from her holiday in France, I won’t be holding my breath for a comment. She’s scared. That’s why she sent Richard Walker out.

“There are cameras in France, Valerie,” Godfrey continued, now being openly condescending. “But I’ve been in this game long enough to know that their corporate media will conveniently unearth a “hot story” about guns or abortion or one of their other wedge issues and Slater will dive right into it while pretending she doesn’t want to talk about it, just like her kind always do.

“I should point out that Slater isn’t the worst of them — even if she is where she is mainly because she ticks the right boxes for the diversity crusaders — so I suppose there’s a small chance that she might give this some real attention. That’s why I’m saying this. I want resolutions to these issues. I want a frank discussion about Dan McCarthy and why the American government is being so evasive regarding the content of his leak. That’s what I want. I don’t want an argument, I just want clarity and openness on this crucial alien issue.”

Godfrey thanked the press with a nod and walked away without saying anything else to formally end his speech.

Cole and Godfrey stepped back inside Number Ten. “What now?” Cole asked. “Are we going to watch the march to see if anything big happens?”

Godfrey shook his head. “We’re going to watch the news,” he said. “Because the big thing just happened.”

D minus 79

AIR FORCE ONE

300 MILES WEST OF LISBON, PORTUGAL

Jack Neal, already trying to process the news that the Australian letter was real, crouched down in the aisle beside President Slater's seat and handed her a tablet with a video paused on the screen.

"Five minutes ago," he said.

President Slater pressed play and watched in silence for three minutes. When William Godfrey walked away from the media's microphones and the video ended, Slater stared at the blank screen and voiced the only thought in her mind:

"What the hell is he doing?"

D minus 78

SIZZLE AND SPARK HAIR SALON
COLORADO SPRINGS, COLORADO

Dan kept his head perfectly still and his eyes tightly closed as the hairdresser applied a pungent chemical hair-straightener.

The “restyling”, which Dan knew was code for makeover, had been Emma’s idea. Dan didn’t really care how straight or how short his hair was but he trusted that Emma knew what she was doing so agreed without argument to drive to the salon after a few quiet hours at home.

Emma had spent those hours on the phone, in animated discussions over the potential implications of William Godfrey’s recent speech. Even if Godfrey’s efforts to distract attention from the day’s protest march were transparent to Emma and everyone else with a basic understanding of either politics or PR, his decision to speak in defence of Dan was a real game-changer. Emma’s colleagues and bosses eventually decided that Dan shouldn’t comment on Godfrey’s speech until President Slater arrived home and gave her own response. There would be little sense in Dan

saying something that could be immediately overshadowed, they wisely decided.

Dan accepted this reasoning. He made a point of avoiding Blitz News and instead watched ACN, where he was pleased to see Billy Kendrick being interviewed again. Billy agreed that Godfrey was playing politics with the timing of his comments but also made the important point that Godfrey wouldn't be making the comments at all if he didn't think there could be some truth in Dan's leak.

"I think Godfrey knows," Billy said. "Godfrey was born into power. Real power, not just political power. His family have had massive wealth and influence for generations, and he reached the top without breaking a sweat. If anyone is privy to the truth, he is. And he wouldn't be going out on such a limb by talking about aliens unless he knew the tide was turning and that persisting with the cover-up will soon be impossible. It will be interesting to see how Slater reacts, because Godfrey just positioned himself to take the lead post-disclosure."

Emma had then walked in from the kitchen, finished with her latest phone call. She saw Billy Kendrick on the TV. "How would you feel about meeting Kendrick at his show on Tuesday?" she asked.

Dan's head shot round, reacting to the question like a deer to a gunshot. "Seriously?"

"It's one of the ideas we have for getting your truth out there," Emma explained. "Kendrick's in Cheyenne on Tuesday, so it's only a three-hour drive. There's no pressure, though."

"Definitely," Dan said. Clark's "guard up, mouth shut" advice had been well intentioned and useful to a point, but Dan had seen how Emma operated — he had seen how reporters did whatever she said — and he felt safe in her hands. When it came down to it, Clark was in Basra and Emma was in Birchwood. That had to count for something.

Emma then told Dan that he had an afternoon interview and photoshoot for a major national magazine at Sizzle and Spark Hair Salon, gently hinting that it wasn't optional. Excited by the Kendrick

news and grateful that Emma had set it up, Dan didn't object.

And so he now found himself in the hairdresser's chair, wondering how much longer it could possibly take as two interested passersby crouched to the ground outside to take pictures of him under the low blinds.

"All done," the hairdresser said after what felt like forever.

Dan looked indifferently at his reflection, saying that it was fine. He saw Emma nodding more emphatically behind him. "How set are you on those glasses?" she asked.

"I'm not wearing contacts," Dan said.

"I mean those glasses."

"Oh. I don't really care."

"Good," Emma said. "We'll get some other options sent over."

At that point, Emma noticed the two people taking pictures.

"Wait here," she said to Dan.

Dan watched as Emma walked to the door and called the two people, both girls younger than Dan, into the salon. She asked Dan to get up and stand next to them, then took some pictures on the girls' phones. The girls thanked Emma profusely and left with a spring in their step.

With no need for words, Dan's expression asked Emma what had just happened.

"I told them they could get good photos if they let me delete the ones they'd already taken," she explained.

Dan didn't get it. Again, he didn't have to say so.

"I'm not supposed to be seen in any photos with you."

This made some sense to Dan, who remembered Emma talking about her No Public Association clause, but he saw a big hole in her logic. "You just spoke to them, though, so they know you're associated with me. In public."

Emma flicked her hand in an exaggerated motion to dismiss Dan's concerns. "They don't know who I am. What are they going to say, they saw you with a blonde girl in a black dress?"

Dan didn't have a comeback to that. "Why did your firm set the

NPA clause, anyway? Are they worried about looking ridiculous by being associated with me?"

"I don't make the rules," Emma said.

"But those guys from Blitz knew who you were, right? If they're pissed off with us for freezing them out, why don't they name you out of spite?"

Emma hesitated. "Let's just say that would be a bold thing for them to do. Have you ever noticed how Blitz never goes after anything personal about President Slater?"

"Not really," Dan shrugged.

"Well they don't. Even when every other news outlet was piling on during her campaign, none of Blitz Media's properties joined in. And you know as well as I do that The Daily Chat is pretty much the most low brow "newspaper" out there. It's nothing to do with political bias, it's just that there are people on Slater's side who the top brass at Blitz really can't afford to piss off."

Dan was shaking his head. "That's not how it works. Blitz is huge. Think how many different media properties they own... there's no way so many staff could all be on the same page, all the time."

Emma couldn't help but smile at Dan telling her how the politics of the media did and didn't work. "It's pretty simple: when an editorial diktat comes from the top, it goes all the way down."

"So what power do Slater's people have over Blitz? What's the dirt?"

"Do you remember all the drama in London when media people went to court and a major newspaper had to close? Well, Blitz has done things way worse than phone hacking. It's the kind of thing it's better for you not to know, but Blitz Media as a corporation wouldn't survive if it came out."

"So how come you know?"

"My old boss dug most of it up," Emma said. "He had a client who Blitz were harassing like you wouldn't believe, and he found hard evidence of some of their tactics."

“What happened then?”

Emma gave a knowing grin. “Blitz stopped harassing the client.”

“But surely your boss had to tell someone if he caught them doing something illegal?”

“This is why it’s better for you not to know,” Emma said.

“But if someone did something wrong...”

“Dan, this is the real world. And success in this business, more than any other, always boils down to who knows what about who. If you know something about someone that they don’t want anyone else to know, then that knowledge is currency. Right and wrong, truth and lies... things like that come and go, but secrets make the world go round.”

“But still, if Blitz know that you know whatever it is that you know, why is the hit piece they wrote about me still online?”

“You’re fair game,” Emma said. “I can’t promise that they won’t keep attacking you, I’m just saying that they know better than to drag me into it. And they know I know better than to dig up old secrets. No one is going to fire the first nuke, because by the time it lands... well, you know how it goes. No one comes out smiling.”

Dan didn’t know how it went, and he was glad of that, realising now that Emma had a much more stressful job than he’d been giving her credit for. She excused herself to answer a call, which sounded like the interviewers promising that they would be there soon.

Having already been in the salon for the longest hour of his life, Dan couldn’t wait to get it over with. Emma had taken his measurements before they left the house and passed them on to the magazine, which she told him fell into the “lifestyle and fashion” genre. Dan rolled his eyes at this.

Emma explained that his physical appearance mattered “because the world sees you before it hears you.” As Dan quietly accepted that, it raised a question in Emma’s mind: “You know these aliens you believe in? If they are actually real, do you think we’ll see them before we hear them?”

"I hope not," Dan said.

"Why?"

"Because contact is better than invasion."

DRIVE-IN
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

“Looks like our monopoly just ran out,” Maria Janzyck said, calling over to Trey as he worked on footage in the back of his van.

Trey climbed out to hear what she was saying, but the only sound he heard came from the convoy of five vehicles entering the drive-in lot. He then watched quietly as a small army of camera crews and snazzily dressed reporters positioned themselves to shoot their reports. They didn’t stick around.

“I thought they’d stay,” Trey said.

Maria walked over to him. “Others will. Have you ever covered a big school shooting?”

“No.”

“But you know what the coverage is like, right? They come in like flies. We come in like flies. The whole town turns into a media city for days, and that’s for something that happens every six months. If this story doesn’t fall apart soon, it’s going to be the biggest thing anyone’s ever seen.”

Trey didn't say anything.

"We lucked out getting here first," Maria continued, "but the bigger fish are coming."

D minus 76

SIZZLE AND SPARK HAIR SALON
COLORADO SPRINGS, COLORADO

A staff of four arrived through the salon's front door with two cameras and a trolley full of outfits. They all shook Dan's hand. He smiled politely until he noticed the logo on their cameras.

"Blitz?" he said, turning to Emma. "Is this a joke?"

"They're independent," Emma said.

"Yeah," one of the magazine's staff chimed in. "It was just a corporate restructuring. We're run as a separate company exactly like we were before the buyout."

Emma was nodding. "See? And even if they weren't, it's not like they're Blitz News."

"The money all ends up in the same place," Dan said.

"Excuse us for one moment," Emma said to the magazine's staff with a forced smile. She pulled Dan into the corner. "I know you don't like Blitz, okay? We've established that. But we have to pick our battles."

"Fine," Dan shrugged. "I'm picking this one."

“Over the other one? Over the one that’s the whole reason we’re doing any of this? You’re picking a grudge over the cover-up? I know this is the worst thing to say to someone who’s being stubborn, but Dan... seriously... you need to stop being so stubborn.”

“It’s not about being stubborn,” Dan said. “It’s about integrity.”

Emma closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths, as if she was trying to stop herself from saying something. Eventually she looked back up at Dan. “I can’t help you if you won’t help yourself,” she said calmly. “So I need you to make a decision right now. Do you want to be a diva or do you want to be a man?”

“There are other magazines,” Dan said flatly.

Emma looked at him for an uncomfortably long time then turned away. “It’s off,” she told the magazine’s staff. “Leave the clothes. The firm will take care of the expenses.”

Once the staff had left without saying a word, Emma sat down and got to work on trying to find another magazine at such short notice. She said nothing to Dan. Within a few minutes, her phone rang.

“My boss,” she said, smiling sarcastically. “This should be fun.”

Dan then listened to Emma apologise for what had happened and insist that she couldn’t force Dan to talk to anyone he didn’t want to. He took no pleasure in seeing and hearing her like this, a scolded child compared to the powerful woman he had seen dealing with everyone else.

“You don’t need to send another rep,” she said, almost pleadingly, before her manner shifted quickly towards defensive aggression. “Nikki? Where was Nikki when I was flying out here at five minutes notice? No, no, you listen to me. Dan McCarthy is my client. Why don’t you ask him if he wants someone else instead of the rep who was there for him when Blitz wouldn’t leave his house in the middle of the night? I think I know what he’ll say.” Emma hung up and looked at the floor.

Her phone chimed and buzzed almost immediately. She read the text and relayed the gist of it to Dan: “A fashion blogger is coming in

five minutes. Hardly a national magazine, but it'll do. She has a few million followers, so at least it's something."

Dan didn't say anything.



A very young woman arrived within minutes, as expected. Her appearance was more understated than Dan would have pictured for a fashion blogger, and she had only her phone as both a camera and a note-taking device.

Emma explained that the feature was going to include questions about Dan as well as comments on the clothes that the magazine staff had procured. "It's \$2,000, non-negotiable," she said. "And I have final edit."

The blogger, awed by the range and quality of the outfits and positive that this feature would attract her biggest ever audience by far, agreed immediately.

Dan dissociated from the whole thing as he posed in outfit after outfit. He refused point-blank to wear a few of the most gaudy but was generally agreeable. Emma played the role of interviewer while Dan changed between outfits, which kept him from dying of boredom. The blogger typed his answers into her phone.

Annoyingly for Dan, none of Emma's questions were about the leak. At first the personal questions were tame, but she caught Dan by surprise as he changed into the fourth outfit. "What can you tell us about your diagnosis?" she asked.

"I told you last night," Dan said.

"I just think you should say something publicly. You saw what Blitz said online this morning. If you don't fill in the gaps, they will."

The blogger sat poised to record Dan's response.

"Okay," Dan said. "It wasn't a real diagnosis. My dad took me to see a doctor in Birchwood and they made a misdiagnosis. I guess that's what happens when a small-town doctor thinks he can play

psychiatrist on the weekends. The real psychiatrist I saw said it was definitely a misdiagnosis, and that's the whole story. Richard Walker either lied about it or was badly misinformed. The real psychiatrist said I had a mild anxiety thing which might not even be permanent. She prescribed some pills, which I still take, and that was it. Is that enough for you?"

"So you don't hear voices?" Emma asked.

"This is why I wish someone else had found the folder," Dan said. "I'm never going to shake this off." He sighed and shook his head at the ground. "Why couldn't it have been someone who wasn't so easy to discredit?"

Emma looked at the blogger and gave a thumbs up; this was too good not to use. "But hardly anyone else would have done what you did," she said. "I wouldn't. If it had been me who the thief ran into, I would have run the other way. But anyway, about the voices..."

Dan couldn't be sure how much of Emma's questioning was for the feature and how much was to satisfy her own curiosity. He knew she had final edit on the feature, though, so nothing her professional opinion deemed damaging would make it in.

"No voices," he said. "I told the first doctor that I sometimes hear thoughts as if they're spoken, but that I know they're not an actual voice. He took that as a symptom of STPD because that's what he'd already decided I had. Then he said I had "vague and over-elaborate speech", which was straight from the flow chart he was using. I'm not exaggerating: he was literally looking at a flow chart on his computer and asking me a bunch of loaded questions. He based his diagnosis on crap like that."

"What else did he base it on?" Emma prodded.

Dan answered without pause, now openly venting. "I said I sometimes have dreams where I'm looking down at myself, or looking at myself from the side, like I'm outside of my body. But how is that any weirder than having dreams where your teeth fall out, like other people have? The other things were "an over-focus on solitary activities" and "living internally", which aren't

symptoms of anything. When we were growing up I thought my brother was weird because it was like he didn't think about anything and just lived in an external world, always lifting weights and going out talking to people. And he thought I was weird for making websites and staying in my room."

"What kind of websites?" Emma asked.

Dan shrugged. "Just, like, conspiracies and stuff."

Emma turned to the blogger, who was typing everything on her phone but had been forbidden from recording the audio. "Leave that part out," she said. "Just put writing code and staying in my room."

"But I've never written any code in my li—"

"Just put that," Emma repeated, ignoring Dan's complaint.

"Okay," the blogger said. "I think we're ready for the next shoot."

"One more question," Emma said. "You were 18 when you got this misdiagnosis, right? So why did your dad suddenly decide so late that you should see a doctor?"

"My uncle shot himself in the throat," Dan said.

The blogger looked at Emma for permission to type this. She got it.

"And they didn't have any mental health stuff when my dad was at school like they do now," Dan went on, "so he started to worry about me. He thought I was too quiet. I dunno, depressed, maybe. I wasn't. 100%... I wasn't. We never talked much about anything, but especially stuff like that. Anyway, he said if I was going to live in his house then I was going to talk to the doctor. But Clark didn't want me to go because he said that they would turn my quirks into symptoms. That's what he said. He said "quirks don't sell drugs, so they'll turn them into symptoms and convince you that you need whatever they're selling." And as soon as we went, my dad wished that he'd listened to Clark. He wasn't ashamed of me or anything, and when he looked at the symptoms that people with actual STPD have, he knew I didn't have it. He just felt guilty for pushing me into

it because he knew it would be a stigma. Because that's the thing with labels: they're sticky. You know what the media are like with mental health; we've already seen it. You're either perfect or you're crazy. There's no in-between."

"I think we should publish all of that," Emma said. "People relate to human stories. And it doesn't matter if it's only an interview on a fashion blog; every news outlet will pick up whatever you say. This way it doesn't sound like you're being defensive by issuing press releases and making public statements. This feels organic. Authentic."

"Are you not going to ask me about the leak, though?" Dan said.

"This article is about you," Emma emphasised. "The leak is news in its own right, and everyone is talking about it anyway. The point of this is to flesh you out as a relatable guy who people can get behind."

Dan nodded indifferently. He respected how Emma could maintain such a laser-like focus on business, but part of him just wanted to talk about aliens.

The photoshoot concluded after two more outfits. The blogger agreed to send Emma a draft of the feature as soon as it was ready so that Emma could make the necessary edits.

Emma and the blogger then held their phones close together until the \$2,000 feature charge transferred over to Emma's account. The blogger left after saying thanks to Dan, which was the first word she had spoken directly to him since hello.



Dan understood the practicalities of why the money went to Emma's account first, and he accepted that she had set the interview up and wouldn't be working for free. He didn't know the going rate for PR reps or agents or whatever kind of role Emma was playing, so he asked her straight up: "What's your fee?"

"My fee?" Emma said, gathering up the designer clothes that

apparently now belonged to Dan.

“Yeah. What percentage do you keep?”

“A hundred,” she said, deadpan.

Dan smiled, like he was waiting for the punch line.

“Do you know how much you’d be paying me per hour if you’d come to us?” Emma asked.

“But I didn’t,” Dan said. “You came to me.”

“Which is why you’re getting this for free. But that doesn’t mean that we pay you.”

“I just thought...”

“Look, Dan. You seem like a nice enough guy, so I’m going to be as clear as I can here. We’re on the same side for different reasons, okay? We both want people to believe you for as long as possible. Your reasons are your reasons, and you’re entitled to them, but I’m at work right now. This is my job. I’m getting paid for this, but if there’s no return on what I’m doing then the firm will call me back to go somewhere else. This two grand goes straight to the firm, and it won’t even cover half of these clothes. When we get you on real TV shows, the firm will get the money it needs and you’ll get the audience you need. See how it works? Win-win.”

“And then what?” Dan said. “You just move on to the next thing as soon as you’ve milked everything you can out of me?”

Emma sighed. “I can’t promise how much longer I’ll be here; it depends how things go. All I can promise is that while I am here, I’m going to do everything I can to make sure people believe you. I’m going to do that by getting your truth in front of as many different people as I can and by protecting you from people who are trying to prove you wrong. That’s what I’m doing. That’s what this is.”

“Why do you always say your truth instead of the truth?” Dan asked, picking up on the thing he could most easily find fault with. Emma had just shattered any illusions that her motives were pure, but at least they were now clear.

“The truth’s a difficult thing,” Emma said. “I’ve spent nine years in this business and I relearn that every single day. But usually our

clients don't even believe their own stories, they just want us to convince everyone else. I know this is different."

"How old are you, anyway?" Dan asked. Nine years seemed too long for Emma to have been in any kind of business, and her "I know this is different" line had successfully slain his brief anger. He was already tired of not being believed, but Emma's obvious proficiency in her work was bound to increase the chances of other people believing him, so Dan was willing to overlook her own doubts.

"I'm 31," she said. "Or 25. It depends who asks."

Dan grinned. He helped Emma load the clothes into his car, and after a few minutes asked her when she thought President Slater might respond to Godfrey's comments.

"The second she touches down," Emma said. "No question. And then you'll respond tomorrow. It's best to let the world sleep on it and see if Godfrey responds again when it's morning in London. The firm wants you to do a little panel show tomorrow evening. It's not live, and it's filmed in New York, so you'll be doing it via satellite and I'll be right beside you. The show has nothing to do with Blitz and the questions will be strictly about the issues, not about you. It's a current affairs show and your leak is one of the topics they're focusing on. We'll go over everything tomorrow, on the way."

"Where do we have to go?" Dan asked. He liked the sound of it.

"The studio is in Amarillo. You don't have to drive, obviously; the firm are sending a car."

"We're driving to Amarillo? That'll take longer than it would to fly to New York! Are your firm really that cheap?"

"Seven hours max," Emma said. "It was my decision, and it was nothing to do with money. A) I don't like flying, and B) driving is a lot more private."

"But you literally just flew here from Vegas," Dan said. "And you just flew there from New York."

"Those are the only two flights I've been on in the last five years. I told you: my work is in New York. The only flight I plan on taking

any time soon is when I go back, which will be for good. Vegas was a one-off when the firm needed me to go at short notice, and it was the same coming here. Well, this was extra short notice.”

Dan didn’t say anything.

“If you want to fly to New York, we’ll fly to New York,” Emma sighed, making her feelings clear. “Or you could fly to Amarillo and I’ll meet you there, because I definitely think it’ll be easier for you to do it via satellite than in the studio. Otherwise I won’t be by your side. I pushed for the network to let us do it somewhere in Colorado but they said it has to be one of their studios. So it’s your call: fly to New York or fly or drive to Amarillo.”

“We’ll drive,” Dan decided after a few seconds. “It’s not like I have plans.”

“Thanks. And like I said, it gives us time to go over everything on the way.”

“So I guess that means I have tonight off?” Dan asked with a slight laugh.

“Don’t rub it in,” Emma said. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

“Do you want me to drop you off at your hotel?”

Emma shook her head. “I have to make sure you get home without anyone bothering you. I’ll get a cab at the end of your street like I always do. Just along from where the media were this morning.”

The media being at the old drive-in was precisely the reason Dan had hoped to take Emma to her hotel. It was almost six, and Dan had someone to meet.

“Do you think I should maybe say something at the drive-in when we pass?” he asked as he stepped into his car. “Because if we feed them, they won’t bite, you know?”

“Not tonight,” Emma said. “Let Slater have her say first. Walker vs McCarthy was a good start, but Slater vs Godfrey is box office.”

Dan didn’t argue. Presidents and prime ministers arguing about aliens was definitely good for the issue’s credibility, and he could always sneak out to meet Trey when Emma was gone.

“Okay,” he said. “You’re the boss.”

D minus 75

ANDREWS FIELD

JOINT BASE ANDREWS, MARYLAND

As President Slater's plane landed in the late afternoon, she and Jack Neal ran through the details of her "rushed" response one final time. Very soon, she would be addressing a controlled media scrum just outside the air base.

Jack Neal's background was in public relations. His association with President Slater began when he caught her attention shortly after transitioning into campaign management and saving several previously written-off local campaigns. His big break came when Slater appointed him head of her Senate campaign, and since then he had risen as quickly in her eyes as she had in the country's. Jack was well spoken, highly presentable and more than a little machiavellian; in short, everything Slater needed in a senior aide who was more visible than any unelected advisor before him.

Jack's advice in this instance was for President Slater to speak outdoors and make it look as though she was doing everyone a favour by agreeing to say something about an issue that she didn't

think worthy of her time.

“Really sell the disinterest,” he said. “I want you to look exasperated with disinterest. Then finish by saying you have more important things to attend to. And when they ask “like what?”, you know what to say. That’s it; just like we said.”

Slater looked down at the runway and wondered how it had come to this, let alone so quickly. 24 hours ago she had more or less supported Richard Walker’s decision to use the alien nonsense to deflect attention from a much more difficult issue, and now she found herself backed into a corner with no choice but to do the exact opposite.

Minutes after her feet were finally back on American soil, President Slater’s car pulled up beside a gathering of journalists and reporters.

“Now,” Jack said.

Slater stepped out and strode towards a conveniently placed media gauntlet. Near the end of the line, she stopped. “Godfrey?” she said, replying to a call that she may or may not have heard. “What about him?”

Jack Neal played his part by encouraging Slater to return to the car without commenting, but she resisted his artificial plea and walked back to the middle of the line to face the cameras.

A bearded young man stood behind Slater, several metres in the distance. The uninvited citizen held a placard which read “SLATER LIES, TRUTH NOW”, with two words on each line. From the angle of most of the TV cameras, the sign was right beside Slater’s head. No one standing at that angle had any inclination to either tell her about the sign or ask the man to move, so their cameras captured what had the potential to become an iconic and embarrassing image.

Unaware, Slater began her well-rehearsed response. “Prime Minister Godfrey is under extreme pressure,” she said. “But that doesn’t change the fact that his comments were highly irresponsible. I won’t allow myself to fall into his trap by assisting

him in diverting the British public's attention away from their own domestic concerns."

Someone shouted something about Dan McCarthy, with the word "McCarthy" highly audible to everyone present. They all hushed to hear what Slater would say.

"I don't want to give Prime Minister Godfrey the publicity he wants on this issue, and I certainly don't want to give any publicity to the source of the lies that started it. I have more important things to—"

"Bullshit!" yelled the bearded man behind Slater, loudly enough to cut her off mid-sentence.

She turned to see where the heckle had come from and saw the man being promptly tackled by her security.

"The Australian letter is real," the man shouted as he was dragged away, offering no physical resistance beyond sandbagging his weight. "It's a matter of time until the rest of the evidence is..."

His voice faded away.

"I have more important things to attend to right now," Slater continued, trying not to look flustered by this genuinely unplanned interruption. She stood awkwardly in front of the line of reporters, waiting for one of them to shout "like what?" as Jack Neal had assured her they would.

When no one did, Jack stealthily assumed an anonymous position at the back of the media scrum and covered his mouth with his hand. "Like what?" he yelled in a strained voice.

President Slater saw Jack's other hand in the air, pointing to the car. She walked towards it and answered over her shoulder as she went:

"China."

D minus 74

DRIVE-IN
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

Dan pulled up just within sight of the old drive-in. Despite the steady rain, there were far more vans and people than there had been in the morning, but no sign of Trey. Dan kept his distance. The ACN van was there, presumably with Maria Janzyck still inside, along with several other larger vehicles which displayed logos with letter combinations Dan didn't recognise.

The lack of a Blitz News van was some consolation, but it was now 6:42 and Trey was nowhere to be seen.

Dan drove slightly further away so that he couldn't see into the drive-in lot itself but could still see the entrance, hoping to catch Trey before he went in and thus avoid dealing with the other reporters. All Dan could do now was wait and pray that Trey hadn't gone home in frustration.

He ran through everything he had done since 6pm and absolved himself of any guilt by recognising that he had arrived at the drive-in as quickly as he could.

When Dan first got home from the hair salon he caught a replay of President Slater's disastrous outdoor speech, which prompted Emma to text him that she would "need to get hold of that bullshit guy for some media stuff." He then heated up one of his Houghton's Home Fresh meals and ate it in front of the TV as quickly as he could.

By that point Dan was already fifteen minutes late for his meeting with Trey, but he opted to wait another five to make sure that Emma would be well away from the drive-in.

He then did something he had avoided doing for three years and had hoped he would never need to do: he removed his framed cheque from the wall beside his bedroom door.

Without the cheque, Dan had \$6.40 in his wallet and \$20 or so in his bank account. Cash flow wasn't normally a big problem since Clark took care of almost everything, but Dan wouldn't be paid by Mr Wolf at the bookshop for another four days. That struck Dan as an unreasonable length of time to expect a complete stranger like Trey to go without the money he had hopefully spent on the old calligraphy book and the digital translator.

Dan paused for a moment to consider the possibility that Trey might not have managed to get the items and that he might be about to cash his cheque for no reason, but he pushed the thought aside and put the cheque in his wallet.

The bank was naturally closed at 6:30 on a Saturday evening, but Dan knew that the pawnshop would be open. He knew the guy who owned the place so didn't anticipate having any problems with the year-old cheque.

Dan drove to the pawnshop and was pleased to see that the owner was behind the counter. Before Dan even had the cheque out of his pocket to ask if he could cash it, the man — older than Dan's father and with a name he couldn't quite remember — recognised him.

"Dan McCarthy," he said, sounding almost as chirpy as Emma.

Dan smiled, wishing the man had been vain enough to name the

store after himself so that he would know what to call him in reply.

“How’s Big Henry doing?” the man asked, his face making clear that it was a real question rather than just something to say.

Birchwood wasn’t the kind of small town where everyone knew everyone else, but everyone knew Dan’s father. “Pretty much the same,” Dan said. “Awake but away.”

The man gave his best wishes and asked what Dan needed. After one look at the cheque, he gave Dan the full \$85 in cash. Dan thanked him and offered the standard \$5 charge but the man wouldn’t hear a word of it, saying that he would do anything for Big Henry’s boy.

There was then some small talk about Dan’s leak, with the man saying that he had always known the government were covering something like this up. Dan didn’t want to be rude but really did have to get to Trey, so he cut the conversation off as soon as he got the chance.

As Dan walked towards the exit, the man called after him.

“Say, when’s your brother next home?”

“Hopefully by next Sunday,” Dan said. He was slightly surprised that the man knew about Clark being away, but it was a pretty small town and Dan knew how regularly his dad used to give the man his custom. “Hopefully sooner.”

“Good, good,” the man said. There was a sincerity in his voice that Dan didn’t hear much of these days; it certainly didn’t sound like Clark owed him money or anything like that. “You take care of yourself now, Dan. Stay on your guard.”

Dan nodded. “Thanks again.”

The \$85 now sat on Dan’s front seat — four twenties and a five — waiting for Trey to arrive to complete the trading sequence that would hopefully unlock the secrets of the German letter.

Dan listened to some music on the radio, making it through a song and a half before he spotted a sky-blue van in his rearview mirror. When it passed by, Dan saw the Blue Dish Network insignia on the side and honked his horn a few times.

Fortunately, Trey recognised Dan's beaten-up silver hatchback from their early morning interview. He pulled over and reversed towards Dan's car then stepped out of his van and walked the rest of the way. He had a bag in his hand.

"Hey, man," Trey said as he stepped into the car, trying not to bring too much rain in with him. "Sorry I'm so late. I took Louise home at five, then after dinner I couldn't be like "I have to be there by six" without sounding suspicious, you know? How long have you been waiting?"

Dan looked at the clock. 6:49. "Seven minutes," he said. "I was pretty late, too."

Trey then chuckled as he noticed how short Dan's hair was. "Did she do that?"

"It was her idea," Dan said. "For a photoshoot. Did you get the stuff?"

"The stuff?" Trey smiled. "Do you want to make it sound any more suspicious?" He handed Dan the bag.

Dan looked inside and saw the book: *Traditional and Antiquarian Calligraphy*. Even better, the digital translator was there, too. It was around the size of a TV remote control and folded open to reveal a keyboard on the lower half and a wide calculator-like screen above it. The thing was branded as a tool for tourists, as Dan had expected, and it could translate between several languages using either voice or text input.

"I couldn't find anything that just did German," Trey said. "Because I know that would have been cheaper. This one was hiding in the travel section of a giant bookstore."

Dan turned it over and saw a sticker for \$25, which was less than he had feared and meant that the total was just \$55. "It's perfect," he said. "You're sitting on the money, though."

Trey lifted his weight and pulled the notes out from under him. He kept \$60 and handed Dan the rest then reached for his own wallet to get \$5 for Dan's change.

"Don't worry about it," Dan said.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, you had to go looking for it.”

Trey put his wallet away without any faux reluctance, which Dan appreciated.

“So what about the British guy?” Trey said. “Godfrey. That’s pretty big, right?”

“I’m not supposed to say anything about it until tomorrow,” Dan said.

Trey nodded. “Understood. What time will you be at the media outpost?”

“Media outpost? Is that what they’re calling it?”

“Yeah. Maria from ACN has been saying it on air all day. It’s getting busy already, but I think this place is gonna explode in the next week. We’ll have trucks instead of vans and international press flooding in from everywhere you can think of. Usually when something big happens, they control which networks can park where and everything like that. I’ll get pushed out, Maria will probably get replaced by one of ACN’s national anchors, and outsiders will be everywhere.”

“You’ll get a space,” Dan said. He was excited by the prospect of international press filling the drive-in lot but could understand Trey’s concerns. “Emma will make sure. I’ll just tell her that I want you there.”

Trey didn’t say anything for a few seconds. “Who is she, anyway? I’ve never seen Blitz guys listen to anyone like that one listened to her.”

“She has a way,” Dan said, leaving it at that.

“Sure does,” Trey shrugged. “So yeah, what time tomorrow?”

“I have a TV thing in Texas in the afternoon, but we might decide to say something before that. It depends what happens overnight. I won’t be out again tonight, though, so you won’t miss anything if you go home.”

“This is pretty much going to be my home from now on,” Trey said, “in case something big happens. It’s weird: the backdrop of

those rusty shutters and that ancient drive-in sign is already what viewers associate with this story. Everyone wants reports from here. Whatever footage the other vans get is theirs, but I can sell mine to everyone else. Seriously, one big night here could earn me more money than I usually make in three months. This crappy old drive-in is the epicentre of the biggest story in years. When they admit it's true and you do a press conference here to say "I told you so," this place will be a tourist destination, just like that." Trey snapped his fingers.

Dan liked how sure Trey was that everything was going to turn out the right way. "But you still don't have a reporter," he suddenly thought. "What use is blank footage of the backdrop?"

"I'm sure I'll be able to stand in front of a camera and talk if I really have to," Trey said. His work typically involved recording footage of developing incidents and selling it to networks for them to dub commentary over for their own broadcasts, but this situation was anything but typical.

"Listen," Dan smiled. "If I can stand in front of a camera and talk..."

Trey laughed. "Anyway, man," he said, opening his door. "I better let you get home." He tapped Dan's bag and winked. "You've got work to do."

D minus 73

STEVENSON FARM
EASTVIEW, COLORADO

Richard Walker sat in the kitchen of his weekend home, growing impatient as he waited for Rooster to go outside to do his business. The storm Richard had forecast hadn't come to much, but the ground outside the kitchen door was wet enough to give the old dog pause.

The media storm over Dan McCarthy, on the other hand, had turned into an international tempest more quickly than Richard could have imagined. Though he usually went to great lengths to keep his weekends free of all work related stress, Richard had taken several phone calls from Ben Gold over the course of the day and was now right up to date.

The first surprise came early in the morning when McCarthy talked to the media, but that was nothing compared to Prime Minister Godfrey's incredible rant about American politics and what he saw as a concerted effort to suffocate the truth.

Richard had long admired Godfrey and knew he was playing a

calculated game to distract attention from domestic unrest, but he still couldn't believe how far the Prime Minister had gone. Calling out American hypocrisy over Mars and the moon was one thing, but making incendiary comments about the war was among the riskiest moves any leader could make.

Richard didn't care that Godfrey had made a joke out of his capture, but the general strength of the Prime Minister's response was highly concerning; so concerning, in fact, that Richard couldn't even enjoy Slater's public savaging.

The difference between Godfrey's speech and Slater's response summed the two leaders up perfectly in Richard's eyes. Both had spoken out of desperation, but while Godfrey did it with a grin on his face and conviction in his voice, Slater couldn't even drown out a lone heckler.

As Rooster finally went outside, Richard couldn't help but wonder what people in China must be making of it all. He imagined that 95% of Americans couldn't differentiate the Chinese premier's name — Ding Ziyang — from any other string of vaguely oriental-sounding syllables, in no small part because the Chinese government conducted most of its business so quietly. Richard thought about this. Though he would certainly never voice it publicly, he had long wondered whether a shift towards the Chinese model of politics, free of the PR-based election cycles that valued soundbites over policy, might just be an improvement over the kind of red-vs-blue popularity contest that could drop a non-entity like Valerie Slater into the White House.

Rooster sulked back inside after a few minutes and shook himself dry.

"You couldn't have done that at the door?" Richard asked.

The dog looked at him then did it again.

Richard smiled an unusually honest smile at Rooster's eternal stubbornness and opened the door to the hallway to let him through. He then limped over to close the kitchen door, noticing a steady stream of water flowing past the house from a clogged

gutter. Rooster had been hesitant to step through the stream, and it gave Richard pause, too.

He watched as pieces of moss and a fallen bird's nest were swept away by the flow. Though today's storm hadn't been as bad as Richard had feared, McCarthy hadn't cracked and Godfrey had entered the fray.

Richard Walker then closed the door and wiped a few raindrops from his shirt. He didn't know what tomorrow would bring, but something told him it wouldn't be pretty.

SUNDAY

D minus 72

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

Sunlight crept through the slits in Dan's blinds, alerting him to the fact that he'd spent all night at his desk trying to make sense of the German document.

Dan's initial effort to decode the text on Friday night had revealed little more than the word Führer as he struggled to identify the same letters anywhere else. Fortunately, the book Trey had managed to source from Wolf & Sons allowed Dan's progress to accelerate rapidly.

Traditional and Antiquarian Calligraphy, which was a surprisingly thick and dense volume, aided Dan by explaining and illustrating how one letter could look very different depending on which letters surrounded it.

Dan read the book from cover to cover, which took a lot longer than he had expected. And even though the German writing was more ornate than any example from the book, Dan had made great progress in the two hours since he had begun applying its

identification techniques.

Efficiency had always been important to Dan, so he opted to transcribe the document into typed German before beginning the more straightforward process of translating it into English. He was also wary of translating it as he went because he knew it was going to take more than one sitting to decode the whole thing and that he wouldn't be able to concentrate on his necessary media appearances if he knew some but not all of what the document said.

For reasons Dan couldn't quite pin down, he didn't want Emma or anyone else to know about this German letter until he knew exactly what it said. He didn't want to think that it was solely about the ego trip of wanting to know first, but he couldn't deny that was part of it.

After two focused hours of letter-by-letter analysis, Dan was almost halfway through. He was neither pleased nor displeased by this rate of progress; it wasn't quick, but at least it was happening.

Dan recognised a few words immediately; Konvention had to be convention, he thought, and Amerikanisch was equally apparent. Proper nouns like Wilhelm and Bonn spoke for themselves, but the most encouraging word so far was Argentinien.

Dan left his bedroom and looked out of the house's front window to check for news vans. There were none. He was surprised by the time but didn't feel particularly tired. 5:30 was too late to sleep, anyway, so he turned on the TV to catch up on what was happening and give his eyes a much-needed break from the flicks and curls of the no-longer-impenetrable German writing.

Maintaining his personal boycott of all things Blitz, Dan watched ACN. Maria Janzyck was talking from the drive-in, above a caption which read "Birchwood Media Outpost". Dan would never get used to that. More importantly, and more intriguingly, the right-hand side of the screen was filled with a picture of a document, printed in English. Parts of the document were blown up to a readable size.

Dan listened to Maria and read at the same time. The document was a "fully verified" letter which had been sent to NASA in 1986 by

none other than Hans Kloster. In it, Kloster warned against any further attempts to communicate with extraterrestrial intelligences via physical media in spacecraft, such as the Pioneer Plaques and the Voyager Golden Record of the 1970s.

This was obviously huge news, as Maria made clear, because it appeared to corroborate Dan's leak.

But Dan focused on something else. Underneath the printed name "Hans J. Kloster", there was a signature. Dan had seen this signature before.

He sprinted into his room and returned to the TV with the German letter in his hand. He flipped to the final page and held it beside the screen.

Sure enough, the signatures matched.



Dan returned to his task, spurred on by the confirmation that the letter he was in the process of decoding and translating had been handwritten by Hans Kloster. This possibility had already crossed Dan's mind, but he hadn't been able to square the fact that the replies to Kloster's other letters were typed. In the absence of a written date, he could only assume that this letter was much older.

After another hour or so, Dan's phone rang. His eyes flicked to the clock in the corner of his computer's screen. It showed 6:30, which wasn't early for Emma. He picked up his phone and swiped the screen to answer without looking.

"Hey," he said.

"What are you doing, man?" It wasn't Emma; it was Clark.

"Uh..."

"Why did I see you on TV yesterday?" Clark asked. "What happened to guard up, mouth shut?"

"They were outside in the middle of the night," Dan tried to explain. "I had to promise to talk to get them to leave."

"Who?"

“Media people.”

Clark sighed. “Okay, well, whatever. I’m coming home on Tuesday.”

“This Tuesday?”

“Yeah. Maybe Wednesday morning by the time I get there. And I don’t want to see you again until then. No interviews, no nothing. Is that clear?”

“I’m booked to do a TV panel today,” Dan said.

“Cancel it.”

“You’re not here!” Dan snapped. “You don’t know what’s happening. This thing isn’t blowing over. I can either take the wheel or let them lie about me. About us.”

“Dan...”

“It’s not a live show,” Dan said. “I get to vet the questions before we start and they won’t air anything that makes me look bad.”

“So they say.”

Dan paused. He didn’t want to say anything about Emma, because he knew how Clark would react to the idea of a cash-hungry PR rep sniffing around. It would have been too difficult to explain why he trusted Emma and how capable she had proven, so Dan didn’t even try. “I’ll be fine,” was all he said.

“And this one TV thing is all you’re doing?” Clark asked.

“Yeah,” Dan said. The upcoming appearance at Billy Kendrick’s show in Cheyenne, now only a day and a half away, genuinely slipped his sleep-deprived mind. “I think so.”

Clark didn’t say anything for a few seconds, as though quietly accepting Dan’s will. “Did you see this new Kloster thing?” he asked.

“Just a few minutes ago. It backs up something else that I haven’t released yet. It’s big.”

“You’ve got more stuff?”

“One thing,” Dan said. “I don’t want to tell you too much on the phone, though.”

“So why mention it? If the line wasn’t safe, you’d already have

said too much. This is what I mean, man... you don't think. I'm serious about this: you're not going to tell anyone that you have something new until I'm home, okay? You're not going to say anything you haven't already said. Anything. And I'm not asking you this, Dan, I'm telling you. Are you listening?"

"Yeah."

"Promise," Clark pushed.

"I won't tell anyone."

"Promise."

"Okay, I promise! I wasn't going to say anything, anyway," Dan said meekly. Clark wasn't usually so forceful with him, but then they weren't usually in situations like this. And Clark was Clark; he was always going to be more assertive than Dan and he was never going to mince his words about anything, especially if he thought it was for Dan's own good. Clark had been looking out for Dan since before Dan could walk or talk, and Dan couldn't begin to imagine what it must have been like for Clark trying to deal with the helplessness that came with watching everything from a distance.

"Good," Clark said. "I'll see you in a few days, then."

"Yeah. See you soon."

"Oh, and Dan..."

"Yeah?"

"Remember the promise."

D minus 71

RMXT STUDIO #2
AMARILLO, TEXAS

Dan and Emma's chauffeur-driven car sped past the unmanned security checkpoint at RMXT's studio complex after a long drive, almost all of which Dan had slept through. The vast complex was dominated by a tall building where local news was produced and filmed, surrounded by several smaller buildings used for everything from post-production work to radio broadcasting.

With a hint of envy over how well rested he looked and a hint of guilt over how peaceful he looked, Emma nudged Dan awake.

She had encouraged him to sleep having been worried by how tired he seemed at the start of the drive. Her concerns weren't cosmetic — hair and makeup would take care of that — but rather over how well Dan could function during his crucial TV appearance if his mind was deprived of rest. Dan didn't argue. The only thing of note that Emma mentioned before he faded was that she would be staying in Colorado for another seven days. Clark would be home on Tuesday, so Dan didn't mind too much that she had to leave so soon.

"Ms Ford," Emma heard through the car's speakers as Dan yawned to life. The voice was the driver's. "There are people with cameras by the door."

Emma looked out of the window at Dan's side. Sure enough, there was a small crowd. She cursed and lifted her phone from her pocket.

"What's up?" Dan asked.

"No one is supposed to know where you are. I could not have been any clearer about that. And now they're not even answering my call."

Dan counted nine people, three of whom were children. "It's not a big deal, is it?"

"I don't want people to see us together," Emma said. "And if they're not press then I can't exactly tell them all not to post their photos online."

"You did it at the salon."

"That was two people on a random street," Emma said. "This is a crowd outside a TV studio."

For the reasons Emma had explained at the salon, Dan understood why she didn't want to be photographed with him. It wasn't personal, it was business. He didn't say anything.

"Go inside," she said. "I'll go in the front and meet you. Stay right at the door, okay?"

"Be quick, then," Dan said. He stepped outside. The car started moving before his door swung closed.

Immediately, the children in the crowd swarmed Dan. Two of the three had pens and autograph books. Dan scribbled his name and posed for a few photos without thinking too much about how crazy it all was. He had never really understood celebrity worship and certainly didn't consider himself any kind of celebrity, so he was relieved when he reached the door and a man in an old fashioned headset ushered him inside with a smile.

"Ah, Mr McCarthy," the man beamed. He wore a security lanyard which identified him as an audio technician but didn't

display his name. "The studio for your Focus 20/20 recording is on the second floor. I'll lead you up."

"I have to wait here for someone," Dan said. "Wait, did you say Focus 20/20?"

"I sure did."

"I'm going to be on Focus 20/20?"

The technician smiled. "Of course. And who is it we're waiting for?"

"My friend. She's coming in the front," Dan said absently. Focus 20/20 was a much bigger deal than he was ready for, and certainly not "a little panel show" as Emma had told him. It was the best known current affairs show in the country, having been broadcast nationwide at 9pm every Sunday for longer than Dan had been alive. Quite remarkably, Marian de Clerk had hosted every single episode bar three: one for each of her children's births and one when a hurricane grounded her flight in Miami. This unparalleled longevity made de Clerk, who was still only 64 and had plenty of good years left, the closest thing the country had to a universally loved TV personality.

Focus 20/20's guests were typically titans in their fields; everyone from astronauts and senators to athletes and movie stars had graced the show, with only a handful of panellists ever appearing via satellite like Dan would be.

Several of the other public figures embroiled in Dan's leak had enjoyed or endured their own time in the 20/20 spotlight, too: Richard Walker's presidential campaign collapsed during one particularly raucous episode in the early 1980s; Billy Kendrick drew ridicule for announcing his belief in a top-level alien cover-up in 2002 then gained many viewers' respect by making his case more dispassionately and articulately nine years later; President Slater was a relatively frequent panellist in her time as a senator; and even Ben Gold had been on the show, appearing in 2014 as a specially invited guest for the episode discussing the discovery of candidate planet Kolpin-6b.

Though far from a regular viewer, Dan had strong memories of his dad sitting down on Sunday night to watch Focus 20/20. And like millions of others his age, Dan's feelings for the show remained irrationally negative since a subconscious part of his brain associated the theme tune to the end of the weekend and a return to school.

Viewing figures were way down from their late-1990s peak, but Dan could still count on at least ten million people hearing his words. The show always covered the two biggest topics of the past week, so Dan would have a full twenty minutes to get his points across to a sizeable audience.

High pressure vs huge opportunity, he thought. He didn't know how to feel about it all.

"Does your friend have the appropriate security clearance?" the technician asked.

"She won't need it."

"But the guards are very—"

"Trust me," Dan insisted, knowing Emma well enough to know that no one was about to stop her. "She won't need it."

Dan was too busy processing the idea of appearing on Focus 20/20 to worry about coming across as standoffish, so an awkward silence filled the few minutes until Emma's arrival.

"Why the hell are there people outside?" she asked the technician as soon as she reached him. Her tone suggested that she had asked the same question several times already without an acceptable reply.

"Uh, I don't... that's not really my, uh..." the man stammered.

"Sorry for the holdup, by the way," Emma said to Dan, her stern expression fading as soon as she turned to him. "I had to get past Paul Blart at the front door."

"A little panel show?" Dan said sarcastically. "Focus 20/20 is a little panel show?"

"I didn't want to stress you out."

"You're unbelievable. What are the topics, anyway?"

"First it's China In Space: New Dawn or False Start?, and then it's Dan McCarthy and the IDA Leak."

"Which one am I doing?"

"Very funny," Emma said. She turned to the technician, her face instantly reverting back to the angry expression from earlier in a manner Dan found almost impressive. "So are you going to show us where to go, or what?"

The technician nodded dumbly and led the way.

"They're filming for two hours today but it's forty minutes for China and eighty for you," Emma told Dan, "because we're doing this on the condition that we can veto any parts we don't like. They're still spending twenty minutes of the actual show on each topic, obviously, since that's the whole gimmick. And you're on second since you're the draw that people are going to tune in for."

"How many viewers are they expecting?"

Emma shrugged. "I've heard them mention thirty million. But if anything else happens today, Godfrey or Slater or something, then we could be looking at a stupid number. I know I said I don't want to stress you out, but this is the biggest thing you'll ever do. Even if you do something bigger later on, whatever comes next comes because of this. No pressure, right?"

"You really should have told me," Dan said. "I could have been preparing in the car."

"We've got three hours until they start filming the China segment, and I have a list of pre-approved questions and a dossier on each of the panellists. I'll be in the studio with you if you're struggling, and like I said: we can cut out whatever we want. Everything is set."

"Who are the other panellists?" Dan asked.

Emma ran through a list of five names. The first of the two names Dan recognised was Kaitlyn Judd, a mega-successful movie star most famous for her role in Lair of Fangs. He imagined that she had been booked in advance to draw young viewers, before Dan was added to the bill. The other familiar name was Joe Crabbe, an ultra-

conservative shock jock who Dan knew from his heated debates with Billy Kendrick. Crabbe seemed to be the only other panellist even tangentially connected to the leak, so Dan expected him to be the most belligerent.

After a quick elevator ride and a short walk, they reached the studio.

"Here we are. Makeup is two doors down," the technician said, pointing.

"You can go now," Emma told him.

"Uh, I... uh, yeah."

"Thanks," Dan said.

The technician nodded and left.

"Why were you such an asshole to that guy?" Dan asked.

"There were people outside," Emma replied through semi-gritted teeth. "I told them to make sure there were no people."

"Yeah but it was hardly his fault. He's an audio technician."

"If he's the guy who let you in then he's the guy who was nearest the door, no? That makes it partially his fault."

Dan decided this wasn't worth arguing over and opened the studio door.

"Makeup first," Emma said. "That way we won't have to see anyone again before they start filming."

She led Dan into the makeup room, where a tall woman in her forties or fifties was reading a magazine in one of the chairs while she waited for them.

The friendly woman greeted them warmly and made sure Dan was comfortable in his seat. There was a greater focus on makeup than when Dan had been in the Sizzle and Spark salon the day before, since his hair was now too short to require any real upkeep. The room had less soul than the salon, though; with no natural light, it was really less of a room and more of a closet with a wall-length mirror.

While the woman worked, chatting occasionally, Emma encouraged Dan to practice facial expressions in the mirror. "It's

really important that your face conveys whatever your words are conveying,” she said. “Imagine that everyone is watching on mute and that you have to make them think you’re telling the truth about whatever you’re talking about, even though they can’t hear you.”

Dan’s efforts to display the emotions Emma called out made the makeup artist’s job more difficult than it should have been, but she still managed to finish before long.

She asked Dan if he could record a greeting for her son on her phone. “He believes in all of this stuff, too,” she said, meaning it kindly.

Dan didn’t take her words the wrong way and agreed to record a short video. He told her son, Harris, to “keep believing, because the truth always wins.”

“Thanks so much,” the makeup artist said. “We’ll be watching tonight. I can’t believe you’re going to get to talk to Kaitlyn Judd! I’m so jealous.”

“Yeah,” Dan said. “But just imagine how excited she must be about talking to me.”

The woman laughed and said goodbye, leaving for her overdue lunch break.

Emma handed Dan his work glasses, as they had both already taken to calling them. These were the thin-framed designer ones that had been brought to the salon for Dan. He didn’t like them, but Emma’s word was the law. He put them on.

“What do you think?” Emma asked. She was nodding with her lip slightly upturned, as though surprised that Dan could become so presentable.

Dan hesitated, searching for the right word. “Weatherman,” he eventually said. “I look like a fashion-conscious weatherman.”

Emma laughed the loudest and truest laugh Dan had ever heard from her. “You actually do!” she said through the laughter, trying to gather herself. “But that’s good. Because people trust weathermen, even though they’re always wrong.”

Dan climbed out of the chair and headed for the door. “Two and

a half hours until filming,” he said. “We should probably start thinking about what I’m going to say.”

“Yeah,” Emma agreed, still smiling about the weatherman thing. “Probably.”



The “studio” being used for Dan’s filming was smaller than the makeup room. There was a chair, a camera, a TV, and nothing else. The upper half of the wall behind the camera was a clear window which revealed an adjoining room full of producers, technicians and other staff all working busily at their screens.

“I’ll make sure that window is covered when they start filming,” Emma said. “And I’ll stay in here with you, beside the camera. I better get another chair, actually.”

Emma quickly returned with a chair from the busy room next door and set it down beside the camera. For the next two hours, she helped Dan to home in on the specific phrases they wanted to get across. As helpful as this was, Emma’s advice over how Dan should say what he wanted to say was even more useful.

She told Dan that the show would be a genuine discussion about his leak and the issues it raised, so he had to be prepared to deal with articulate doubters without losing his cool. “Everyone sees you as the underdog,” she explained, “so don’t be afraid to play that role. If you’re struggling, just say you feel ambushed and you don’t have a team of scriptwriters feeding you smart one-liners. You can be aggressive if you’re backed into a corner, but try not to be the aggressor. Does that make sense?”

Dan nodded and scanned the list of pre-approved questions that Marian de Clerk would ask him before inviting comments from the rest of the panel. At first glance, the list didn’t pose any problems; they were the kind of questions Dan had heard Billy Kendrick answer a thousand times. The first two questions were “If aliens are real, why haven’t we seen them?” and “If their home planet is far

enough away that we haven't detected it, how could they possibly get here?"

There was also a question about the Fermi Paradox and one about Billy Kendrick's outspoken views on disclosure. Dan felt a lot calmer for having seen the list; it was Aliens 101.

"I think it's impossible that intelligent extraterrestrial beings could exist without us knowing," Emma suddenly said.

Dan looked up from his list, taken aback by the outburst. "What?"

"It's ridiculous. Your whole claim is ridiculous," she said. After a few seconds of Dan staring at her blankly, she clapped her hands. "Defend yourself!"

"Uh..."

"Uh is no good," Emma scolded. "Uh is for children and liars."

"Uh..."

"Children and liars!"

Dan took two deep breaths. "You can't just say it's ridiculous," he said in a surprisingly authoritative tone. "You have to tell me why it's ridiculous. Tell me why it's ridiculous to think that this tiny little planet is the only one with intelligent life on it. If you want to talk about ridiculous, let's talk about how ridiculously arrogant it is to think that we're the smartest thing in an infinite universe."

Emma's expression softened into a smile. "Correct."

As the start of filming drew closer, someone in the control room knocked on the glass window and called Emma through. Dan watched as she listened to whatever they were telling her. Emma was a master at keeping her emotions to herself when she had to, so Dan had no idea whether the news was good. When Emma left the control room, Dan turned away from the window to pretend he hadn't been watching.

"They've got some historian lined up to talk about the U-boats, and they want to know if we're okay with adding him to the panel," she said.

"Definitely," Dan said.

Emma hesitated. "I'm not so sure. The firm isn't too hot on the whole Nazi angle. A lot of people have difficulty buying into it. People don't like Nazis, and people don't easily buy into things they don't like."

"If Nazi officials found the craft, Nazi officials found the craft," Dan said. "And if they tried to hide it, then we're getting one over on them by revealing it. Why don't we frame it like that?"

Emma didn't say anything.

"It could work in our favour, anyway," Dan said. "Because think about it: everyone must know that I wouldn't have chosen to lump the alien discovery in with old Nazi conspiracies. Because, A) it makes it sound more far-fetched than it has to, and B) if I had dreamt up this detailed plot of secret Nazi alien discoveries, I wouldn't have wasted it on a fake leak. I would have turned it into a screenplay."

"You definitely can't say that," Emma said.

"Can't say what?"

"Anything about 'if I had made this up'. You can't bring that into the discourse. If you want people to think you're telling the truth, you can't concede any other possibility. Not ever."

"But it's nuance," Dan said. "It shows that I'm self-aware."

Emma was shaking her head. "We're not shooting for nuance. This is TV; everything is black and white. We can have the U-boat guy on if you really want him, but you can't say anything about what you would or wouldn't have done if you'd made it all up."

"Okay."

"It's just a seed we don't want to plant," Emma said, continuing to explain even though Dan had stopped arguing. She turned to the window and gave a thumbs up, okaying the U-boat expert. "Because even if you say 'I'm not a greedy liar', that still brings the idea of you being a greedy liar into the discussion. And 'McCarthy says he's not a greedy liar' is a bad headline, because your face beside the words 'greedy liar' is a bad front page. Do you understand why?"

"I guess."

"You can't say that, either. Guesswork is for people who don't know the facts."

"Fine. I understand," Dan said, rolling his eyes.

Emma glanced at the clock in the control room next door. "Three minutes until they start filming the China segment," she read from the clock. "We start shooting forty minutes after that."

Dan no longer took exception to Emma saying we; by this point, he was thoroughly glad to have her. "How much are we getting paid for this, by the way?" he jokingly asked.

Emma suppressed a smile. "It should cover those clothes from yesterday, let's just say that." She sat in her chair next to the camera, on the opposite side from the TV that would soon show Dan the other panellists, and took a small plastic folder from her bag.

"What's in there?" Dan asked.

Emma removed five sheets of paper. "Dirt," she said.

"What?"

"On the other panellists. It's not my work, before you bite my head off." She handed Dan the sheets.

His eyes scanned the top page, which was about Joe Crabbe. Under the headline "Infidelity (conclusive, photographic)", Dan read sordid details of Joe Crabbe's extramarital affair with his cleaner. The cleaner happened to be an undocumented immigrant, which added a layer of irony given Crabbe's well known views on border control. Dan couldn't stop wondering how a story like this hadn't come out publicly.

"I don't need to see any of this," he said.

Emma took the sheets back without complaint. "I didn't think so, either. The firm only wanted you to have the dirt sheets in case one of the panellists knows something about you that we don't. But I think you should be the guy who rises above petty gossip and brushes personal comments aside. Be the bigger man."

Someone from next door knocked on the glass again and the TV beside the camera flashed on. "Filming for the China segment is

about to begin,” a voice announced through unseen speakers.

“Forty minutes until go time,” Emma said. She signalled for the people next door to close the blinds to give Dan a degree of privacy. “Pay attention to the panellists so you know what to expect from each of them, okay?”

Dan nodded and sat in his chair without saying a word.



During the early stages of the Focus 20/20 filming, which took place in New York without a studio audience, Kaitlyn Judd said almost nothing and Joe Crabbe held nothing back.

Crabbe was almost Richard Walker-like in his comments about China, saying things like “we cannot give the Chinese an inch” and “President Slater needs to grow a pair and tell the Chinese that space is not for them.”

His “grow a pair” comment drew dismissive eye-rolls and head-shakes from most of the panel until another male panellist, a young filmmaker called Caleb North who neither Dan nor Emma had previously heard of, took it upon himself to demand an apology for the “toxic and sexist comment.”

Crabbe predictably laughed off the request, slamming the filmmaker for his attempt to “win brownie points” and defiantly insisting that “the thought police will be getting no apologies from me.”

Several panellists talked over each other for a few seconds.

Emma turned to Dan. “I don’t have to tell you to stay out of stuff like that, right?”

“Nope,” he replied.

The camera then focused on Marian de Clerk, who had chaired Focus 20/20’s panel for more than three decades. Tangible disappointment was etched on her face. de Clerk had seen debate descend into this kind of thing all too often recently, with it seeming like one side of every argument wanted to offend the other while

the other couldn't wait to take the bait. Each side had its buzzwords, be they "problematic" and "offensive" or "thought police" and "free speech", but de Clerk and most of her viewers were tired of the holier-than-thou point-scoring from both sides.

"Enough," de Clerk said, raising her normally restrained voice. "We only have forty minutes for this segment and we need twenty of them. Joe, stop trying to be offensive. And Caleb, stop trying to be offended. Now, can we get on with the show?"

After a few minutes of more polite discussion and with Dan's appearance drawing ever closer, he looked away from the TV and into Emma's eyes. "I don't know if I can do this," he said. "It suddenly feels real. They're all sitting together and I'm the outsider, sitting in here alone. It's more intimidating than I thought."

"You're not alone," Emma said.

"You know what I mean."

"Just pretend you're talking to me. Pretend you're trying to convince me. That's not intimidating, is it?"

A few days earlier, spending this much time alone with a woman who looked and carried herself like Emma would indeed have been intimidating for Dan, but by now he felt sufficiently comfortable with her for this to be a worthwhile exercise. "No," he said. "I can do that."

Emma's phone vibrated in her pocket. "I have to take this," she said after looking at the screen.

"Okay."

"This better be important," Emma whispered to the caller. "We're on in eight minutes."

Dan watched as Emma's expression changed.

"Right now? Okay. Thanks." She ended the call but kept her phone in her hand.

"Was that the firm?" Dan asked.

Emma slid her chair over towards Dan's and held her phone at arms length, navigating to a web page and launching a video.

"What's going on?" Dan pressed.

Emma tapped the play button. “Godfrey.”

D minus 70

MANSLOW MONUMENT
LONDON, ENGLAND

On the 150th anniversary of one of Britain's worst industrial disasters, William Godfrey laid a wreath at the Manslow Monument. The Prime Minister was flanked by his long suffering Deputy PM Diane Logan on one side and his coalition partner John Cole on the other.

Diane had been the only cabinet member to speak out against Godfrey's decision to involve himself in the developing story of the IDA leak, while Cole had written much of what Godfrey had said about it so far.

Cole's eye for controversy and Godfrey's expert delivery had succeeded in deflecting attention away from Saturday's anti-privatisation protest to the extent that around half of the questions that greeted them when they emerged from their cars were related to President Slater and Dan McCarthy. Half were still about the thorny issue of the health service, though, so Godfrey knew he had more work to do.

After the respite of the solemn memorial service, the three attending politicians took their position to say a few words as scheduled. As Prime Minister, William Godfrey went first.

“On a day like today, we reflect on what it means to be British,” he began. “To be British is to honour our fallen. To be British is to pursue a world that fits our values. To be British is to value truth. So let us take the example of the families and colleagues of those who fell in the Fire of Manslow 150 years ago today; of those families and colleagues who refused to accept the official line and fought for the truth until it became clear that negligence rather than happenstance lay at the root of this tragic incident.”

Diane Logan tilted her head away from Godfrey, hoping that he wasn't going where she thought he was.

“And on this 150th anniversary,” Godfrey continued, “let us recognise that another truth is being ruthlessly suppressed even as we stand here to pay our respects.”

“This is disgusting,” Diane Logan muttered under her breath. And then, more loudly, “even for you.” She walked away and stood with the members of the public who had gathered for the memorial, capturing the reporters' attention for a few seconds before they focused back on Godfrey and Cole.

Godfrey blanked Diane's words and didn't even acknowledge her departure. “We are being lied to,” he said, “for what can only be reasons of calculated self-interest.”

As he had during Godfrey's initial outburst at President Slater, John Cole nodded silently beside him.

“Mr Cole and I, as both representatives of the British people and as citizens of this planet, cannot in good conscious allow shady American interests to control information as important as the kind that Dan McCarthy has fearlessly made public. We call for vigilance in the face of attempts to frame this issue as an alien problem and invite an open dialogue on what may well be an unprecedented alien opportunity. After all, if alien technology was indeed discovered in Lake Toplitz, who's to say what global problems it

could solve if properly used? For this reason, we cannot allow the American government to shape the world's response to any future revelations, and we cannot allow them to delay those revelations out of calculated self interest. The families of our fallen deserve better than that."

To Diane Logan's amazement, people around her applauded the end of Godfrey's speech. Loath to detract from the memorial service any more than Godfrey already had, she opted to keep her disdain private as John Cole prepared to speak.

"Another thing we'd like to point out," Cole said in his broad Yorkshire accent, "is that the Americans are in no position to tell us what to say about this. I heard President Slater talking about "irresponsible murmurs from London" as if she has some kind of idea what this city went through at the hands of Hans Kloster and the others whose lies they're trying to cover up."

It was Godfrey's turn to nod now. He knew what was about to be said and had decided to let Cole say it since it was a topic he would rather not broach himself.

John Cole cleared his throat. "Hans Kloster was involved in the early stages of the rocketry programme that eventually led to the V-1 and V-2 rockets, slaughtering more than 6,000 British civilians. We deserve to know the true origin of the technologies that led to those weapons. And thanks to the paper trail of Kloster's correspondence with various government agencies, a picture is becoming clear.

"It's also important that we don't forget where the Americans fit into this," Cole continued. "They recruited an army of mad Nazi scientists under Operation Paperclip and gave some of them new identities. For most of the war they were turning Jewish refugees away from Ellis Island, and then the minute the war was over they were sneaking war criminals like Kloster into air bases in Texas! You couldn't make it up. It's also worth remembering that Operation Paperclip was a carefully guarded secret back then. With that in mind, the Prime Minister and I can't help but wonder what

other American secrets will one day be taken for granted as indisputable facts. That's all we'd like to say for now, and we thank you all for coming out to join us in paying our respects."

As Godfrey and Cole headed to their cars amid further sombre applause, Diane Logan took it upon herself to apologise to the families of the Fire of Manslow's victims on behalf of her party for the way the two men had hijacked the memorial service. But even as Diane spoke, the public began filing away and the media crews began packing up their equipment.

"He's playing a game," she said, but no one was listening.

D minus 69

RMXT STUDIO #2
AMARILLO, TEXAS

“Holy shit,” Emma said as William Godfrey and John Cole walked away from the Manslow Monument. “The gloves are off.”

“Alien opportunity,” Dan mused. “That’s a good line. I should use that, right? And maybe calculated self interest, too.”

Emma nodded. “Quote Godfrey all you want, but stay away from Cole. Trust me: that guy is bad news. Anyway, the best thing about this is that none of the other panellists know what Godfrey just said, so you’re going to come across as knowledgeable and well informed.”

A producer’s voice filled the room again: “One minute.”

Emma put her hands on Dan’s shoulders and looked into his eyes. “This is your time. Sink or swim, Dan McCarthy... it’s all on you.”

Dan closed his eyes for a few seconds then shook his face alive. “I’m ready,” he said.

Emma moved her chair back beside the camera. The clock was at

18 seconds. "Three things," she said, still standing, now holding her hand out and getting ready to raise a finger for each point. "Remember why you're here. Stick to the story. Game face."

"I don't need a game face. I'm telling the truth."

Emma sat down and winked at him.

"That's starting to piss me off," Dan said.

A series of shrill beeps then came through the speakers, growing more frequent until a constant shriek played for two or three seconds. The lighting in the room then changed completely, with most of the ceiling panels going dark and the wall behind Dan turning a light grey.

Before Dan's eyes settled on the screen, which now displayed his fellow panellists, he looked to Emma for some final words of support. She had only two whispered words for him:

"Convince me."



Dan dealt with Marian de Clerk's opening questions as comfortably as he could have hoped. de Clerk's longevity as host of Focus 20/20 was due in no small part to her interviewing technique, which could be best described as staying out of the way. She had an easy demeanour which encouraged guests to open up, and from there she let them say their piece and only stepped in if the conversation strayed off-track.

On the few occasions when Dan's eyes flicked to Emma between questions, he saw that she was highly satisfied with how he was doing.

After Dan had tackled most of the pre-approved questions, de Clerk asked another off the top of her head. "To take a step back here," she said, "why do you think Richard Walker would cover something like this up in the first place?"

Dan's answer began with "I'm not here to speculate," which was the one line Emma had been absolutely insistent about. "But I

suppose it all boils down to control,” he continued, drawing an approving nod from Emma. “Politics is all about artificial fear and the illusion of control. Politicians and the media create fake threats and play down the real ones.”

Emma raised her eyebrows at the end of Dan’s point, not exactly thrilled with where he had taken it.

“But as I said, I’m not here to speculate.”

She gave him a thumbs up.

“So visitation could be a threat,” de Clerk said.

It took Dan a few seconds to realise that her statement was intended as a question. He saw Emma mouth the words “unhealthy fear”, encouraging him to give another of the stock replies he’d been working on.

“It would be unhealthy to fear alien visitation,” Dan said. “If you think about fears, some are healthy and some aren’t. It’s healthy to fear sharks. Think about it: sharks can rip you apart, but you can avoid them by staying out of the ocean. But with hostile aliens there would be nowhere to hide. You can’t outrun the sky, so what’s the point of holding the fear? It’s senseless, and, although I’m not here to speculate, I am as confident as I could be that no one is hostile. Hostile enemies don’t leave spheres containing information about themselves.”

“You know that the spheres contained such information?” de Clerk prodded.

“The real point is that we have to be wary of the media framing this as an alien problem,” Dan said, somewhat evasively. “Like Prime Minister Godfrey said a few minutes ago, we should treat this as an alien opportunity.”

de Clerk then invited the other panellists to ask their own questions. Predictably, Joe Crabbe jumped in first. “Okay, Mr McCarthy. You’ve already said there’s no visual evidence of alien visitors because they don’t want to be seen and that anyone capable of getting here would be capable of avoiding detection, correct?” He allowed a few seconds for Dan to confirm this. “So if they don’t

want us to have any photographic evidence, why did they leave physical evidence? And don't weasel your way out by saying you're not here to speculate."

"That's a good question," Dan said, buying himself a few seconds.

"So answer it!"

Dan glanced at Emma. She held both hands out and lowered them slowly, signalling for Dan to keep calm.

"If you'd let me breathe, I will," he said. "Maybe they wanted to see how humanity would react to the knowledge in the spheres. Maybe the spheres and the craft had been here for hundreds or even thousands of years before they were discovered. After all, there are cave drawings that depict spacecraft. So maybe the visitors haven't been back since cameras were invented? I don't know; I'll leave the speculation to you."

"It seems to me like there are a lot of maybes," Crabbe chided. He was grinning. "It seems to me like there's a lot of uncertainty."

Without missing a beat, Dan shot back: "It seems to me like there are a lot of people trying to keep it that way, and it seems to me like you're one of them."

Joe Crabbe began to respond, but de Clerk cut him off. "Can we hear from someone else?" she asked the panel.

To Dan's surprise, Hollywood starlet Kaitlyn Judd had a question. And to his even greater surprise, it was a good one. "If there is a cover-up," Kaitlyn said with her unmistakably Californian cadence, "then doesn't that mean the aliens want there to be one? Because if they didn't want the government to keep it secret, wouldn't they just go over the government's head and reveal themselves?"

Star-struck was the only word for how Dan felt. He stared at the TV, which had zoomed in on Kaitlyn, for several seconds without speaking.

"Pretend she's me," Emma whispered as loudly as she dared, leaning in towards Dan but wary of the camera.

If Dan had squinted, Kaitlyn and Emma would have actually

looked a little alike. He tried to think of megastar Kaitlyn Judd as a normal-on-the-inside person like Emma. It worked. “These kind of good questions are exactly why we need clarity,” he said. “I don’t expect hostility, though, because if they wanted our planetary resources then they would surely already have them.”

Joe Crabbe reinserted himself into the conversation without any complaint from de Clerk. “You’re wrong, McCarthy. If Kloster did know something, it had to be bad. Why else would he have asked NASA to stop sending information about our planet into space?”

“People can have selfish reasons for suppressing good news,” Dan answered. “And so can governments. It could be that the only threat these aliens pose is the threat of a good example. They might have superior technology, different ways to harness energy, better ways to distribute resources, someth—”

“A-ha!” Crabbe yelled. “There it is. You all heard him: it all comes down to redistribution of resources. This is the globalist, communist, eugenicist agenda!”

Dan immediately looked at Emma and spoke to her out loud for the first time since the filming started, too confused to keep it to himself. “Eugenicist?” he said. “What the hell is he talking about?”

Emma widened her eyes, telling Dan to look back into the camera.

“You’re a wolf in sheep’s clothing,” Crabbe snapped.

“I’m just the guy who found the folder,” Dan replied automatically.

“Lies! You’re a globalist agent. This is Agenda 21! You want to reduce the Earth’s population by 90% so that—”

“Cut his mic,” Marian de Clerk said. Crabbe’s voice faded.

“You can’t silence me!” he shouted, but it was barely audible to Dan under de Clerk’s calm tone.

“Save your breath,” de Clerk told Crabbe, rising to her feet. “We’re not airing any rants. Everyone cut. Two-minute break.”

Most of the panellists also stood up, but Joe Crabbe stayed in his chair, calmly taking notes. He didn’t look like the same man whose

face had been purple with rage only moments earlier.

"Are you playing a character?" Dan asked, unsure whether he would be heard.

Crabbe looked up, confirming that he'd heard the question, but didn't answer.

Emma stood and pulled Dan out into the corridor.

"How am I doing?" he asked.

"A lot better than I thought," Emma said, very honestly. "But don't get dragged into a mud-fight with Crabbe. Even if it doesn't air, he's not the kind of guy who's going to respect a non-disclosure agreement or a gag order."

"He's basically the only one asking questions, though," Dan said.

Emma shrugged. "You were talking to Marian for forty minutes, so that will fill most of the segment, anyway."

"Forty minutes?" Dan echoed in disbelief. He thought it had been more like fifteen. "How long do we have left?"

"About twenty. He is playing a character, by the way. That's his whole deal. He's kind of the opposite of Billy Kendrick; he has his show and he has his audience, so all he does is pander, pander, pander."

"Billy's not like that," Dan said.

Emma blew air from her lips. "Agree to disagree."

Dan shrugged it off. "I still don't understand why he's talking about Agenda 21, though."

"I don't even know what the hell that is," Emma admitted.

Dan tried to explain what was a contentious issue in some circles as succinctly as he could: "It's basically an old UN thing about sustainable development, but when people mention it now they're usually talking about forced depopulation and a tyrannical one-world government."

"That sounds like the kind of thing Crabbe's audience buys into," Emma said, "so he's just giving them what they want. Don't take it personally."

A door opened behind them. "They're back," a producer said.

“Keep doing what you’re doing,” Emma said to Dan. “We’re almost there.”

D minus 68

10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON, ENGLAND

“What’s the latest on McCarthy?” William Godfrey asked, sitting on the edge of his bed and talking into his phone.

“He’s doing Focus 20/20 tonight,” John Cole replied. “They’re filming it right now.”

Godfrey’s eyes widened. “With Marian de Clerk? That’s a serious show.”

“I know.”

“Who’s representing him? He must have signed with an agency to get near a show like that.”

“I’ve no idea, boss.”

“Find out,” Godfrey said. “And when you do, tell them our interests align.”

D minus 67

RMXT STUDIO #2
AMARILLO, TEXAS

After the unscheduled recess, Joe Crabbe picked up right where he left off on the Focus 20/20 panel. “You and your kind would welcome an enemy threat from above,” he said to Dan, “because you want a new global order. You want a one-world government to rise from the chaos.”

“It doesn’t matter how many times you try to frame this as a threat,” Dan said, “people won’t buy what you’re selling. We live in a culture obsessed with war, so people like you project that. But any species which has pooled its resources enough to achieve interstellar travel will surely be beyond war.”

Crabbe scoffed. “Beyond intra-species conflict, maybe, but not beyond conquest. Not beyond dominion. Tell me, in your dystopian globalist future when humans are “beyond war”, won’t we still fish the oceans? Won’t we still mine the earth? Won’t we still do whatever is necessary to procure resources?”

Emma did the universal slit-throat hand gesture, warning Dan

off this train of argument.

"I'm just here to talk about the cover-up," Dan said. "You know how I feel about speculation."

"How can you be so blasé?" Crabbe snapped, as though another switch had been flipped in his head. "Even if there was a cover-up, have you really never considered that it might be because they're hostile?"

Emma pumped her fist, delighted that Crabbe had so explicitly made the kind of hypothetical concession she had told Dan to avoid.

"We've been over this," Dan said. "Knowledge is power, and for the people behind the scenes in Washington that's all that matters. Power isn't a means to an end for these people, power is the end. All they care about is power for its own sake, truth be damned."

"As opposed to truth for its own sake, consequences be damned?"

Dan glanced at Emma. She nodded. "Well... yeah," he said. "I know that Billy Kendrick has made this point to you before, but since you don't seem to have grasped it I'll make it again. People like you talk about how there would be panic and violence if the public learned a frightening truth, but people don't riot when they're scared. People riot when they're angry. And the best way to make people angry is to hide things from them and to patronise them by saying they're not strong enough to handle the truth. Who are you to decide what we're grown up enough to handle? Who is President Slater to decide that? My position on this couldn't be any clearer: we deserve to know the truth, whatever it is. We have a right to know the truth."

Emma mimed an enthusiastic round of applause. Dan tried not to laugh at the sight.

"Speaking of truth," Crabbe said, undeterred.

"Very briefly," de Clerk ordered.

Crabbe nodded curtly. "I have a good friend at Blitz Media — The Daily Chat to be precise — and she, uh... or he, has been kind enough to share with me a story they're going to publish tomorrow.

It seems that they've unearthed some old schoolwork of yours, Mr McCarthy, which just so happens to mention your lifelong desire to, quote, be the first person to find the proof, unquote, so you could become rich and famous. Care to comment?"

Dan wracked his brain for some memory of such a piece of schoolwork, but he couldn't remember anything. He didn't think it was a bluff, though, so he couldn't risk denying something which could quickly be proven.

To the side of the camera, Emma held up Joe Crabbe's dirt sheet, replete with sufficient detail to end his marriage and career in one fell swoop. She shrugged at Dan, who was deep in thought.

"No," he said after a long pause. "I'm not going to lower myself to the level of the gutter press and their gutter tactics. If they investigated real issues instead of people they hold grudges against, maybe this cover-up would have been exposed years ago. And as for my schoolwork... what do you want me to tell you? I used to be a child, guilty as charged. It's going to be a crowded prison if we're all punished for that."

Joe Crabbe said nothing.

"Can we bring in the historian?" de Clerk asked someone off-camera. "We'll edit him in earlier, because I want to finish on the discussion about truth. And Joe, you should know better than to mention a competitor's name."

Humbled, Joe Crabbe maintained his silence. Like de Clerk's words, it sounded good to Dan.

The historian appeared on screen, both to Dan and the rest of the panel, from his own remote location in Ottawa. de Clerk introduced him as Professor Mark Shaw and, with time running out, got straight to the point by asking for his opinion on the likelihood that alien artefacts may have been smuggled to Argentina on board one or both of the named U-boats.

"It's actually a novel and intriguing take on a series of tired conspiracies," Shaw said, surprising everyone with a refined English accent.

“Enlighten us,” de Clerk said.

“Well, as has been documented in the media over the last few days, the crew of U-530 did indeed surrender at Mar del Plata in Argentina a full two months after the end of the war in Europe. Then of course U-977 did the same another five weeks later, by which point we were well into August of 1945. The conspiracies arise from the discrepancies between Argentine and American interrogation reports, as well as a general scepticism over the stated reasons for travelling all the way to Argentina.”

de Clerk waved her hand to hurry him along. “Which was...?”

“The official line is that the crews considered Argentina a safe haven and viewed surrender to the Allies as a fate worse than the death they risked by making the journey. This falls down when we consider that the captain of U-977 learned a full eighteen days before surrendering that U-530 and its crew had already been handed over to the Americans. If he was alive and with us today, I would ask why he continued into the now hostile Argentine waters. Of course his options were limited, but bear in mind that his crew had undertaken a near-suicidal journey with the express purpose of avoiding surrender to the Allies.”

“So what were the other limited options?” de Clerk asked, professional as ever but with a hint of impatience creeping through the words.

“Uruguay might have been one,” Shaw said, almost inflecting it into a question, “and suicide was another. The fact that they continued to Argentina hardly quashes speculation of a precious cargo. Let me quickly stress that Adolf Hitler was not part of this cargo, in case any of your viewers get the wrong idea. The survival myths are verifiably nonsensical; these U-boats left Europe when Hitler was alive and accounted for.”

“So the survival myths are nonsense but the rest might not be?”

“There’s no might. None at all. U-530 and U-977 reached Argentina and quickly ended up in American hands. I could show you photographs of the American crews bringing them north. I

could tell you when and where they were sunk for target practice. None of this is at all controversial.”

“Okay,” de Clerk said, striving to find a useful angle. “But can we read anything into the fact that Dan McCarthy knew the names of these U-boats, or is that common knowledge?”

“There’s a middle ground between secret knowledge and common knowledge,” Professor Shaw explained. “If I were to ask you the population of Lesotho or the name of Saturn’s fifth largest satellite, you probably wouldn’t be able to tell me. If I gave you twenty seconds with an internet connection, I imagine you would. You see, the stories of these U-boats aren’t part of the traditional narrative we teach our children in school, but nor are they esoteric facts that can’t be found and verified with a few mouse-clicks.”

“And if I had to push you for a position on Mr McCarthy’s claims?” de Clerk asked.

“Certainly worth exploring,” Shaw said. “U-530’s interrogation reports suggest that documents were thrown overboard along with ammunition, so the suggestion that some kind of sphere was dumped from U-977 as it neared Argentina — where the crew knew the Americans were waiting — isn’t beyond the realms of possibility. Whether that sphere is earthly or not is another story altogether.”

“Thank you, Professor Shaw,” de Clerk said. “And on that note, we say a big thank you to Dan McCarthy, Kaitlyn Judd, and the rest of today’s panel. Tune in next week for another exciting edition of Focus 20/20.”



The ceiling lights in Dan’s mini-studio came back on.

“Where have you been hiding that?” Emma asked.

“Hiding what?”

“The fire in your belly. The passion. The conviction. Joe Crabbe riles people up for a living and you held your own against him.”

Dan didn't really know how to answer. "I guess I haven't spoken to anyone else who doesn't believe me. Apart from Clark, at first." He looked at Emma. "And you."

"Anyway," Emma dodged, "you should be proud of yourself. I think we should ask them to leave the thing about The Daily Chat's story in. I mean, it's going to be published, anyway, and at least this way people will hear your response before they read the article."

"Yeah," Dan said.

"Okay, stay here. I'll tell them what we do and don't want to make the cut. de Clerk and her team know better than to make you look stupid or take anything you said out of context, anyway."

Having seen the kind of dirt sheets that Emma's firm kept on people, Dan didn't doubt that.

A man wearing a Senior Technician lanyard entered Dan's studio to do something with the camera and made a passing comment congratulating Dan on his performance. Dan thanked him. As the technician was leaving, he stopped at the door. "How do you know Emma Ford, anyway?"

The question caught Dan off guard. "Thanks again," he said carefully.

The man took the hint and left. Dan didn't mention him when Emma returned a few minutes later.

As they walked down the corridor together, Emma told Dan about a new opportunity to do a live show on Tuesday evening. "It was the firm's idea and I said no at first," she told him, "but after seeing how well you handled yourself there, I think you're ready."

"What show?" Dan said.

"Nothing is set in stone, but it's a good way to get your face out there to a whole new audience. Most people don't watch the news or current affairs shows, so even if you had actual proof there would still be a lot of people who didn't know."

Dan let the "actual proof" jibe fly, still reluctant to mention his smoking-gun Kloster letter until it was fully translated and he had shown it to Clark. "This isn't the way we came," he suddenly said

when they reached an unfamiliar corner.

Emma didn't reply.

"What's going on?"

"There are some people I want you to meet," Emma said.

"What kind of people?"

"Advertising people."

Dan did a 180-degree turn and kept walking.

"Twenty thousand dollars," Emma said. "You keep the cash."

He stopped in his tracks.

Emma walked until she caught up with him. "Lexington Cola. It's a thirty-second spot and you'll be in and out in two hours, max. All they want you to do is stand in front of a green screen with a can in your hand, look into the camera, and say a few lines."

"Not a chance in hell," Dan said.

"Thirty grand."

Dan shook his head.

"Fifty."

"How much is the firm making out of this if you can afford to negotiate my pay up by 250%?"

Emma's expression changed. "You keep an \$85 cheque on your wall and you're seriously saying no to \$50,000? You're not thinking straight. You have to make the most of your fifteen minutes."

"What fifteen minutes?" Dan said. "This isn't a flash in the pan. I found evidence of an alien cover-up. I have the evidence. We can talk about money when the truth is out, but until then I'm not listening."

"Dan..."

"No. It's not even a moral thing. If I take money for ads, that's it. Game over. I literally become the guy who's in it for the money. That's all the ammunition that Walker and Slater and Crabbe and the rest of the liars and shills will ever need."

"We have to make hay while the sun shines," Emma said. It was corny, but it was all she could muster. "And I already told you that the firm are recalling me next Sunday..."

“Emma, I can’t do it.”

“Okay,” she said, setting off back along the corridor. “But ads are the biggest payday you can bring, so I don’t even think they’ll let me stay until Sunday.”

Dan walked beside her. “How does this sound,” he said. “If you help me win, I’ll do the ad and you can keep my fee.”

“Define win...”

“When someone in the current government admits that intelligent aliens exist,” Dan said. “When that happens, I’ll do it. Deal?”

“We had offers from Mansize Clothing and Beanstox Coffee, too. If you promise do to all three, I might be able to talk the firm into letting me stay. That’s if I can convince them that there’s even the slightest chance of your winning scenario actually coming true.”

“Fine by me,” Dan said. “Unless you don’t want to stay? You could probably be making more money with another client, right?”

Emma shook her head briskly. “Well, yeah... but I’ll get a good commission if you do the live show on Tuesday. And trust me, this is a lot more fun than my usual work. You’re not like the other clients.”

“Because I’m telling the truth?” Dan said with a grin.

Emma laughed. “Something like that.”

D minus 66

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

Dan arrived home in the small hours of Monday morning. Emma went inside with him to charge her phone for a few minutes while the chauffeur waited outside, the phone's battery having been stretched beyond its limit by heavy use throughout a long day and particularly by streaming Focus 20/20 when it aired at 9pm.

Dan came across very well on the show, and Joe Crabbe came across like the obnoxious lout he was. As Dan watched himself, he felt like he was looking at someone else; even a day after getting it cut, he kept forgetting how short and straight his hair now was. And weatherman jokes aside, he couldn't deny that the designer glasses and the makeup artist's deft touch had him looking thoroughly presentable.

Someone from Emma's firm called immediately after the show to express their satisfaction and they ultimately agreed that Emma should stay in Colorado for at least another week or two. The phone had died shortly after that but she and Dan were both pleased by

the news, growing quite fond of each other's company as they became something of a formidable team.

Now, in Dan's living room, Emma sat down to watch the news while she waited for her phone to turn on. Quite surprisingly, President Slater hadn't responded to Prime Minister Godfrey's latest speech and Richard Walker still hadn't said anything since Friday. Emma wondered whether he would show up for work at the IDA on Monday morning. There would be a media scrum if he did, she reckoned.

"Do you want a drink or something?" Dan asked as he took off his shoes.

"Sure," Emma said. "Do you have any more of that fancy lemonade in the glass bottles?"

Dan fetched two bottles of Houghton's Home Fresh lemonade and joined Emma on the couch. "I meant to call my boss and tell him I won't be at work tomorrow," Dan suddenly said. "Shit, I'm supposed to be on coffee. If no one covers for me, Clint will be on the counter by himself and Mr Wolf might realise he doesn't need both of us."

"How much do you get paid at the bookstore?" Emma asked.

"Why?"

"I'm sure I could get the firm to cover it as an incurred expense. They're pretty hot on you after how well you did on Focus 20/20. I'll sort it out. How much will I say you make, \$150 a day?"

"Plus tips," Dan said unconvincingly.

Emma's phone made a sound like a wind chime. She walked over right away and scanned through her new messages, of which there were too many for her to deal with at this time on a Sunday night slash Monday morning. One caught her eye. "The article about your school thing is up," she said.

"How does it look?" Dan asked from the couch.

Emma scanned the text then met his eyes. "Bad."



The Daily Chat, Blitz Media's flagship national newspaper, bucked the general trend of declining readership by utilising attention-grabbing headlines and running the kind of long-form populist pieces which would have traditionally been more at home in weekly tabloid magazines. The Chat, as it was universally known, was only printed on weekdays, so this was the first edition since Dan's leak.

The online edition was behind a paywall, but Emma had full access one way or another. Its front-page headline read: "‘I WILL BE FAMOUS AND RICH’: MCCARTHY'S MOTIVES REVEALED... IN HIS OWN WORDS!"

The body of the article contained not one but two short essays, along with large scans of the originals which Blitz had somehow obtained. The originals were handwritten on ruled paper in a rushed schoolboy scrawl, both covered in red-pen notes from teachers correcting unnecessary capitals and too many exclamation marks.

Jan Gellar, editor of The Chat, prefaced the essays with an almost laughably biased introduction: "Any reasonable person already knows that Dan McCarthy's claims don't stand up to any kind of scrutiny, but when we take a closer look at the man who's making them, we see that the claims don't even stand up themselves."

Dan closed his eyes for a few seconds then kept reading.

"Here's the crux of the matter: Dan McCarthy didn't want to find proof of alien life, he just wanted to prove it. Twelve years later and with no proof in sight, he made some up."

Dan still didn't remember exactly what the essays said, but he was starting to remember writing the first in Mrs Dempsey's classroom, the one that was always too hot.

The first essay was titled *My Best Present*, and the date in the corner revealed that Dan would have been nine at the time of writing.

"How bad can it really be?" Dan said.

Emma didn't reply. They both started reading.

MY BEST PRESENT:

My best present was when my dad bought me a poster of all of the planets side by side. Can you believe that the other planets are even bigger than this one? Well they are! It says that some are really hot and some are really cold. My dad is a firefighter and he said that the sun is hotter than fire!

He also said that if the poster showed more of space then I would see that the other stars are bigger than the sun and that the other galaxies are bigger than our galaxy, too! Then when I said there must be other people on some of the other planets, my dad said "maybe there are," and my brother Clark said "don't encourage him." Then when my dad left, Clark said this to me: "Dan, you are an idiot. There are no aliens." But he is the idiot, because of course there are!

My dad also said that if I'm good all year then when I turn ten I might get my very own telescope... and that is now only two more weeks away! Then I will be able to show Clark and everyone else that there are aliens on other planets. And I will be the first person to find the proof and everyone will say "Well done!" and I will be famous and rich and buy a big house for all of my friends to live in.

THE END.

Emma finished reading first and looked at Dan until he lifted his eyes. "Did you write this?" she asked.

"I was nine."

Emma said nothing and scrolled to the second essay, titled *When I Grow Up*. The date indicated that it was penned a year after the first.

WHEN I GROW UP:

When I grow up I will find aliens for real because space is way too big for there not to be any. Even this planet is huge. One day last

year we drove to the store and it took TWO HOURS and I asked my dad why the car kept turning left and right because it felt like we had gone around the world five times already. Then when we got to the store he showed me a globe and said “this is where we live and this is where we are,” and compared to the whole size of the world, the two places were right next to each other!

I did another report about aliens last year. Mrs Dempsey said “Dan, there is no such thing as aliens.” So I pointed to the map on the wall and said “we are here, and if we drove all day we would still only be here, and our planet isn’t even big compared to the other ones.” And she said “Dan, you have been watching too many movies.”

Too many movies!

But I’ll show her, just like I’ll show Clark. I’ll show everyone.

I don’t have my telescope yet because on my birthday my dad said that the economy was too high for a telescope, and at Christmas he said that Santa only brings big fancy things for kids who don’t have big stupid brothers, but that if the economy comes down before my next birthday then I will definitely get one and I will finally be able to show Mrs Dempsey and Clark that I am right and they are wrong.

THE END.

The concluding commentary from Jan Gellar, The Daily Chat’s controversial editor, was scathing: “This is what we’re dealing with in Dan McCarthy. Rather than maturing his mind, all that the passage of time has done is give him a chance to come up with this perfect “leak”. What these essays reveal is that Dan McCarthy isn’t just someone who is desperate to believe; he is someone who is desperate to be the one who breaks the news. I’m no psychologist, but is that not an odd thing for a child to want?”

After he finished reading, and with Emma again waiting for a response, Dan spoke. “The second one wasn’t so bad,” he said. He

waited for Emma's face to show something. Anything. Eventually, he saw a hint of a smile.

"If this is the worst thing that Blitz could dig up about you, I don't think we have too much to worry about."

Dan felt a weight lift from his shoulders.

As Emma finished her lemonade and got ready to leave, she noticed a pensive look on Dan's face. "What are you thinking?" she asked.

"Just what you said about Blitz trying to dig up dirt on me. Do you think they're snooping around in my trash and stuff like that?"

Emma sensed an unease in Dan's voice that wasn't normally there. "Nothing's beneath them," she said, "but I can get security cameras and an alarm system set up. In fact, if you're keeping the folder here then we definitely should. The folder is here, right?"

"Yeah," Dan said, realising only then how foolish he had been to leave the documents, and particularly the Kloster letter, in his empty and unalarmed house. "And I think we should go ahead with the cameras."

"Will do. I'll sort it before we head off to the Kendrick show. But get some sleep tonight, okay? It's boring when I'm the only one awake in the car."

"I'll try," Dan said.

Emma stopped before stepping inside the waiting car. "By the way, did you ever get that telescope?"

Dan shook his head. "They're pretty expensive."

"Yeah." Emma waved. "See you in the morning."

Dan closed the door, turned the lock, and pushed the couch up against it. For the first time, he realised how exposed he and the folder were. Everyone knew who he was, everyone knew where he lived, and everyone knew he was alone.

If only Clark was here, he thought. No one would get through Clark.

Dan didn't want to translate any more of the Kloster letter until after he had seen Billy Kendrick and done the live TV show on

Tuesday, if that ended up happening. Though he was more curious about the content of the letter than he had ever been about anything, he knew Clark had been right to warn him against telling anyone about it until Clark got home on Tuesday night and he knew that keeping quiet would be a lot easier if he didn't know what the letter said.

Dan's thoughts were jumbled to the point of near incoherence as the clock neared 3am. After leaning a dining chair against the handle of the back door, he threw himself on the couch and watched ACN. At some point during the second news cycle, he fell asleep.

MONDAY

D minus 65

*IDA HEADQUARTERS
COLORADO SPRINGS, COLORADO*

Richard Walker arrived for work on Monday morning at his normal time of 8:35.

Unfortunately for Richard, nothing else about this particular Monday morning at the IDA could be described as normal.

The first thing to hit him was the media presence. Reporters crowded his car as he parked and swarmed him when he walked as though he was a high-profile defendant leaving court.

The press irritated him greatly, but they were nothing compared to the protesters who soon came into earshot. Though Richard counted only six of them, these megaphone-wielding rabble-rousers near the doorway made enough noise for six hundred.

“Walker lies, truth now!” they chanted, paraphrasing the sign from the already famous image of the man who stood behind President Slater during her brief appearance in Maryland. Having enjoyed a chuckle at Slater’s misfortune, Richard failed to see the funny side now that the shoe was on the other foot.

As an experienced politician, Richard knew better than to look into any of the many cameras being thrust in his face or to acknowledge the protesters in any way.

Richard maintained his bee-line to the doorway and quickly texted Ben Gold to warn him about the commotion and suggest that he enter via the lesser-used side door. Three security personnel then belatedly emerged from the IDA building and formed a cordon around Richard.

The chanting stopped as Richard and his guards reached the doorway, only a few metres from the previously loud group. He instinctively looked over to the protestors, if they deserved such a title, wondering why they had stopped so suddenly.

In turn, they took his stopping as a sign that he was about to speak. When Richard instead resumed walking and stepped into the revolving door, the oldest-looking of the protest group — a man who himself could have been no more than 25 — goaded Richard through his megaphone. “What’s wrong, scarface? Nothing to say?”

Richard’s head shot round to meet the eyes of the heckler. Richard stayed in the revolving door for a full rotation then stepped back outside. His guards, knowing better than to argue, dutifully followed and reformed their cordon.

“Who said that?” Richard asked.

In response, the heckler tossed a red water-balloon in Richard’s direction.

One of Richard’s guards, a long-serving IDA employee named Raúl, unthinkingly threw himself in front of his boss to take the impact. The other two guards, concerned that the balloon could be filled with anything from urine to acid, roughly shoved Richard off to the side.

The water-balloon burst against Raúl’s chest. Red paint splashed onto his face and covered his shirt. He turned to Richard, partly to check that he was okay and partly to receive the next order.

Richard’s eyes, however, were focused on his own feet; focused on the single speck of red paint that had landed on his Italian suede

shoes.

“Boss,” Raúl said.

Richard looked up. “Inside,” he ordered.

Raúl dashed towards the missile-thrower and tackled him to the ground. The other five protesters offered no help to their comrade, fleeing as quickly as their feet would allow. Conscious of the cameras, Raúl avoided punching the man and instead delivered three swift forearms to the side of his head; only two more than necessary.

This fallen protestor, evidently inspired by the blood drones which had been embarrassing Prime Minister Godfrey for the last few days, was already paying the price for being stupid enough to launch his copycat strike within sight of its target.

Richard waited for Raúl and his perp inside the IDA building, away from prying eyes. The man, dazed by the ferocity of Raúl’s tackle and strikes, struggled to support his own weight. The other two guards followed Richard’s orders to help Raúl prop the man up.

“Say it again,” Richard said to the man. They were nose to nose. Richard turned so that his scar was right in front of the man’s eyes. “Call me that again.”

“I-I-I’m sorry,” the man choked out.

“Stand up!” Richard snapped as the man slouched. He then signalled for the guards to step back.

The man regained his footing and looked at Richard, who was a lot taller than he came across on TV. “I’m sorry,” he repeated, each word a struggle.

Richard smirked. Then, with no warning, he sent a crashing head-butt into the bridge of the man’s nose. The man fell to the ground, clutching his nose in agony. Richard didn’t flinch.

Raúl noticed blood above Richard’s eyebrow. “You okay, boss?”

“I’ll feel a lot better when this maggot is out of my building.”

The other two guards, who didn’t know Richard nearly as well as Raúl did, looked at each other in shock. To them and others their age, Richard Walker was a frail 68-year-old with a limp.

“What are you waiting for?” Richard asked them. “Get him out of my sight.”

The guards unceremoniously pulled the man to his feet.

“Not you, Raúl,” Richard said.

Raúl stood, looking unsure, as the other guards dragged the man towards the building’s side entrance.

Richard opted to limp towards Raúl rather than call him over, then extended his hand. “Clean yourself up,” he said, “then come to my office. I need someone at my door, full time.”

“Of course, boss,” Raúl said, setting off immediately. He had been around long enough to know how unwise it was to hang around once Richard was finished talking.

At 8:43 on a far from normal Monday morning, Richard Walker set off towards his office.

As soon as no one was looking, he gritted his teeth and rubbed his aching forehead.



Ben Gold arrived in Richard Walker’s office with the four usual newspapers under his arm.

“How bad was it?” he asked.

“It would have been worse if we didn’t have Raúl.”

Ben placed the newspapers on Richard’s desk and sat down opposite him. For the first time, he saw the hint of blood above Richard’s eyebrow and the developing bruise that surrounded it. “What the hell happened?”

“Justice,” Richard said. After further prodding from Ben, he relayed the whole story. Ben seemed most keen to confirm that the head-butt had occurred away from the cameras, which Richard insisted was indeed the case.

“I’ll arrange a police perimeter for the end of the day and tomorrow,” Ben promised.

Richard shrugged and unfolded the newspapers. The Gazette,

The Bulletin and The Digest all ran front-page articles about the leak. The Gazette and The Bulletin both focused on the unusually personal strife that the issue had caused between President Slater and Prime Minister Godfrey. The Digest, meanwhile, covered the revelation of Hans Kloster's now-verified private letter to his former employers at NASA in which the controversial scientist warned against attempts to communicate with any extraterrestrial intelligences.

Without voicing his annoyance at these headlines, Richard turned to The Daily Chat. Unsurprisingly, as Blitz Media's flagship periodical, The Chat devoted their front page to a hit-piece on Dan McCarthy. While the other newspapers seemed to be sitting on the fence, hedging their bets, and giving dangerous credence to the leak, Richard was pleased to find someone willing to take a committed anti-McCarthy stance.

He was also impressed by The Chat's success in unearthing something tangible to discredit McCarthy, even if the excited ramblings of a 10-year-old weren't exactly decisive proof of questionable character.

"Call Gellar," Richard said to Ben.

"Jan Gellar?"

Richard's eyes replied for him.

"You can't be serious," Ben said. "You're not going to work with them after what they tried to do to you with the—"

"I'm calling it in," Richard interrupted. "It's time."

Richard's tone left Ben in no doubt that he wouldn't budge, so Ben reluctantly dialled Jan Gellar and handed the phone to Richard.

Jan Gellar, the former Head of Content at Blitz News who had since been tasked with saving the floundering Daily Chat, answered her phone with a questioning inflection: "This is Jan?"

"And this is me," Richard said. Despite a half-hearted attempt, he couldn't keep the smile from his face.

Jan said nothing for several seconds. "What do you want?"

"Dan McCarthy's head."

“Oh, we’re working on that,” Jan replied in a more upbeat tone.

“Today,” Richard said. “ACN and everyone else are at my place of work, and I won’t stand for it. I want you to shut McCarthy down. Today.”

“Like I said, we’re working on—”

“Work harder.”

Jan paused again. “What exactly are you getting at?”

“It’s time to break out the old tactics,” Richard said casually. “Stalking, surveillance, harassment of friends and family. You know, all the ones I’m so familiar with?”

“It’s not that simple,” Jan pleaded. “McCarthy has representation. He’s with XPR.”

Richard raised his eyebrows at the surprising news that Dan McCarthy had secured such powerful representation.

He certainly recognised the irony in the situation given that XPR’s founder had been the first to uncover Blitz Media’s penchant for underhand and illegal surveillance and harassment campaigns, one of which had targeted Richard. When XPR broke the news to Richard and a handful of Blitz Media’s other targets, those targets quickly reached lucrative settlements with Jan Gellar and her employers. This revelation about McCarthy was the first Richard had heard of XPR in a while.

“You’re already going after him, anyway,” he said, setting aside the XPR news to which he had no stock reply.

The increasingly desperate voice at the other end of the line then tried to explain to Richard that their coverage and methods so far had been within certain roughly defined conventional boundaries and that an unprovoked escalation would likely elicit a devastating response from XPR.

“I don’t care,” came Richard’s dispassionate reply. “This isn’t a negotiation. If you’re worried that XPR might put you in the shit if you do this, let me make it clear that I will put you in the shit if you don’t. No might. Will. Don’t forget: I have the proof, too.”

“We made a deal,” Jan said, trying to keep her cool as the

situation spiralled beyond her control.

“And I’m making a new one.”

After a few seconds, Jan sighed audibly. There was no guarantee that McCarthy and XPR would find out about what Richard was asking her to do, so doing it was unquestionably less risky than calling the bluff of a man who quite simply didn’t bluff. “Fine. You win. So what exactly are we talking?”

Richard winked victoriously at Ben. “Give it all you’ve got,” he ordered.

With no other options, Jan Gellar committed to the role she had been forced into. “McCarthy and his rep are going to Cheyenne today, for a Billy Kendrick show,” she said. “It’s an unannounced appearance. We picked that up at Kendrick’s end.”

“Perfect. Even if it means you won’t get anything useful until tomorrow, at least it’s an easy opening.”

“We’ll get right to it.”

“Good,” Richard said. “Go nuclear.”

D minus 64

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

“The home security people are running late,” Emma said when she arrived on Dan’s doorstep at the unusually reasonable time of 9:35. It was the first weekday morning since Dan’s leak, and she had already dealt with a lot of necessary but tedious admin.

“How late?” Dan asked.

“Too late. And We have to leave at 10:30, so I doubt they’ll be finished before we go. I can’t even get through to them on the phone.”

Dan opened the door fully and invited her inside. “Do you want some fancy lemonade while we wait?” he asked.

Emma’s frustrated expression faded. “Why not.”

“I got a food delivery twenty minutes ago,” Dan said on his way to the kitchen, “and it’s a whole week’s worth, even though Clark is coming home tomorrow night.”

“Tomorrow?” Emma echoed.

“Yeah. He managed to switch some things around and book a

flight.”

“What time does he get in?”

Dan returned to the living room and handed Emma her bottle. “Late,” he said. “Why?”

“The firm have secured the live show I was telling you about, and we’re filming it here. Well, in the city. Your brother could have, uh, come along if he was home,” she said.

“He won’t be,” Dan replied, not sounding too disappointed; it was bad enough that he hadn’t told Clark about the Kendrick gig, never mind a live TV appearance. “What kind of show is it, anyway?”

“A lighter one. The firm think it’s time to get your face in front of a broader audience. We should focus on today, though. I spoke to Billy Kendrick’s people, and he’s happy to have you onstage for as long as you want to be there. Two minutes or two hours, it’s our call.”

“What would I be doing onstage?”

Emma shrugged. “Probably just standing there while Billy uses you to sell his books, but at least he’s 100% on your side so nothing can really go wrong.”

Dan finished his lemonade and carried the glass bottle to the kitchen. “Where’s your computer?” she asked. “I want to check something.”

“I’ll bring it to the couch,” Dan said; he didn’t like anyone going in his room, even Clark.

“I need you to show me every article you’ve ever submitted,” Emma said when Dan returned with the laptop. “I need to know what’s out there, in case Blitz do what they did with those things you wrote in school.”

Dan navigated to a folder and explained that he had only ever submitted a few articles he was confident of selling, wary of getting a reputation for wasting editors’ time. There were four articles in the folder. One, titled Lake Vostok, was the article Richard Walker had referenced in his initial response to the leak. Emma had read

this article a few hours before meeting Dan and knew it was the source of his treasured \$85 cheque.

The next two articles focused on the relatively uncontroversial but interesting topics of super-volcanoes and cryogenics. Emma then spotted the title of the final article, which piqued her interest. "What's Space vs War?" she asked.

"Not as cool as it sounds," Dan said. He opened the file, explaining to Emma as he scrolled that it was a numbers-heavy comparison of the cost of space exploration and military equipment.

Satisfied that there was nothing harmful in any of that, Emma asked to see what else Dan had written but not submitted. Within seconds, a folder of 63 files met her eyes.

"They're not all finished," Dan said.

This time, the first two titles Emma saw were Atlantis, Lemuria, Mu: Fact vs Fiction and The Conspiracy Theory Conspiracy. She immediately pushed Dan's hands out of the way and disconnected his computer from the internet.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Plugging the leak before it gets out," Emma said. "From now on, nothing with any of your files on it goes online, okay? I'll get you a new tablet for the internet."

Dan didn't say anything. Emma's thoroughness always impressed him, and the promise of a new tablet to replace his geriatric laptop sounded good. He closed the computer and carried it back to his room. When he got back, Emma was looking at something on her phone.

"No one is talking about aliens today," she said. "It's 80% politicians and 20% you."

Dan took Emma's phone from her outstretched hand and looked at the cartoon on the screen. Like many other British political cartoons it featured the Coledog, an already famous caricature of John Cole as a fat bulldog with a Union Jack bow-tie. As usual, the Coledog was foaming at the mouth. But in this topical sketch, a monocle-wearing William Godfrey sat atop the Coledog, desperately

trying to keep hold of the reins.

The country-sized Coledog stood on a map of the world, straining angrily to cross the Atlantic and attack President Slater, who was caricatured as the Statue of Liberty. There was a lot going on in the small drawing, which was the first original Coledog cartoon to debut in an American newspaper, but none of it forwarded Dan's goal. He handed the phone back to Emma.

"This is why the firm set up the live show for tomorrow night," Emma said. "We need people to start drawing and writing about you."

"Do you know who's hosting it yet?"

"Marco Magnifico," Emma said, answering in the most neutral tone she could manage.

Dan chortled involuntarily, then realised that Emma wasn't joking. "What station is it on?" he asked after a few disbelieving seconds.

"Not a Blitz one," Emma said, delighted and only slightly surprised that this was Dan's first concern.

Prior to learning that he didn't appear on a Blitz station, Dan knew precisely two things about Marco Magnifico: he was a stage hypnotist, and he was an asshole.

"You can say no to this," Emma continued, reading Dan's conflicted expression. "I told the firm you might say no."

"He's the guy who makes celebrities eat dog food, right?" Dan asked. He had once seen a few minutes of a Marco Magnifico show when Clark was watching it, and the dog food was all he could remember. Other than that, the only reference he had was Clark's description of an appearance on Marco's show as the last resort of fading D-listers who were "too old or too ugly to go the usual sex-tape route."

Emma hesitated. "From what I've heard, he can't make them do anything they aren't willing to do. But trust me, he won't pull any of that stuff on you. I'll be right there, and he'll know that. This is a special one-off live interview, not his usual clown show. That's why

he's coming to Colorado Springs to film it. The selling point is that people want to see if you can stick to your story when you're, you know, out of it."

"It's not a story," Dan said, instinctively defensive.

Emma didn't respond directly. "How would you feel about truth serum?"

"Why not just skip the foreplay and waterboard me?" Dan retorted.

"It wasn't my idea," Emma said, literally holding her hands up. "I don't even know if it works, the network just wanted it as part of the show. Will you do the hypnotism without it, though?"

"I'll do it if Walker does it. That's fair."

"The burden of proof is on you. I'm not saying it's fair, but he is Richard Walker. You're just Dan McCarthy, some guy who says aliens are real."

"Okay," Dan said. "I'll do it."

"Are you sure? It's live."

"If this is what it takes."

"So you're sure that you're sure? Because they're going to start advertising the hell out of this show as soon as I green-light it."

"Emma... take yes for an answer."

Emma smiled broadly then quickly regained her composure. "Okay. Just one thing: I need you to swear that you don't have that schizotypal personality thing, because the stuff I read said that you might be too susceptible to hypnosis if you have it."

"I don't have it," Dan said, trying not to sound tired of repeating that fact. "I do solemnly swear."

"Perfect." Emma took her phone from her pocket and texted out the good news.

"Is he even a real hypnotist, anyway?" Dan asked. "My dad used to say the celebrities were just acting, but me and Clark didn't think anyone would be desperate enough to choose to eat dog food on TV."

"He's legit. I know people who have repped clients on his show,

and none of it was fake. He used to be a clinical hypnotist; pretty well known and respected in his field, I think. Now his peers see him as a joke because he switched over to entertainment and decided to use his skills to make as much money as he could. He's basically the Billy Kendrick of hypnosis," Emma said, smiling to herself.

"Billy's nothing like that," Dan said. "You'll see."

Emma looked at the time. They only had five minutes before they had to set off, and the home security people still hadn't answered any of her calls. She tried once more and finally got through.

Dan watched quietly as Emma switched into a gear he hadn't seen before, verbally mauling whoever was on the other end of the line. She made absolutely clear that the work had to be finished before they returned from the Kendrick show, no ifs and no buts. "I don't want my client to notice that it's done," she said, "and I don't want anyone to notice you doing it. Is that clear?"

After a few minutes of testy back and forth, Emma hung up and turned to Dan.

"We need to leave them a key to get in," she explained, "so we need to take the folder with us. Obviously they know better than to do anything stupid, but we can't take any kind of chance."

"No way," Dan said. "I'm not taking it on the road. I'll leave it with Mr Byrd."

"Is he home?"

"Probably."

"Could you get him to stay here while they fit the equipment?"

Dan nodded; he knew that Mr Byrd meant it when he often said he would do anything to help. Dan ran across the street and filled Mr Byrd in on the situation. As expected, Mr Byrd said he would be over in a few minutes.

Emma called the security company to tell them about the new plan, which was better for them, too, since it ruled out any potential suggestions of impropriety.

"When does the car get here?" Dan asked when she was off the

phone.

"The firm wouldn't give us a car for this," Emma said. "I meant to say that earlier."

"Why not?"

"They didn't think Kendrick was worth it. Their words. I had to talk them into letting you do it at all because I know how highly you think of him, and I know how highly he thinks of you. I probably could have lobbied for the car, but I didn't think you'd agree to do Marco so I didn't want to pick this battle."

"Can you drive?" Dan asked.

"You mean legally, or...?"

Dan looked at her blankly.

"Lighten up, I'm joking! You drive there, I'll drive back. Deal?"

"Other way round," Dan said.

"Fine by me," Emma agreed.

Dan tossed her the keys just as Mr Byrd entered the house. "Could you keep an eye on the installers when they're in my room?" Dan asked him. "I don't want them nosing around."

"Of course, son."

"And don't let them in my dad's room."

Emma interjected. "Dan, they need to put cameras everywh—"

"I wasn't talking to you," Dan said in an uncharacteristically blunt tone.

Without replying, Emma walked out to the car.

"Don't worry," Mr Byrd said reassuringly. "I won't let them near it."

BEANSTOX BOWL
CHEYENNE, WYOMING

Dan and Emma pulled up outside the Beanstox Bowl arena several hours ahead of Billy Kendrick's sold-out show. As they entered the theatre's backstage area, where Billy was already talking to sound engineers and lighting technicians, everyone stopped what they were doing and turned to see the man of the moment.

Everyone, that was, apart from Billy Kendrick.

A confused expression crossed Billy's face when he saw them arrive, his eyes focusing only on Emma. "How did this happen?" he asked, eventually looking at Dan.

"We approached him," Emma said.

Billy tipped his head slightly in a "that makes sense" kind of way. He then extended his hand to Dan. "Good to finally meet you," he said warmly. "That was a solid showing on Focus 20/20. And trust me, five hostile faces on a panel is a lot tougher to deal with than 3,000 friendly faces in a theatre."

Dan mumbled his thanks, even more star-struck in the presence

of a man he had admired for years than he had been when talking to the world-famous actress Kaitlyn Judd less than 24 hours earlier.

Billy then personally showed Dan and Emma to a private room where they could settle in. He said he would come back in an hour to talk Dan through what he could expect during the show.

“Why don’t you show Dan the stage now?” Emma suggested, addressing Billy in a friendlier tone than she typically used but still making clear that it wasn’t a suggestion. She then looked to Dan. “I have to make a few calls, anyway.”

Dan knew that Emma only threw in the “anyway” to make it sound like it wasn’t a direct order, but he didn’t object to looking around the theatre. He gladly set off with Billy, who didn’t seem to mind, either.

Despite its tacky corporate name, the Beanstox Bowl was an iconic building with a rich history. As Billy led Dan through its corridors towards the stage entrance, they passed countless old posters and props framed on the walls. Billy, already dressed to perform in his unassuming grey-suit-white-shirt combo, made small talk as they walked. Dan, for his part, wore one of the fashionable outfits from his first interview at the Sizzle & Spark Salon, handpicked for this event by Emma.

Right before the stage, they passed an impressively well preserved fragment of the 120-year-old theatre’s original burgundy curtain.

In support of what Emma had been saying since Friday night, Billy shared his feeling that momentum was crucial. “24-hour news is nothing if not fickle,” he said, “so you need to keep striking while this iron’s hot.”

Dan had listened to Billy Kendrick talk for countless hours on his radio show and podcast, but that had always been one-way. Face to face with Billy, Dan found himself stuck in listening mode. “Yeah,” was all he managed to mutter in response.

“How are you holding up to all of this, anyway?” Billy asked, changing track. “Last week you were working in a bookstore, right?”

Now you're talking to Marian de Clerk and Marco Magnifico; Slater and Godfrey are namedropping you; you're showing up here with Emma Ford..."

Dan couldn't help but notice that Billy put more emphasis on Emma's name than those of people far more famous and powerful. Combined with the fact that Billy had seemed more interested in Emma than Dan when they first arrived, this made Dan curious enough to successfully articulate a semi-coherent thought: "How do you know her, anyway? Emma, I mean."

"I've had some, uh, dealings with her and her firm," Billy said. "She didn't tell you?"

Dan didn't commit to an answer.

Billy continued nonetheless. "I was caught up in the whole Blitz Media and XPR thing. Well, I wasn't caught up in it; I was one of Blitz Media's targets. Do you know what I'm talking about?"

"She mentioned something about her boss digging up evidence of Blitz illegally harassing people, and that one of them was her client."

"That's right; I heard about what Blitz were doing from the higher-ups at XPR. They pretty much told me that they had the evidence against Blitz and could secure me some compensation if I flew to New York and signed a contract that gave them a cut. I couldn't pursue the case against Blitz myself because I didn't have any of the evidence, so XPR offered me a take-it-or-leave-it deal."

"Did you take it?"

"I left it," Billy said. "You can't expect to dip your foot in a pool full of sharks and walk away whenever you feel like it."

Dan didn't know what to say.

"I don't mean you," Billy sought to clarify. "And I don't mean her. Not Emma Ford. This was, I don't even know, seven or eight years ago. She was barely in the door. The top people from XPR at that time have left now, anyway, so it's pretty much a different company."

"But you said you've had dealings with her specifically," Dan

said.

Billy nodded. "Much later. Maybe two years ago. She repped a few of the bigger names I had on my show. We did a few video chats to go over what I couldn't ask them, but it was only ever personal stuff. She always seemed more open minded than the talent agents I usually deal with. She said she was covering for someone who was sick and that she didn't normally rep entertainers. I think her work is more of the bigger picture behind-the-scenes stuff; you know, controlling media narratives."

"So you think it's a good thing that she came to me?"

"It's an excellent thing," Billy insisted. "Did you sign anything, or are XPR just keeping the booking fees from your appearances in exchange for giving you the exposure and trying to shape the narrative?"

"I didn't sign anything."

"Even better," Billy said.

"How much did you have to pay them to let me come here?" Dan asked.

Billy looked surprised. "Nothing. Emma called me on Saturday morning and said you were desperate to do it."

"She didn't bring it up until Saturday afternoon," Dan said. "I jumped all over it, obviously, but I wouldn't have even known it was an option if she hadn't suggested it. She said the firm didn't think it was worth doing until she talked them into it. They wouldn't even give us the car."

"Hmmm," Billy mused. "She wouldn't have wasted a day coming here if she didn't have some kind of an angle."

Dan looked out at rows and rows of empty seats. The traditional theatre had three tiers of seating, with room for around 3,000 spectators in total. "I want to know what the angle is," Dan said.

Billy tapped him on the back and started walking. "Me too."



Only a few paces after Billy and Dan passed the framed piece of curtain on their way back to find Emma, she appeared through the door up ahead.

“Hey,” Dan said. “We were just coming to—”

Emma briskly raised a hand which silenced Dan with immediate effect. Only now did he notice that she was talking on the phone.

“Hold on a second,” Emma said into the phone. “He’s here right now.”

Somewhat reluctantly, Dan held his hand out to take the phone. To his relief, and surprise, Emma gave it to Billy.

“Hello?” Billy said, as surprised as Dan that he was apparently receiving a call on Emma’s phone. “Oh, Timo! Always a pleasure.”

Dan immediately turned to Emma. She was smirking.

Billy raised a finger to excuse himself and returned to the relative privacy of the stage.

“Timo?” Dan said. “Timo Fiore? How in the hell do you know Timo Fiore?”

“I know everyone,” Emma grinned.

In the early planning stages of Billy Kendrick’s speaking tour, Billy sought crowd-sourced funding for his travel and living expenses while on the road. He promised to itemise and publicise every cent he spent, and only took the crowd-funding route in an effort to keep ticket prices low and avoid the need for corporate sponsors.

Billy reached 40% of his target within 48 hours, at which point Blitz News and other Blitz Media outlets began mocking his cap-in-hand approach and warning the public against contributing. Contributions ground to a halt until Timo Fiore, an exceedingly wealthy individual with great enthusiasm for Billy’s work, donated 100% of the target so that Billy could both undertake his ambitious tour and also refund everyone who had already contributed.

Timo’s fortune — which floated around the thirty to forty billion dollar mark — made him something between the second and fifth wealthiest person in Europe, dependent on trivial things like stock

fluidity and exchange-rate fluctuations.

As the forty-something heir to two vast fortunes, Timo's wealth was inherited rather than earned. An only child of two blue-blooded only children, Timo won the genetic lottery. But with no desire to manage any kind of empire, he wasted no time in cashing in his chips.

Despite doing nothing to earn his controlling interests in two titanic corporations, Timo had been roundly praised for extracting an eye-watering price from the Qatari oil magnates who purchased the Pierre & Jonas fashion house inherited from his mother's side of the family. Some observers criticised the sale of his father's Paldor supercar firm to an already huge Italian conglomerate as rushed and accused Timo of xenophobia for refusing to consider a more lucrative Japanese bid, but in general it was accepted that he had done well with the sell-offs.

Timo's father's sole wish had been that Paldor stayed in Italian hands, while his mother demanded only that Timo would continue her philanthropic efforts. In the five years since his father's passing, which almost immediately followed his mother's, Timo had kept both of his promises.

Dan, like most others, had little affection for the hyper-rich, but he knew that Timo could be a powerful ally; had Dan known Emma had his number, he would have asked to speak to Timo straight away.

Timo owned four of the most advanced radio observatories in the world, three of which he had built from scratch and another which he had saved from closure. He was a forthright believer in the existence of intelligent extraterrestrials and, though he had never publicly accused anyone of covering anything up, he was outspoken in his insistence that space observation and even exploration should not be the sole domain of government agencies.

Dan tried again to make out some of Billy's words through the stage door, then gave up and asked Emma the obvious question of why she had approached Timo.

Frustratingly, Emma refused to “spoil the surprise.”

Knowing her well enough to know that she wouldn't budge, Dan moved on to the question he'd been going to ask before the subject of Timo came up in the first place: “Why did your firm tell Billy this whole thing was my idea when you told me it was the firm's idea?”

“Because the firm don't know the good news about Timo. I had to go solo for that one, because he wouldn't have agreed to give them any kind of cut.”

Dan furrowed his brow. “A cut of what? And what good news? And if it's so good, why is it secret?”

“Sometimes you have to hold good news back until the time is right,” Emma said.

Dan's mind automatically turned to the Kloster letter, currently in the care of Mr Byrd and still unknown to everyone bar Dan and whoever was in on the cover-up.

“It's worth the suspense,” Emma said. “Trust me.”

Dan suddenly leapt away from the door, hearing footsteps on the other side.

“Ho-ly shit,” Billy said as he stepped through. He then handed the phone back to Emma, who was smiling almost as broadly as he was. “I knew you had something.”

“What is it?” Dan asked, agitated at being the only one who didn't know.

“A bounty,” Billy said.

Emma nodded and took over. “He'll give any government worker who brings forward irrefutable evidence of intelligent extraterrestrial life guaranteed safe harbour and a one-hundred million dollar reward.”

“What's in it for him?” Dan asked.

Billy shrugged. “Prestige, probably.”

“I don't think it's just that,” Emma mused. “See, there are very few things money can't buy. I have a feeling our man Timo wants to find out if the truth is one of them.”

D minus 62

WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON, D.C.

In lieu of a spoken reply to William Godfrey's latest inflammatory comments, President Slater and Jack Neal penned a short statement. Godfrey's escalation left them with no choice but to respond in stronger language than they had used thus far.

Jack handed the statement to the White House's head press officer and instructed that it should henceforth be quoted as the administration's official response.

All reporters who called after this point were given the same few lines. In them, President Slater scolded John Cole in no uncertain terms and encouraged Godfrey to keep him in check. She emphasised her "extreme disappointment that the Prime Minister's politically motivated outbursts have descended into sustained personal belligerence." The verbose wording was intended as a jab at Godfrey, but this went over most people's heads exactly as Jack Neal had tried to warn Slater it would.

At Jack's suggestion, Slater had at least agreed to include a line

about her hitherto undisclosed conversation with Diane Logan, Godfrey's Deputy PM. The statement mentioned "a constructive conversation" in which Diane was "keen to stress that the Prime Minister's words do not reflect the views of his own party, much less the British people."

The final line was a direct response to Godfrey and Cole's accusations of American selfishness and hypocrisy: "In the face of the very real international challenges we face," Slater wrote, "a united front among natural allies has never been more crucial. Personal differences between elected leaders cannot and will not be allowed to harm the synergistic relationship between our two countries. If William Godfrey has a problem unrelated to his role as Prime Minister, he would be well advised to address it in private rather than continue to destabilise the international community and sully his own office with these transparent attempts to divert attention from his own domestic failings."

Within minutes, the statement was everywhere.

BEANSTOX BOWL
CHEYENNE, WYOMING

Emma relayed President Slater's statement to Dan before he took his seat behind the curtain on Billy Kendrick's stage. That Slater had entirely avoided referencing the leak frustrated both of them, but the news of Timo Fiore's \$100,000,000 bounty strengthened Dan's belief that the President was swimming against a tide that was about to sweep her up and slam her into a wall of her own lies.

Even since Slater's previous public comment, it had been verified that Hans Kloster had indeed pleaded with NASA to halt all active SETI. Emma suggested that Slater was probably being advised to stop denying the story she wanted to go away, which could only ever serve to give it more oxygen. It was a sensible and inevitable move, Emma said, but Dan knew Slater was crazy if she thought the wave of truth coming her way could be avoided so easily.

All 3,000-plus audience members were by now in their seats, and a sly peek showed Dan that they were a very diverse crowd. Most surprising to Dan was the large number of women in their

twenties and thirties; for whatever reason, he had always assumed that Billy's primary demographic was older men.

Billy promptly took to the stage to rapturous applause. He thanked everyone for coming and got on with his well-rehearsed routine. It involved a lot of graphics and audience participation, as usual, but proceeded at an accelerated pace to ensure that he could get through the whole thing and still leave plenty of time to address the developing story of the IDA leak. Billy had done similar during his Friday and Sunday night shows, but tonight he had to be even brisker to make sure everyone got to see his special guest. Billy had the theatre for three hours, but the show was only supposed to run for two and he knew that some people would have pre-arranged travel or childcare commitments.

The meat of Billy's show centred around the book he was best known for, *How And Why: Five Scenarios For Disclosure*. Commonly known as *Five Scenarios*, Billy's magnum opus wasn't just a scenario analysis; it was the scenario analysis. There had been official NASA-backed analyses of contact scenarios in the past, but nothing on disclosure. Disclosure was the dirty word that the establishment avoided like the plague. Billy Kendrick, utterly sure that aliens were real and that the elites already knew, had long felt that disclosure was an inevitable step on the road to contact.

In Billy's mind, "capital-D Disclosure" would be a species-defining moment. He reminded the crowd that Disclosure would be an admission of a lie as well as an acknowledgement of the truth, and implored them to refrain from any violent expressions of anger at being kept in the dark once the truth came out.

He shared his expectation that baseless fear would be the most prominent emotional reaction and predicted chaos in the first few hours after the announcement, which he now took for granted as an inevitability. "Gas pumps will run dry and shelves will lay empty for a while," he said, "but a week later everything will reset into the new normal. Our place in the universe and our systems of government might transform in the months to come, but most of

your day-to-day lives will not. Some industries will fall, but new ones will rise in their place. I know I'm preaching to the converted here, but we have to stress that capital-D Disclosure does not equate to capital-D Disaster. Make sure your friends and families know that."

After a speedy and semi-distracted run through his slides on "knock-on effects," Billy turned to the tactics and strategies he believed were still being used to suppress the truth, including the central idea of a "laughter curtain". In simple terms, Kendrick talked about unspecified elites hiding their secrets behind lies and attempting to "link real issues with joke issues" so that anyone who questioned the official line could be dismissed out of hand as a lunatic.

He cited Area 51 as a good example, insisting that it was "almost certainly brimming with above-top-secret military tech" but that an unshakable association with little green men had been carefully cultivated to render serious discussion impossible.

Before long, Billy moved on to Dan's leak. "I'd be lying if I said that the phrase "too good to be true" never crossed my mind," he said, "but everything that's happened since Dan McCarthy leaked those files has corroborated their contents. If anyone is still lost as to why Richard Walker and the IDA would cover this up, it's not complicated; this is what happens when we let Cold War-era mentalities run space agencies. The IDA always was and always will be a corrupt tool of the military industrial complex, and Richard Walker always was and always will be the perfect IDA leader. Even when he tried to bury Dan on Friday afternoon, he mentioned that old phrase of his about protecting our "well-earned national security advantage." Walker has been using that line since 1988."

Billy walked to the other side of the stage and continued. "And now we know what it means," he said. "Think about it: what happens when we find out that we're not alone? What happens when we as a species start defining our existence in contrast to something else rather than each other? What happens to our

ridiculous levels of military spending when we realise that we're all citizens of one of many inhabited planets? Hmm? What happens to "our" well-earned national security advantage then?"

Dan considered Billy's words from his backstage seat. They made sense.

"That's what this is all about," Billy went on. "The IDA exists to protect that advantage from the truth that will render it obsolete. I should note that this doesn't mean I think the aliens will be hostile... far from it. I've covered that before, and Dan did the same on Focus 20/20 last night, so I won't address it now. What I do want to touch on is something William Godfrey said yesterday. Now, I never like to be on the same side as a snake-tongued scumbag like Godfrey, but his point about this being "an alien opportunity rather than an alien problem" really is worth reflecting on. Aside from the obvious and inherent potential for uniting humanity, the possibilities are endless. The government could be sitting on a revolutionary method of energy generation, interstellar propulsion, or any number of other things. I think Dan touched on this last night, too. Speaking of Dan... I'm going to see him soon, so does anyone have anything they'd like to ask him?"

Dozens of hands shot up.

"Hold that thought," Billy said. He walked off to the back of the stage and called Dan over with his hand.

A few audience members shifted in their seats, hoping their hunches were right.

Dan then stepped into the spotlight with Billy, drawing gasps of genuine surprise that soon morphed into loud cheers and applause.

"He's all yours," Billy smiled.



Everything Billy and Emma had told Dan about the crowd being on his side was quickly proven correct.

Dan found himself enjoying standing in front of the fully

engaged crowd so much that he considered ramping their enthusiasm up even further by mentioning the untranslated Kloster letter.

The initial reason for leaving the letter untranslated and keeping it quiet was Clark's order not to mention it, combined with Dan's recognition that it would be easier to stay quiet if he didn't know what the letter said. But things had started moving faster than Dan expected since he last spoke to Clark, what with the success of Focus 20/20 and now Timo Fiore's game-changing intervention. The news of Dan's upcoming hypnotism on live TV brought new concerns that something might slip out of his mouth before he wanted it to, and he ultimately decided to maintain his silence for now. A promise was a promise, and a promise to Clark meant more than any other.

Billy played the role of emcee, asking for questions and only passing them over to Dan if he considered them cordial and worthwhile. The next question, once again, turned Dan's mind to the German letter.

"I'll repeat that for everyone," Billy said, walking back to Dan from the front of the stage. "What made you decide to leak everything from the folder at once, Dan?"

Wary of saying something that would come back to bite him when he eventually released the letter, Dan hesitated. "Well, I wasn't in it for the attention," he said after a few seconds, "so I didn't want to make people wait without good reason. And there was no reason to hold back any of the files that I made public on Friday." He gulped, hoping that the conscience-easing qualification at the end of his answer wouldn't raise any suspicions.

Fortunately for Dan, it didn't. The rest of the fifteen-minute Q&A passed without any further hairy moments.

"We have two special announcements to close the show," Billy said, surprising Dan, who only knew about the Timo news. "As has been the case at every other venue, anyone who purchases their ticket tonight for the ET Weekender in Myrtle Beach will receive free

coach transport to and from the event. The first announcement is that, along with the guests we've already publicised, I'm extending an invitation to Dan McCarthy to be part of our spectacular event, which is now just eleven days away."

Dan didn't like being put on the spot, but he definitely wanted to be part of the ET Weekender. While Billy had previously run outdoor events which piggybacked on major music festivals, his latest creation was on a different scale altogether. Around 6,000 weekend camping passes and 12,000 one-day passes to the site had already been sold — a respectable number relative to the 73,000 who had attended one of the legs of the speaking tour so far. A master networker and unrivalled self-publicist, Billy supplemented the core discussion panels featuring prominent activists and academics with performances from several of the "ET curious" music stars who had previously been on his popular podcast. To attract another demographic, he had also secured several retired athletes to take part in his attempt to break the world record for most people cooking outdoors in one place at the same time.

"I'll be there," Dan said.

Billy applauded, encouraging the crowd to do the same. He then pointed their attention to the giant screen at the back of the stage, which he had made extensive use of during his show. "Now for the really big news," he said.

Timo Fiore's well-tanned face appeared on the screen to a smattering of mild applause and row upon row of unsure expressions; even though he was an ally in their search for truth, many in the audience were understandably hesitant to cheer for a man whose inherited fortune could make a serious dent in any number of humanitarian problems.

A recorded video then played, with Timo beginning by discussing his long-standing commitment to and support for SETI projects around the world. "And like thousands of scientists around the world, people like Billy and Dan are doing excellent work," Timo said in the kind of flawless English that came with a largely

parentless childhood in London, alternating between terms spent at boarding school and summers spent with nannies. “But the kind of evidence that will settle this once and for all is going to come from someone on the inside.”

Dan felt a little slighted by this, since his Kerguelen folder had come from someone on the inside, but he didn’t let it show.

Timo proceeded to announce his \$100,000,000 reward for any US government worker, contractor, or official, “no matter how lowly”, who stepped up to the plate and provided the kind of irrefutable evidence he was looking for. “The time is now for a hero to step forward: the whistleblower to end all whistleblowers.”

This time, the crowd applauded enthusiastically. Billy brought the show to a close and instructed the crowd how they could go about purchasing their ET Weekender tickets.

Backstage, Emma scolded Billy for putting Dan on the spot with his invitation. Billy laughed it off. He quickly changed the subject and warned them both to be careful around Marco Magnifico. Emma assured him that she would be in full control, which Dan was glad to hear.

“Until next time,” Billy said, offering Dan his hand. Dan shook it. “You know, I’m so glad it was you who bumped into that thief. Most people would have gone to the police or the press, and it would have been buried.”

“And I’m glad you’re the guy who was being interviewed by Blitz News when they cut to Walker’s speech,” Dan said. “Anyone else would have buried me under his lies.”

“Be careful with Blitz, too,” Billy said.

Emma fielded that one: “You don’t have to tell me.”

Billy laughed. “At least you’re in safe hands,” he said to Dan, before patting him on the back and opening the theatre’s back door for him.

When Dan stepped outside he saw two missed calls on his phone, which hadn’t been able to pick up a signal in the depths of the old theatre. They were both from Clark.

Emma looked at her own phone, also picking up its first signal for several hours, and Dan immediately noticed a look of concern on her face. "What is it?" he said.

She turned the screen to face him.

Above a Blue Dish Network logo and the headline "Update: Confirmed As Blitz Media Equipment", Dan saw the familiar background of the old drive-in and the familiar face of the old man from the pawnshop.

The man had a shotgun in one hand and a shattered spy drone in the other.

D minus 60

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

Emma insisted on driving back from the Billy Kendrick show in Cheyenne, thinking that Dan looked too shocked by the news of a spy drone being shot down over his house to safely take the wheel.

Phil Norris, the pawnshop owner whose name Dan was glad to finally be reminded of, explained that he had followed the shoe-sized drone after noticing it passing over his own property. He shot it down when it began to hover “right over Big Henry’s backyard,” as he put it. As Henry’s longtime friend, Phil saw nothing odd in walking round the side of the house to collect the fallen drone. He then hurried to the drive-in and told Trey and the watching world what had happened.

Trey examined the drone and found an exposed but intact micro SD card, which he promptly put into his computer. The unsecured data on the card, which included a full recording of the drone’s twelve-minute flight, conclusively pinned it on Blitz Media.

Dan asked Emma during the drive home whether Blitz sending a

drone to spy on him constituted the kind of unilateral escalation she had told him that neither side of the XPR-Blitz rift would risk.

“That’s above my pay grade,” Emma answered, “but it’s safe to say this won’t go down well.”

After watching Trey’s impromptu interview with Phil “drone-killer” Norris enough times to memorise the words, Dan decided to call Mr Byrd to check that he was still in the house. The idea of the folder, and especially the letter, being in an empty house with Blitz sniffing around made Dan uneasy.

Mr Byrd took a while to answer his phone but eventually picked up and told Dan that he had crossed the street to his own home shortly after the security cameras had been fitted, which had been around six hours ago. He hadn’t seen the news about the drone or even heard the gunshot.

“I was in the city for an hour or two,” he explained, “so it must have happened then. The cameras will have picked it up, though.”

“And you definitely locked the door, right?”

“Front and back,” Mr Byrd confirmed.

His assurances were enough for Dan.

When Emma pulled into Dan’s driveway after a journey that felt twice as long as its first leg despite the nighttime lack of traffic, Dan jumped out of the car, unlocked the door, and ran into his bedroom. He pulled the folder from under his bed and breathed a sigh of relief that everything was there, exactly as he’d left it. Emma was just walking through the front door when he returned to the living room.

“It’s late,” she said. “I’ll show you how to work the camera console then call a cab.”

“Where is it?”

Emma led Dan into the kitchen and showed him the console, which lay on the counter where she had asked the installers to leave it.

The front of the unit looked like a regular touchscreen tablet, but the back panel had several physical switches and eight steadily

blinking green lights arranged in two tight rows of four.

“Are there really eight cameras?” Dan asked.

Emma confirmed that there were, and that this number included several outdoors.

“And how do we know no one can hack into the feeds?”

“Nothing is online,” Emma said. “There’s no alarm or anything, and you can’t access the feeds remotely. This is just a recording system. It’s a local network, and the cameras and console don’t connect to anything except each other.”

Emma activated the console via a button on the side and showed Dan how to switch between camera feeds, viewing up to four at a time. It seemed simple enough. She then showed Dan how to review footage that the system deemed as suspicious, such as something walking past one of the outdoor cameras.

“If we review the flags on high sensitivity, there will be dozens,” she said. Sure enough, the outdoor cameras had flagged more than twenty distinct incidents, some of which were picked up by multiple cameras. Emma tapped an option to play through the incidents. The first was a bird flying past the camera on the side of the house. It was barely perceptible at full speed. The next piece of footage displayed the same bird walking on the grass in front of one of the other outdoor cameras. “See, dozens. But at least this way you don’t have to fast-forward through hours of nothing to see if anything happens.”

On medium sensitivity, the cameras flagged the drone falling to the ground. “Switch it to low,” Dan said, keen to get straight to the footage of Phil Norris from the pawnshop walking round to collect his kill.

After showing street-facing mailbox-cam footage of the installers and Mr Byrd leaving, the console displayed the time of the next incident for several seconds then showed Phil walking along the street towards the house. He knocked on the front door, triggering the eye-level door camera. The footage was impressively high quality.

The rolling footage switched between cameras as Phil walked round the side of the house and picked up the drone from a small and barren vegetable plot.

“Low sensitivity will only pick up people,” Emma said. “Or maybe a big dog, or a cat if it was really close to one of the cameras.”

After Phil walked back to the front of the house, triggering the same cameras in reverse order, the screen displayed new footage with a different timestamp: 23:15. Dan looked at the clock on the wall. It was after 1am, so this definitely couldn’t be him and Emma arriving in the driveway. “What the hell is this?” he asked.

Emma said nothing and focused on the screen.

The first footage to roll was from the street-facing mailbox camera. A black car with no plates pulled up right outside. “Who the hell is that?” Dan asked.

Again, Emma said nothing.

A lone individual stepped out of the car, soon revealed as a young-looking man with blond hair. He approached the front door. His face wasn’t covered, so Dan didn’t jump to any assumptions of malice.

The man knocked on the door three times. After ten or fifteen seconds, he scanned his peripherals then tried to open the door.

“Who the hell is that?” Dan asked, more accusingly than before.

“I have no idea,” Emma said quietly. She still focused only on the screen, as confused and as helpless as Dan.

When the door didn’t budge, the man crouched to the ground. This took him out of the eye-level door-cam’s view. The console’s screen automatically switched to the door-facing mailbox-cam and picked up where the other left off. As the man crouched low to the ground, Emma ran towards the door.

“What are you doing?” Dan called, taking his eyes from the screen.

“It’s a bug,” she said without turning back.

Dan looked at the screen again and saw the man take something

from his pocket before balancing it on two upturned fingertips and sticking it to the base of the front door, utilising the small gap that had previously been seen as a draughty annoyance rather than a security risk.

Emma stood at the doorway with the tiny bug in her hand. "Audio only," she said.

The screen abruptly changed again, catching Dan's eye. But rather than switch to the street-facing mailbox-cam to show the snooper leaving, his movements activated the first of the side cameras.

"Emma," Dan said, his eyes glued to the unwelcome footage. "He's not finished."



The next few snippets of footage showed the man planting two more bugs as well as attempting to enter the house via the back door. Emma collected the bugs one by one.

When the man finally left, both Dan and Emma were relieved to see that the next footage was of them pulling into the driveway.

"So do we go to the police?" Dan said, staring at the three audio bugs on his kitchen counter, which Emma had already submerged in water and smashed with her heel. "We have a close-up of the idiot's face."

"Are you crazy? This idiot could be the police. He could be the government."

"So what do we do?"

Emma lifted Dan's car keys from the counter. "We do nothing. I'll talk to my bosses and they'll deal with it."

"Why do you need the car? Where are you going?"

"Nowhere," Emma said, "but he could have planted more bugs in the camera's blind-spots, and some of these things can hear through thin walls. I'm going to go into the car, turn on the engine, and call them from there. You stay here."

Dan nodded. For the life of him, he couldn't understand how Emma always had a sensible response to any situation. While she was in the car, Dan ran through the few minutes of footage again. He thanked his stars that the cameras were there, at least, but the bugging still felt like a highly personal violation.

Dan knew that whoever this man was working for must have known that no one was home. He then tried to imagine what might have happened if they had done their dirty work 24 hours later instead; the snooper's employers would know that Dan was busy with Marco Magnifico, but they wouldn't likely know when his brother was scheduled to arrive home.

At first Dan smiled at the thought of Clark catching the snake in the act and giving him a well-earned dose of natural justice, but Dan knew how protective and short-tempered Clark could be and ended up grateful that his hypothetical scenario hadn't come to pass. He wanted Clark to be home, not in prison.

Dan's eyes shot to the front door when he heard it open.

"They want me to send them the guy's picture," Emma said. She walked over to the console and took the old-fashioned but time-efficient approach of photographing the screen with her phone. While waiting for an acknowledgement of their receipt, she turned back to Dan. "Psst," she said, almost silently. "Get your stuff and come to the car."

"Why?"

"Just get your stuff." Emma raised her eyebrows and mouthed the word "folder".

Dan caught on. He gathered the priceless Kerguelen folder and his old laptop and joined Emma in the car. The engine was still running, protecting their words from prying microphones.

"Listen," she said. "You can't stay here tonight."

"Why?"

"I need to get people in to sweep the place. Everywhere. If there are any more bugs, we have to find them. The firm will pay for a hotel room. You can stay at the Gravesen, where I—"

"I could stay with Mr Byrd," Dan said. "I want to stay close, in case someone comes back."

Emma nodded in concession. "Okay. But if they do, you call me. Got that? You don't go outside, you don't call the police, you call me."

"Okay."

"But don't tell Mr Byrd we found a bug. We need to keep that quiet until I hear from the firm. Just say that we're going to sweep for bugs because of what happened with the drone." Emma looked across the street to Mr Byrd's house. "Don't you think it's maybe a bit late to knock on his door? The lights are all out, so he's obviously asleep."

"It's okay," Dan said. "He said he'd be there for me whenever I needed him."

Something about the way Dan said this gave Emma pause. For all the things people had written about Dan's mental state since Friday, she had seen first hand how intelligent and how sharp he could be. Dan had dealt with new situations, stressful environments and a large crowd better than 95% of people could, and yet there was still something she couldn't put her finger on. It seemed to her like Dan only saw the best in people, from Billy Kendrick to the brother who had left him to fend for himself. He took people at their word and took that word literally. The only person whose motives Emma had seen Dan question at first glance was her, and her career experience indicated that such suspicion of PR people was an innate human trait.

Emma watched as Dan left the car and knocked on Mr Byrd's door; as the hallway light came on; as Mr Byrd appeared, rubbing his eyes; as Dan pointed towards the car; as Mr Byrd nodded as though every movement of his head involved a gargantuan effort; as Dan almost skipped back across the street to relay the good news.

In no way was "simple" an appropriate word to describe Dan McCarthy, so Emma's mind settled on "uncomplicated".

"He said it's okay," Dan blurted out as soon as he got back inside

the car.

Emma's phone buzzed.

Dan heard it. "You better take that."

"It's a text," Emma said. As she read through it, her mouth fell open. "It was Blitz. The guy who planted the bugs writes for The Chat."

"Is this what they did to Billy?"

Emma looked at Dan carefully. "How do you know about that?"

"He told me. And this must count as an escalation, right? I mean, bugging my house..."

"What else did Billy tell you?" Emma asked, still focused on that.

"He said Blitz harassed him and that your firm had the evidence and offered him a compensation deal if he gave them a cut, but he turned it down. He did say that your new bosses are different from the old ones, though, so maybe the new ones could call Blitz out for doing it to me and Billy?"

"Dan, Billy doesn't know how deep that thing went. It's a can of worms you don't want to go near; trust me. He wasn't the only target, and he was nothing like the highest profile."

"But he's tied in with the leak. And Blitz going after him so long ago shows that they—"

"They did the same things and worse to Richard Walker," Emma said, cutting Dan off. "And the last thing we want is a story that makes people sympathetic to him."

Dan was stunned. "Walker? Who else? President Slater?"

"No one knew who Slater was eight years ago," Emma said, shaking her head. "Seriously, like I told you in the salon on Saturday: this is the kind of stuff it's better not to know."

Dan thought back to eight years ago, when he was an excited 13-year-old visiting the IDA. It didn't make sense in his mind that, while he was doing that, Emma was already swimming with the sharks at XPR. If Emma really was 31, which Dan had no reason to doubt, she wore the years remarkably well; particularly compared to Clark, who was only 28 but looked a solid 40. Some of it might have

been the cheerful cadence of her voice and some might have been the obvious effort she made to present a flawless face to the world, but whatever it was came together to form something greater — and younger — than the sum of its parts.

“I should have had cameras and alarms installed from the start,” Emma said, as much to herself as to Dan, “but at least we have them now. You might as well go across to your neighbour’s house now. I have to wait here for the... I dunno, actually. What kind of job is it that sweeps for bugs? Anyway, I have to wait for those people. The firm are arranging it.”

“I’ll wait, too,” Dan said.

Emma reached across Dan and opened his door. “Get in his house, get in a bed, put that folder under your pillow, and close your eyes.”

Dan ducked his head to avoid banging it on the car’s doorframe and stepped out.

“What are you smiling at?” Emma asked.

Dan crouched down to look back in at her. “You finally believe me now, don’t you? You know the folder’s legit.”

Emma fought a smile. “Go to bed, Dan McCarthy.”

As the night wore on, Dan watched from the street-facing window of Mr Byrd’s spare bedroom as a grey car eventually and silently pulled up. Emma stepped out into the now heavy rain and pointed the two well-built men to where she’d found the first bug. Dan assumed that men in this line of work would understand the value of discretion, and he knew that Emma’s firm wouldn’t send people they didn’t trust.

The men took equipment from their vehicle, putting on large headphones and lifting out long devices that looked almost-but-not-quite like the toy metal detector Dan used to have.

One of the men stepped inside Dan’s house and the other began to walk around the side, but Emma called him back. She signalled him to the front door, which Dan took as her telling the man that she wanted to be able to see what both of them were doing at all

times. Vigilant as ever, he thought.

Emma then turned towards Dan, who had the light on in Mr Byrd's spare room. Dan pointed to his house, telling Emma to get out of the lashing rain. She responded by pointing to Dan and putting her hands together beside her ear, telling him to go to sleep. Dan turned his light off, and Emma went inside.

Almost an hour later, the two men emerged and put their equipment back in their car, presumably having checked the side and back via the back door. They drove away as quietly as they had arrived. With the rain still lashing, Emma locked Dan's door and walked across the street. She looked up at his window, which he was still peeking out of, and sent him another go-to-sleep gesture.

Dan didn't know whether Emma could see him or just knew him well enough to know that he was watching, but she stayed there in the rain as though waiting for him to turn the light on. Instead, he sent her a text: "You're getting wet."

She looked up at the window then lifted her phone from her pocket, guarding it from the rain. Dan received a text seconds later which read: "I'm not calling a cab until you go to sleep. Firm's orders."

"They didn't say that," Dan texted back.

"I work for the firm and I said it. Big day tomorrow. Both of us. Go to sleep, Dan McCarthy!"

As he often did when it came to written communication, Dan struggled to definitively interpret Emma's tone. But since she was standing in the rain and calling him Dan McCarthy, he correctly assumed it was her playful and sleep-deprived way of saying goodbye. When Dan thought about it, he realised just how little sleep Emma must have been getting. She had been with him almost every waking hour since Friday, and all of the organisational work she was doing had to happen when he was catching what already felt like insufficient sleep.

Keen to get her out of the rain and into a cab, Dan texted again: "Okay. I'm asleep."

“Good,” Emma replied. She walked away.

Dan smiled and lay down on Mr Byrd’s spare bed. As he did, another text arrived from Emma:

“P.S. Never let that stupid folder out of your sight again. Too close.”

TUESDAY

D minus 59

IDA HEADQUARTERS
COLORADO SPRINGS, COLORADO

“Under the door?” Richard Walker barked into his phone, leaving a furious voicemail reply to the early morning email from Jan Gellar which broke the news that the bugs had been discovered. “Under the goddamn door?”

Richard sat alone in his office, having arrived late in a successful effort to dodge a similar gauntlet of reporters and protestors to the one that had almost left him covered in red paint the previous morning.

“I didn’t ask you to bug McCarthy’s place so that he could come out of it looking like a victim, you idiot. Who did you send, anyway, an amateur? The clean-up is on you. The first thing you’re going to do is fire whatever clown planted the bugs where they could be found. Then you’re going to get to whoever McCarthy is working with at XPR and make sure they understand the consequences of making this public.”

Richard looked out of his window and saw the crowd of reporters

thin as they began to accept that they had missed him.

“And if at any point you think about contacting me with more bad news, don’t. Fix it,” he demanded, “or you’re finished.”

D minus 58

*BYRD RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO*

The breaking glass sound of Birchwood's weekly recycling truck woke Dan unceremoniously just after sunrise on Tuesday morning.

He turned on the TV in Mr Byrd's spare bedroom and quietly watched the news on ACN, trying to focus on recent developments in an effort to keep the German letter out of his mind for what was now just a matter of hours until the Marco Magnifico show would be over and Clark would be home.

The morning news centred around two main talking points: the Blitz Media drone shot down over Dan's house, and Timo Fiore's unprecedented \$100,000,000 bounty. Though several commentators disputed the legality of Timo's offer and questioned whether Billy Kendrick could be liable to prosecution for facilitating it, no one dismissed the vast sum as a publicity stunt; everyone knew Timo was good for it.

Dan could only imagine how much coverage the bugging would get if Emma and XPR decided to release the footage. He muted the

TV when the coverage looped back to the drone story after a brief mention of Dan's appearance on Marco's show, which ACN couldn't ignore even though it was happening on a competing station.

After Dan had been awake for an hour but before he had gone downstairs, he heard Mr Byrd's doorbell. He looked out of the window but saw no car. He was unsurprised to hear Emma's voice when Mr Byrd answered the door.

"Is Dan still here?" she asked.

Mr Byrd invited Emma inside and Dan walked downstairs.

What struck Emma about Mr Byrd's house was that despite being the same shape as Dan's, the ambiance was almost diametrically opposed. Where Dan's house was clean and tidy but in need of new furnishings and plenty of handiwork, Mr Byrd's had thick carpets and working doorhandles but was plagued by dust and clutter.

There were several framed pictures of two girls who Emma assumed to be Mr Byrd's twin daughters. One of the pictures had been taken on the street and featured Dan and presumably Clark, who at 11 or so looked slightly younger than the girls.

A smell of burnt toast and overly sulphuric eggs filled the air, wafting through from the kitchen. "Would you like some breakfast?" Mr Byrd asked.

"Thanks," Emma said, "but I already ate."

"I'll have some," Dan said. He and Emma followed Mr Byrd into the kitchen, which followed the house's pattern by having modern appliances and surfaces caked in crumbs and grease.

Under strict orders to tell no one any more than they needed to know, Emma said very little while Dan and Mr Byrd ate. Dan asked if she had seen that ACN were still talking about the drone, but Emma killed the conversation as subtly as she could. She felt relieved when Mr Byrd then changed the subject, even if his tone was critical.

"I've been thinking about this hypnotism thing," Mr Byrd said, his inflection making clear that the thoughts weren't positive. "Is it really necessary? Take one look at the TV, read one page of the

paper, talk to one person on the street... it seems to me like people are already coming round to this."

"Doing this shows that we have nothing to hide. It's Live and Unfiltered," Emma said, referencing the name of Marco's show.

Mr Byrd hesitated. "I... I just don't like it." He looked across the table to Dan, who was keeping his eyes down and cutting his food into tiny pieces to look busy in an effort to stay out of the conversation. "A hypnotism on live TV is bad enough, but Marco Magnifico? His whole thing is embarrassing people."

"This is differ—"

"And especially when Clark's not here. If he was there, at least I'd know Marco wouldn't get away with going too far."

Emma looked at Dan, his eyes still down, and wondered if he had told Mr Byrd how soon Clark would be home. "What if you came?" she suggested. "If you can make your own way, I'll make sure you get in."

"Okay," Mr Byrd said. He knew that the live show was being filmed in a small studio in the city, just a short drive away.

Dan looked up from his plate at Mr Byrd. "What do you have planned for the rest of the day?" he asked, as though nothing unusual was going on.

"Phil Norris called me last night. He'd been talking to the Blue Dish guy who's been camped at the drive-in since Friday. The one who filmed your first interview."

"Trey," Dan said.

"I couldn't tell you his name, but he told Phil that there's going to be a huge influx of media types into Birchwood today. Apparently there's been an understanding so far that news crews keep to the area around the drive-in, but he doesn't expect the new arrivals to be so agreeable. We're going to put some things in place to make sure the message gets through."

"Sorry," Emma said, "who's going to do this, exactly?"

"Mr Byrd is the head of Birchwood Watch," Dan answered for him. "He used to be a sheriff's deputy."

Emma tilted her head back in a slow and thoughtful half-nod.

"That's right," Mr Byrd said. "And Phil said Trey was nothing but helpful. If nothing else, he's an extra pair of eyes."

Dan didn't say anything; by bringing him the calligraphy book and the digital translator, Trey had already been more helpful than anyone else could imagine.

As soon as Dan had finished eating, he thanked Mr Byrd for his hospitality and crossed the street with Emma, folder in hand.

Emma immediately checked the security console for notifications of suspicious movements. Their arrival was the only low-sensitivity trigger. "All clear," she said, heading straight for the kitchen where she took one of Dan's Houghton Home Fresh meals and put it in the microwave.

"I thought you already ate?" Dan said.

She shook her head. "So listen, the firm have been talking about tomorrow, and—"

"I'm not listening," Dan said. "I have enough on my plate today."

"I know. I was just—"

"Seriously. Every day it's something else, but I just want to get through today first. Besides, I thought this Marco thing was going to be what finally tipped everything our way?"

Emma nodded. "It's like advertising: you need to touch people's consciousness enough times. Tonight you can reach a new audience, and you can totally convince the people who are almost sold. The tomorrow thing is nothing huge, anyway."

"Good," Dan said. "So when you were talking to the firm, did they say if they'd decided what to do about the bugs?"

"Let's just focus on today," Emma said, turning Dan's words back on him. The microwave beeped, and she walked over to collect the meal. "I've been looking at the SMMA, and the one thing people want is to see you tackling hard questions on live TV."

"What the hell is SMMA?"

"Social media meta analysis."

Dan rolled his eyes.

"It's better than it sounds. Smarter." Emma handed her phone to Dan with the SMMA app loaded.

"What am I looking at?" he said.

"The Y axis is your Average Aggregate Reach, the X axis is time. The dip yesterday is because we didn't do much. There's a tab you can click that annotates major events on the graph. It's good stuff."

"It doesn't work. You can't know what people really think based on what they write online. People say all sorts of stuff."

"It's more sophisticated than you'd think," Emma said, talking between bites. "It doesn't just scan for keywords. It knows satire, context, each users' common phrasing. Everything. It bases the stats on how people react in comments sections below articles and how many times they share or respond to other people's public posts. Every big media story gets its own engagement figures and each public figure has what they call an OAR — Overall Approval Rating."

"What's mine?" Dan asked.

"Improving."

"And this is accurate?"

"It gauges the public mood better than anything else out there. This is the same framework advertisers use to know what to sell when. It's the same framework political campaign managers use to measure minute-by-minute reactions and tailor their online presence accordingly."

"Can I get it on my phone?"

Emma shook her head as she finished chewing. "It's a subscription that rolls over every twelve months. You don't want to know how much it costs."

Dan slid Emma's phone across the table. "Tell me whenever my approval thing goes up or down," he said.

"Worrying about that is my job. You just keep doing what you're doing."

Playing around with Emma's phone inspired Dan to lift his own from his pocket and check the flight-tracking app to see where Clark

was right now. His flight was on time, and his evening connection looked set to get him home just after midnight.

The kitchen clock said 10:58.

Thirteen hours, Dan thought. Well, if I've made it this long...

10 Downing Street
London, England

Despite having only spoken publicly about the IDA leak twice, Prime Minister William Godfrey had succeeded in entrenching the phrase “crucial alien issue” in the British public’s consciousness. His tenacious badgering of President Slater had been generally well received at home, and he knew he had John Cole to thank for deciding to take that route.

Godfrey’s last statement at the Manslow Memorial on Sunday morning went down quite well, but he had since decided to avoid saying anything else that could be construed as a blunt criticism of the United States for fear of alienating the American public. It would be far more instructive to attack Slater for keeping her electorate in the dark, he suggested, and Cole agreed. The scattergun approach had served its purpose in diverting attention away from the much loathed NHS reforms, but Godfrey knew it was time to be smarter and pickier with his words.

Despite their failure to identify and contact Dan McCarthy’s

representatives, there was also now an unspoken understanding between Godfrey and Cole that there might actually be some truth in McCarthy's story, which Godfrey at first assumed to be a well-researched hoax and which Cole had privately dismissed as the "conveniently timed ramblings of an attention-seeking autistic". These early doubts, shared by countless others, had since steadily diminished with each new development.

In fact, the verified correspondence between Hans Kloster and NASA combined with the American media establishment's increasingly desperate attempts to pin something on Dan McCarthy gave Godfrey growing hope that he had hit the jackpot by being the first major figure to throw his weight behind what might become the biggest exposé of all time. With this in mind, Godfrey and Cole agreed that it was time to double down.

William Godfrey stepped outside Number Ten to greet the press. Alone, he quickly mentioned in passing that John Cole had been promoted to the role of Deputy Prime Minister and that Diane Logan would no longer be serving in his cabinet. Godfrey didn't say why, but he didn't have to; if there was one thing the whole country knew he wouldn't tolerate, it was subordinates going behind his back like Logan had to Slater.

When two or three voices in the press pack yelled questions about Diane Logan, Godfrey regretted mentioning her at all. With a clear goal of concentrating attention on Slater's lies and McCarthy's truth, the last thing he needed was a domestic spat muddying the waters.

"Look," Godfrey said impatiently. "None of that matters. You all know that Diane and I never saw eye to eye, so it's hardly a great surprise. John's work in stabilising the coalition merits his promotion, and that's all there is to it. Now, if we can get on to the things that do matter?"

The reporters all took note of Godfrey's words, with the few who had yelled out looking now like scolded children.

"President Slater issued a statement yesterday in response to my

comments on Sunday, and this is my reply. You might notice that it's coming from my mouth and being delivered in front of your cameras, not coming through Jack Neal's spin machine and being delivered through a press secretary."

The Prime Minister grinned smugly for a few seconds.

"But as for what she slash Jack said... aside from the unnecessary and intrusive suggestions on how I should run my government, the crux of their statement was the suggestion that we should be putting on a united front to focus on "real international challenges" rather than squabbling over personal differences. As if that's not what I've been trying to do! What could be more real than a cover-up of information that could change everything we think we know about our place in the universe? And how can she talk about united fronts when we and the rest of the international community are being completely excluded from the discussion?"

Godfrey turned over his single sheet of notes. "With that said," he continued, "I stand before you today to lay the first brick in what I hope will become a road of global cooperation. I am pleased to announce the immediate declassification and publication of our so-called "X-Files", which some of you will know were already due for release in a little over two months time. The files in question date from the early 1950s and cover everything from UFO sightings by military personnel to details of abandoned plans for a British agency not too dissimilar to the IDA."

This kind of unilateral government declassification was what Billy Kendrick's *Five Scenarios* book termed "small-d disclosure". Rather than an admission of lies or a revelation of an unequivocal alien truth, the mass of declassified materials being published only disclosed what the British government and intelligence agencies had on file. As Billy had always predicted, this was far from the whole story.

But Billy had also predicted that one major government publishing its alien-related files would put pressure on others, and few of the reporters had any doubt that this was Godfrey's prime

motive in facilitating the early release. While Billy saw small-d disclosure primarily as a stepping stone, he recognised that the impact of such an event depended entirely on how shocking the files in question turned out to be.

“The entire collection of files is now available,” Godfrey announced triumphantly, “completely unedited and as redaction-free as legally possible. I haven’t had time to look through everything, but from what I’ve seen I can confidently say that there’s plenty to keep everyone busy.”

Godfrey folded his notes into his breast pocket in his usual signal that he was almost finished.

“In taking this action, I don’t mean to back President Slater into a corner,” he said with a poorly disguised smirk. “I do, however, want to be perfectly clear about one thing: this is everything that we have to disclose.”

D minus 56

TVT STUDIO

COLORADO SPRINGS, COLORADO

Dan spent several hours poring through the British files, which were almost entirely composed of UFO sightings.

Some already high-profile cases were given new context and corroboration via eyewitness testimony from RAF pilots, police officers, and US Air Force personnel, among others.

There were also images of unexplained lights in the sky and descriptions of abduction events that were completely new to Dan, who thought he had seen and read every case out there. But having recently found details in the Kerguelen folder of a detailed plan to put forward genuine-looking images to be later debunked, Dan was more wary than ever of taking any of the photographs at face value.

The contents of the files were far from underwhelming — and would ordinarily have been a huge news story in their own right — but Dan couldn't pretend that he wasn't a little disappointed that there was nothing concrete and definitive. Still, he thought, at least it upped the pressure on Slater and might further erode people's

remaining doubts.

It took Dan around five hours to go through the files in their entirety, during which time Emma left to meet with Marco Magnifico's people at the studio. She also returned to her hotel, where XPR had arranged to send a package containing new clothes and everything else she needed now that her unplanned stay in Colorado had reached its fifth day.

Rather than return to Dan's house to travel with him to the studio, where a crowd would be gathered, Emma waited there for him. She called Dan when it was almost time for him to leave, telling him not to worry about getting ready beyond putting on the clothes she had picked out. He dutifully put them on — apart from the tie, which he placed in his pocket — and drove to the studio. Emma made it clear that Mr Byrd should hang back until the studio opened its doors to the ticket-holding public.

On the short drive into the city, Dan spotted Mr Byrd and Phil Norris talking to Trey near the edge of the old drive-in. There was now a large white sheet with the word "MEDIA" written on it in impressively neat strips of thick black tape, suspended with wire between two rusted pillars where the drive-in's gate used to be.

There were at least ten news vans and satellite trucks in the lot, most of which Dan didn't recognise. He honked his horn as he slowly drove past. The three men waved, but none of the newly arrived crews recognised the vehicle as his.

Dan saw another huge truck pull into the drive-in lot in his rearview mirror. If things continued the way they were going, Dan imagined that the term "media outpost", which he had never really accepted, would soon give way to "media village".

Dan spent the rest of the drive thinking about Marco Magnifico and wondering what he was getting himself into. Marco was the most famous stage hypnotist around; really the only famous stage hypnotist. He found fame three years ago at the age of 36 when he appeared on a TV talent show. He didn't win, despite impressing the judges enough to reach the final eight, but he still managed to

secure a TV deal and had gone on to achieve far greater success than the talent show's winner.

Soon after its debut, Marco's show developed a reputation as the place where desperate celebrities did degrading things to try to hold on to whatever fame they had left. As the ratings got bigger, so did the guests. Real celebrities with movies and albums to promote began appearing on Marco's show to undertake carefully stage-managed tasks that were amusing enough to satisfy the audience without being too embarrassing for the guests.

Kaitlyn Judd's appearance was a perfect example, allowing her to promote *Lair of Fangs* by performing mildly embarrassing tasks that showcased her sense of humour without making her seem like a shameless publicity hound. Emma had promised Dan that she wouldn't let Marco do anything with him that an A-lister like Kaitlyn would say no to.

Marco's show was set to return for its next regular season in two weeks, so the timing was perfect for him to raise awareness. Emma called it a win-win, since it was also perfect timing for Dan to reach a new audience and show that he was willing to stand behind his truth. She also told Dan that tens of millions of viewers would be watching since the show was taking place on a night without football or anything else that people usually watched live on TV.

Right before Emma had left for the studio, Dan pushed for details on why her firm was able to influence Marco and his producers. She explained that it was similar to the limited but effective power they held over Marian de Clerk and her Focus 20/20 team. It wasn't based on anything like dirt or blackmail, Emma said, just that Emma's firm represented a lot of people the show might want as guests in the future. XPR also had links with other big firms, so hosts and producers were careful to avoid doing something that would upset the firm enough to earn themselves a spot on a blacklist.

"How much does your firm really care about me, though?" Dan asked. "I don't know if I trust them to look out for me if it would cost them money."

“Yeah, but you trust me,” Emma said. It wasn’t a question.

These thoughts and memories quietened in Dan’s mind when he neared the studio, which turned out to be uncannily close to the library on Baker Street where he first published the leak. He parked his car where Emma had told him to, walked past a few supportive ticket-holders who were already queuing to get in, and entered the building through the front door.

A burly security guard, as tall as Dan and almost as broad as Clark, greeted him inside. “This way, sir,” the man said, leading Dan down a hallway. He then left Dan outside a door marked “MAKEUP”.

Dan sighed. He had made it 21 years without the need for makeup, but in the last four days his face had hardly had a break from the stuff. He opened the door and saw Emma waiting for him, dressed more glamorously than normal in a formfitting dress that looked like it didn’t allow for much movement at the knee. The design featured a narrow blue hourglass contoured strikingly against a black body, accentuating Emma’s natural curves.

“You look like someone famous who’s about to open a hospital,” Dan said. “Or go to a ball. Or host a charity din—”

“Okay, okay,” Emma said. “I get it. This is what my assistant sent. When I said “send some clothes for tomorrow night,” I meant send some of my clothes. She didn’t seem to get that part.”

“You have an assistant?”

“This is what one of my assistants sent,” Emma corrected herself with a slight grin. “And trust me, she’s going to hear about it.”

Dan shrugged. “I was just joking around. It’s not that bad.”

“High praise,” Emma said. “Anyway, get in the chair. We’ve only got an hour.”

“Until what?”

“What do you mean?”

“An hour until what?” Dan asked. “The show is at nine, right?”

“Dan, the show’s at seven.”

“What? All the ads I saw today said nine.”

“Nine Eastern, maybe,” Emma said. “Seven here. I thought I told you when I told your neighbour?”

“You just told me to be here by six!”

“And here you are. It’s not like we have anything to talk over, is it? You know what’s happening.”

While the least talkative makeup artist yet made Dan’s face glow, Emma filled him in on her meeting with Marco’s people. All that was left to do before the show was sign a waiver. As soon as he was allowed out of the makeup chair, Dan read through all three pages and found nothing too alarming.

Emma led him down a quiet corridor. “We just have to hand this over and answer a few questions,” she said, stopping at an unmarked office door.

“What kind of questions?”

Before Emma could answer, a woman with thick reddish-brown hair opened the door and invited them inside. There was only one seat at their side of the desk, and Dan and Emma each insisted that the other take it. As stubborn as each other, they both stood.

“Okay, Mr McCarthy,” the woman said in a fairly posh English accent. She wore glasses and gave Dan the impression that she was much older than she looked. “Just a few questions.”

“Who is this?” Dan asked Emma, as though the woman wasn’t there.

The woman answered. “I’m Mr Magnifico’s management.”

Dan didn’t know what was odder: that the woman didn’t say her name, that she said management rather than manager, or that she called Marco “Mr Magnifico” when Magnifico was so obviously half of a stage name rather than a surname in its own right. “Oh,” was all he said in reply.

“As I was saying,” she said briskly. “A few questions. First of all, are you currently taking any medication, particularly anything that may interact with barbiturates?”

Emma butted in: “Don’t answer that.”

“Why?” Dan asked.

Emma ignored him and sat down, directly in front of Mr Magnifico's management. "Why are you asking about barbiturate interactions?" she probed. "We went over this when I told you we're not doing the serum. I couldn't have been clearer."

"Hmm. Indeed. These questions must have been prepared before you made that known."

"I'll do it if I have to," Dan said to no one in particular.

"You don't," Emma said immediately.

The woman looked irritated. "Perhaps you should let Mr McCarthy speak for himself, Ms Ford?"

"Next question," Emma said.

The woman looked at Dan. "Fine. Just a quick yes or no to whether you have you ever suffered from or experienced the following, Mr McCarthy. Epilepsy?"

"No," Dan replied

"Psychosis?"

"Why would you ask that?" he said.

"It's yes or no," the woman groaned, somehow managing to make such a simple statement sound condescending.

"Then no."

"Very good. Depression?"

Dan hesitated.

"No," Emma answered for him.

"I was asking Mr—"

"It's not relevant," Emma insisted. She tipped her head back to Dan, who was standing awkwardly behind her. "Just say no."

"No," Dan parroted.

The woman made a note, longer than two letters. "And have you ever been hypnotised before?"

"No."

"Has sleepwalking ever been an issue in your life?"

When Dan didn't answer straight away, Emma looked back at him again. "Say no."

"Why would that matter?" Dan asked the woman.

"Say no," Emma repeated. As before, she made no effort to disguise her instruction.

"It's just a question we like to ask," the woman said. "Shall I put yes?"

With Emma staring up at him, Dan shook his head. "No," he said.

The woman handed Dan the sheet of paper with the boxes ticked in accordance with his answers and asked him to sign on the line. He did so then handed the paper back.

"Good luck, Mr McCarthy," the woman said in a tone Dan couldn't work out. "Ms Ford."

Emma closed the door loudly behind them.

"What was that all about?" Dan asked.

"I met her earlier. And if you think that was bad. Anyway... sleepwalking, huh?"

"Not since I was a kid," Dan said. "Well, maybe 16, 17? My dad had to get double locks on the front and back doors because I went outside one time and he was worried I'd do it again."

"Where did you go?"

"I didn't get far. Not even to the drive-in. One of the neighbours saw me. I didn't have any shoes or anything but the weird thing was, they said I was careful when I crossed the street and they swore my eyes were open."

Emma paused for a moment. "Were you definitely asleep?"

"I definitely wasn't awake," Dan shrugged.

Emma's phone buzzed. "That's time," she said.

"Do I not get to meet Marco before we go live?"

"He never meets his guests. Apparently it can complicate things. But listen: you've got this. Just say the things you said on Focus 20/20 and at the Kendrick gig. Stick to your truth and we'll be out of here before you know it."

"Will you be in Marco's ear?" Dan asked. "In case he starts asking anything too personal? I don't want questions about my family. Nothing about my dad and especially nothing about... you

know, just nothing about my family.”

“I won’t be directly in his ear, but I’ll be standing right next to the people who are. I’ve already told them what he can’t ask so there shouldn’t be any problems. If there are, I’ll be there to solve them.”

A man in a lanyard emerged at the end of the corridor and asked Dan to go with him.

“I’m this way,” Emma said, pointing in another direction.

Dan didn’t say anything as he obediently followed the man. The narrow corridor looked quite like the ones in the big studio where they’d filmed Dan’s Focus 20/20 segment, but he knew that something altogether different was waiting for him this time.

This time there was no quiet room to himself; this time there was no security of being able to edit out any slip-ups; this time there was no Emma to hold his hand and guide his way when the going got tough.

Dan stopped walking when his escort reached a door on the right. He looked back along the long corridor, where Emma still stood at the other end, watching him go. He waved. She waved back. The man opened the door.

“Dan McCarthy,” Emma shouted as he was about to step through.

He turned towards her again. “Yeah?”

“Game face.”

D minus 55

*10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON, ENGLAND*

In the early hours of the British morning, William Godfrey sat patiently at his desk as the final few seconds ticked away before the beginning of the live hypnotism the whole world was talking about.

Godfrey had played his hand earlier in the day, going all-in by declassifying Britain's UFO files ahead of schedule.

After one last ad for Lexington Cola, Marco Magnifico's logo filled the computer screen. Godfrey shifted in his seat and adjusted his headphones.

Now, finally, it was time to see what Dan McCarthy was really holding.

D minus 54

TVT STUDIO

COLORADO SPRINGS, COLORADO

Dan emerged from the corridor to find Marco Magnifico's audience already in their bleacher-like seats, including Mr Byrd at the very end of the front row in a seat that looked tacked on. He felt tangible relief at how small the studio was.

Dan didn't know what else was filmed there, but the entire room was no larger than half of a school gymnasium. Were it not for the lighting rigs set up high behind the audience, he wouldn't have thought it was a studio at all. The more he looked around, the more it really did seem like a gymnasium. And even though the show would be going out live to untold millions of TV viewers, the low capacity of the room eased his mind.

Mr Byrd raised his hand to greet Dan. From his tacked-on seat at the end of the front row, he could see both the set and also part of what was going on behind the scenes. The set, decorated with the apparent intention of resembling the inside of an aircraft hanger, was separated from the backstage area only by a temporary stage-

divider that didn't quite reach the side wall. Before Marco appeared, Mr Byrd saw Emma take her overseeing position against the wall. He waved.

Emma looked up and caught sight of him. After the initial surprise of seeing someone wave, she noticed who it was and sent a nod of acknowledgement his way.

Neither Dan nor the rest of the audience he was facing could see anything backstage, and with no clock in sight Dan didn't know exactly when the show would begin.

"Live in ten," someone called. "Nine."

Dan straightened his back in his chair. Everything suddenly felt too real, and the nervous butterflies in his stomach had Dan looking forward to being hypnotised in front of the country if only to get a moment of calm.

When Marco's introductory music hit, a sign that said [APPLAUSE] flashed high above the set, encouraging Mr Byrd and everyone else to play their part.

Marco Magnifico walked on to receive the applause. "Welcome to this very special edition of The Marco Magnifico Variety Hour," he said as the noise died down, "Live and Unfiltered! I'm sure you know all about our guest tonight for this exclusive interview."

[APPLAUSE]

Mr Byrd joined the rest of the audience in applauding Dan.

Marco took his seat across a small table from Dan, who was on a low couch. "Thanks for coming, Dan," he said.

Silence circled for a moment before Dan realised he was supposed to speak. "Uh, yeah. No problem," he eventually stammered. He could see the earpiece in Marco's ear and wondered for the first time why he didn't have a hidden one of his own so Emma could feed him the right lines.

"A brief note before we begin," Marco announced directly into the hard camera. "Despite agenda-driven claims to the contrary, Dan McCarthy has never been clinically diagnosed with schizotypal personality disorder or any other psychiatric condition. Dan

McCarthy exhibits no contraindications for hypnosis. Dan McCarthy has given his full, express, and informed consent to be placed under hypnosis for entertainment purposes.”

[APPLAUSE]

This didn’t seem particularly worthy of applause but Mr Byrd obliged nonetheless, if somewhat less enthusiastically than his fellow audience members.

Dan still didn’t like people talking about his misdiagnosis, even when they were correctly dismissing it, but he focused more happily on the beginning of Marco’s disclaimer. The inclusion of the term “agenda-driven” indicated to Dan that Marco was on his side, or at the very least open-minded.

With the formalities concluded, Marco began the show.

“Our guest this evening has been variously described as a truth-seeker, a conspiracy theorist, and—”

“That’s a loaded term,” Dan interrupted.

Marco took his eyes from the camera and looked at Dan. “Excuse me?”

“Conspiracy theorist,” Dan said. “When you call someone a conspiracy theorist, you undermine them before you even hear what they have to say. It sets up an asymmetrical discussion.”

A handful of people in the audience began to applaud, but the majority were already dependent on the flashing prompt for cues.

Mr Byrd looked past the edge of the stage-divider to Emma, who was giving him an enthusiastic thumbs up with one hand and pointing in Dan’s direction with the other. Mr Byrd quickly understood the request and held his thumb up to Dan while hinting towards Emma with his eyes.

Dan relaxed. It felt good to have an unambiguously friendly face in the audience and it felt even better to have a line of communication to Emma, however limited and indirect.

“Okay,” Marco said. “So does that mean you’re not here to tell us about the time you went sailing with Bigfoot and found Elvis in the Bermuda triangle?”

[LAUGHTER]

Mr Byrd looked up at the new flashing sign, positioned just to the right of the other.

"I kid, I kid," Marco smiled. "He's not here to talk about anything silly, folks... just little green men and flying saucers."

[LAUGHTER] [&] [APPLAUSE]

Dan shrugged it off. "I'm used to this, and so is your audience. We're used to the power class mocking every dissenting voice."

"If I'm part of the power class," Marco said to the studio audience, "could one of you tell my bank account?"

[LAUGHTER]

"Exactly," Dan said. "Billy Kendrick talked about this yesterday. We're too busy laughing at the jester on the stage to wonder what's going on behind the curtain."

"Are you calling me a jester?" Marco asked in a light-hearted tone.

Dan hesitated. "Aren't jesters supposed to be funny?"

As with the earlier unprompted applause, a few audience members laughed heartily but stopped when they realised that no one else was joining in. After a brief but awkward silence, the sign lit up:

[LAUGHTER]

Mr Byrd didn't bother, but everyone around him did their best fake laugh. It amazed him how blindly they all followed the orders of a flashing sign.

"Okay, enough of the funny stuff," Marco said, forcing a warm smile. "Let's get started."

The lights in the studio dimmed to a level similar to the inside of a cinema.

A new sign appeared. It was yellow, static, and to the left of the others:

[SILENCE]

If it wouldn't have looked like an admission of guilt, Dan would have walked away right then. The audience didn't look so small in

the dark, and the tiny lights shining down on him from the ceiling made him feel more exposed than ever.

“Are you comfortable?” Marco asked softly.

“Yeah,” Dan lied.

“Lean back for me,” Marco whispered. “Now raise your feet and rest them on the other end of the couch. Good.”

Dan was impressed and a little unnerved by Marco’s immediate transformation; there was no longer any of the brash, showman-like arrogance that had oozed through his words prior to the lights dimming above the audience. The voice and tone now reminded Dan of a free mp3 file he had downloaded from some Canadian health agency’s website a few years earlier when he was having trouble sleeping.

As Marco continued, Dan closed his eyes and tried to imagine that he was in bed at home listening to that file. The last whispered words he consciously heard were “extremely relaxed”, and from then on he was entirely at Marco’s mercy.

Mr Byrd watched on uneasily. He saw Emma standing against the side wall of the still-lit backstage area, looking up at what he assumed was a large screen.

“Dan can hear me, and he can respond,” Marco explained to the few hundred audience members and the tens of millions of viewers at home. “He can wake up at any point, and I can’t force him to say anything. This interview won’t follow our normal pattern; Dan will remain on his couch with his eyes closed for the duration, as he would if he was a patient from my pre-TV days. Isn’t that right, Dan?”

“That’s right,” Dan said. He pursed his lips, suddenly dry.

[APPLAUSE]

The [SILENCE] sign on the left was still lit, confusing the audience. When it momentarily flicked off, they applauded diligently until it returned.

“Now,” Marco said to the camera. “Under hypnosis, patients sometimes claim that aliens forced them to forget their abduction

experiences. Maybe they flashed a little Men In Black gadget in their eyes? Anyway, through regression therapy we can get to the heart of such experiences. So, Dan... can you tell me what they look like?"

"Who?" Dan asked in a tone best described as sleepy.

"The aliens."

"I don't know. I've never seen one."

"O-kay..." Marco said, turning his head away from Dan to directly address the camera again. "You know how showbiz types always say you should never work with kids or animals? Well, in hypnosis we say never do live TV." Marco looked over each of his shoulders. "Where's my agent?"

[LAUGHTER]

Mr Byrd rolled his eyes.

"Seriously, though," Marco said, "Dan has never claimed to have any abduction memories, so that was the right answer. He passed the test."

[APPLAUSE]

After a brief commercial break during which Marco spoke gently to Dan about things like work and hobbies, he moved onto the real questions.



Even under hypnosis, Dan had all the right answers.

He regurgitated familiar responses to familiar queries, such as why there was no clear video record of alien visitation and what the government stood to gain from covering something like this up.

Dan shared his previously unshared personal speculation of what might be inside the sphere, suggesting that "something that works like a musical birthday card" would be sensible since the recipient of such a card doesn't have to understand how the electronics work in order to hear the message. He also defended the virtues of sending a physical object against Marco's position that wave-based communications were superior.

“If I send you a message through a radio,” Dan said, “you’re only going to hear it if you have your radio turned on and tuned to the right frequency. But if I throw a rock at your head, you’re going to notice.”

Satisfied with Dan’s lively responses, Marco then broached the issue of the Kerguelen folder itself. This change in direction would have worried Dan were he more conscious of the context of the questions. Blissfully relaxed, he stuck to his story of literally crashing into the IDA thief who then dropped the folder on the street. Fortunately for Dan and his decision to keep the German letter quiet until he had the chance to show it to Clark, Marco didn’t press for a recap of what was inside the folder.

When Dan dealt with these questions as well as he and Emma could have hoped, Marco shifted gears and brought up the schoolwork that had been published in Monday’s Daily Chat. In his answers, Dan recalled forgotten details about Mrs Dempsey’s too-hot classroom and the day his dad bought him the poster.

“Tell me about your father,” Marco said. “I gather he’s currently...”

As Marco trailed off, Mr Byrd looked up and saw that Emma had moved away from the side wall and out of his view.

Marco pressed a finger to his ear. “Hold that thought,” he said. “We’ll be right back after these short messages. Dan, stay relaxed.”

“He’s in the hospital,” Dan said, but Marco had already stood up and walked backstage.

The entire audience then heard an angry voice that Mr Byrd immediately recognised as Emma’s. A burst of music quickly drowned it out.

Marco missed his cue when the show returned from its commercial break. The show’s music kept playing on TV but cut in the studio. With no signs to tell them whether to stay silent, laugh, or applaud, most of the audience talked quietly amongst themselves. Mr Byrd was sure he heard the words “my fucking show” seconds before Marco returned, smiling as though nothing

had happened.

“Welcome back,” he said to the viewers at home. “Still with me, Dan?”

“I’m still here,” Dan said.

“Good. I was worried you might have been abducted again.”

[LAUGHTER]

“I wasn’t abducted before,” Dan said, his mind still calm and his body still totally relaxed.

At this point, Marco sat in his chair and reached down beside it to pick up a doll, roughly three times the size of a Barbie. “Zoom in,” he said.

When the cameraman did so, the detail of the doll became clear. Mr Byrd could already see that it was an effigy of Dan, complete with an impressively accurate representation of the hairstyle and glasses he had only had for a few days. The effigy wore a tinfoil hat and a T-shirt which read: “I’m not crazy, everyone else is!”

[LAUGHTER]

Marco held the doll out to Dan, whose eyes were still closed. “Dan, can you remember where the bad aliens touched you?”

[LAUGHTER] [&] [APPLAUSE]

“How could an alien touch me when I’ve never even seen one?” Dan asked. He sounded like a child as he said it. Mr Byrd watched uncomfortably, thinking back to Dan’s childhood when he had too often been taken advantage of by people he didn’t realise were making fun of him. Reading social cues and seeing the bad in people had never been easy for Dan, even when he was fully conscious.

“Why don’t you just pretend that you’ve seen one?” Marco asked. “Maybe then you could be rich and famous and get a big house, like you’ve always wanted?”

Emma disappeared from Mr Byrd’s view again.

“I’m not going to lie,” Dan said.

“Really?”

“No. Why would I want to lie about being abducted? The folder is evidence enough.”

“Evidence enough for what?” Marco pushed. “To get the kind of attention you crave? The kind of approval you so desperately need?”

Mr Byrd heard Emma say something in the silence before Dan replied. A few other people near him did, too, judging by their attempts to crane their necks enough to look behind the stage-divider. She was still nowhere to be seen.

“I don’t know what you mean about wanting attention,” Dan said. “I don’t like all of this attention. I didn’t ask for it. I tried to be anonymous.”

“Really?” Marco said again, ever more condescendingly than before.

“Yes, really!” Dan insisted, his voice was sounding younger and more vulnerable with each answer. “I went to a library, and I used throwaway accounts, and I didn’t tell anyone online or in real life what I’d found. What else could I have done?”

Marco pressed his finger into his earpiece again, then defiantly removed the earpiece and dropped it on the floor behind his seat.

Emma came back into Mr Byrd’s view, now standing against the side wall with her hand on her chin in an uncharacteristic display of concern.

“Why don’t you tell me how it was growing up with no friends,” Marco said. “Did you ever, I don’t know, make things up to occupy yourself?”

Mr Byrd saw Emma gesturing to someone out of sight. He heard her shout: “If you don’t, I will.”

Emma then threw her hands up and stormed away from the wall. The next thing Mr Byrd and everyone else heard was Emma’s voice, loud and clear through the studio’s speakers: “Cut to commercials. Now!”

“Emma?” Dan said.

Marco turned to the source of the noise, recognising the voice from his unseen backstage argument during the last commercial break. “It would be helpful if security could take care of that heckler,” he said.

“Emma?” Dan repeated.

“No. No. The only voice you can hear is mine,” Marco whispered. “It’s just Dan and Marco. Dan and Marco. The only voice you can hear is mine.”

“Okay.”

“Now, I gather your mother left right around the time you were starting school, too. That must have been tough?”

Members of the audience looked at each other uneasily, not liking the way Marco was going. Marco seemed to have mistaken them for his own fans, when really they were a Dan crowd at a Marco show.

“I said cut to break,” Emma yelled, more loudly than before but this time without the benefit of the speakers’ amplification. She appeared again at the side wall, as though ready to step forward. Before she could, the same huge security guard who had been friendly with Dan earlier in the evening approached her from behind and placed his hands on her shoulders.

“Get your idiot hands off me,” Emma protested, sounding forceful rather than helpless.

The crowd began to murmur in defiance of the [SILENCE] sign. Any pretence of Marco being in control vanished when Mr Byrd left his front row seat to confront the overly physical security guard. On his way to the stage-divider, Mr Byrd looked at Marco and barked an order: “Wake him up. Show’s over.”

The [SILENCE] light flashed on and off a few times, but the only thing achieved by quietening the crowd was an increase in the audibility of Emma’s tussle with the security guard.

“I don’t know who let these people in,” Marco said, trying to talk over her and hopeful that the ruckus wouldn’t be coming across as loudly on TV as it was in the studio. “Remember, Dan: the only voice you can hear is mine. Now, can you remember why your mother left?”

The members of the audience nearest to Mr Byrd’s empty seat had again craned their necks, enabling them to see him talking

calmly to the security guard. They then saw Emma take her chance to sneak away and walk past the stage-divider, out of the backstage area and towards the set.

"I don't know," Dan said, unaware of what was going on around him.

Marco saw Emma and gave a frantic cut-throat gesture to the cameraman.

"Wake him up," Emma said.

"Cut," Marco ordered.

Emma kept walking towards them. "Wake him up!"

"We're cut," a voice called from the back of the audience.

"What the hell is this?" Marco demanded, rising to his feet. "Someone get her out of the damn shot."

Mr Byrd did his best to hold the security guard back.

"Listen, asshole," Emma said. "If you ever want to be on TV again, you'll wake him up right now."

With no lights telling them what to do and all sense of order gone, many of the audience started recording the unfolding disaster on their phones. None of them knew who Emma was, but they all knew she wasn't supposed to be there.

Marco saw the sea of phones and knew he had no option. He tried to put on his calm voice and counted up from one to five.

Dan's eyes opened at five. He blinked several times. The sight that met his focus caused him to quickly sit upright, startled. "What's going on?"

"We're leaving," Emma said, taking his hand. "Come on."

"What happened?" Dan asked Marco.

"She did," Marco said. "I guess Real Mommy didn't care enough to be here, so PR Mommy—"

Emma took two steps towards Marco Magnifico's smug face and slapped it with enough stinging force to elicit a collective gasp from the audience. Sporadic cheers and applause soon followed, signs or no signs.

Mr Byrd, past his prime but still a well-built man, abandoned his

losing struggle with the security guard and followed Dan and Emma to the exit they were taking, which was the same door Dan had come through before the start of the show.

"That was a brave thing you just did," Mr Byrd said when he caught up with them, intending it primarily for Emma but knowing that it applied to Dan just as much.

"You should go," Emma said.

Mr Byrd nodded. "Come on, Dan."

Dan looked at Emma.

"Go with him," she said.

Dan shook his head then turned to Mr Byrd. "I have to get my stuff, anyway. I'll be home soon."

"Okay, well... be careful, son,"

Dan waved Mr Byrd off down the long, deserted corridor. "Did I say something wrong?" he asked Emma.

"No," she said quietly, with none of her usual verve. "You were so good. You did everything we talked about. I'm proud of you."

"So why did you come into the shot to stop it?"

"He was asking the wrong questions. The ones you told me to make sure he didn't ask."

"Couldn't you have got his producers to tell him to stop?"

"I did. Twice. They stopped for a break the first time, but that just pissed him off. The second time he just took his earpiece out so they couldn't talk to him anymore. I ran to the mic and shouted for a break, but he kept going. I didn't have a choice; I had to come out."

"Thanks," Dan said. "I know that your No Public Association clause means you're not supposed to be seen with me."

"Yeah. There goes the NPA," Emma sighed. She leaned into the corridor's wall and slowly slid down against it until her head touched her knees. "Dan... I'm in so much trouble."

WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON, D.C.

"I need you to start digging," President Slater said to Jack Neal, her tireless right-hand man.

It had been a terrible day for the President, kicking off with William Godfrey's unforeseen decision to declassify and publish the British government's extraterrestrial files. Slater had since been informed that those files contained evidence of incidents that no one in any American agencies were familiar with. And as if that wasn't enough, Dan McCarthy hadn't crumbled under the pressure of televised hypnosis as everyone had reassured her he would.

"Digging into what?" Jack asked. He stood at the other side of President Slater's desk, oblivious to what had happened on Marco Magnifico's show having been busy playing damage limitation with the British files until Slater summoned him.

"Ben Gold," she said.

"Gold? Really?"

"He's been Walker's number two for years, so he'll know

whatever Walker knows about this damn folder. Walker will never crack, but if you can get to Ben Gold..."

"Understood," Jack said. Investigative work had once been his forte and he was glad of the chance to get back into it.

"And find out as much as you can about her," President Slater said, swivelling the screen on her desk so Jack could see the freeze-frame of the young woman berating Marco Magnifico live on air. "The show cut right after this."

Jack said nothing. He just stood, stunned, staring at the face on the screen.

"Do you know this person?" Slater asked.

"That's Emma Ford," Jack said, still staring at the confident young woman he once hired straight out of college and had only seen a handful of times in the seven years he'd been away from XPR.

Slater raised her hands impatiently. "And you know her?"

"I taught her everything she knows. Has she been with McCarthy the whole time?"

"You tell me," Slater yelled, uncharacteristically slamming the desk with her fist. "It's your job to know these things!"

Jack nodded quickly, like a child promising to do better next time. "But why is she on screen with McCarthy and the hypnotist? What happened?"

President Slater skipped the video back to the first time Emma's voice could be heard. "She didn't stop any of the tough questions about the folder or his story," Slater said, "but apparently his family was off limits. It's almost like she actually believes him."

"That might be what she wants you to think," Jack said, searching for an angle that made more sense than believing Emma thought the folder was real. In any case, he couldn't help but admire how she had managed to stay unseen while getting McCarthy the kind of TV spots she had.

And though Jack Neal knew better than anyone what kind of leverage Emma and XPR had against Blitz Media, he could only

imagine the kind of deals she must have struck with other media outlets to ensure that her name was never mentioned and her face never shown.

“Find out,” Slater said. “Find out everything. Forget about Ben Gold for now. I want Emma Ford.”

GRAVESEN HOTEL
COLORADO SPRINGS, COLORADO

“Fired,” Emma said as Dan drove the few blocks to her hotel. “By text. I work there for nine years and make them millions of dollars and they fire me by text?”

“That’s pretty bad.”

“More like total horseshit! It’s all because my commission rate was grandfathered into my contract before the new bosses arrived, and they can’t bear the fact that I make more money than them most years. They’ve wanted rid of me for so long, but they needed an excuse. They never even believed you, you know.”

This didn’t surprise Dan as much as Emma seemed to expect.

“They sent me all this way,” she continued, still ranting, “and then when I pushed for a retaliation against Blitz they said you “weren’t worth the trouble” because you would trip over your own story before long. They threatened to call me back if you didn’t do those ads, they didn’t even want to shell out for the security cameras, and they were angry that I set up the Timo thing on my

own. They never believed you for a minute.”

“When did you start believing my story?” Dan asked. He couldn’t help it; there hadn’t really been a clearly defined turning point in his client-agent relationship with Emma, but they had definitely come a long way from the moment she showed up at his doorstep on Friday night.

“Sunday,” she said without missing a beat. “Early in the morning, when the news came out about Kloster’s letter to NASA. It was too much like the documents you found to be a coincidence, and everyone I spoke to said there was no way you could have seen that letter and faked others to look like it.”

Dan bit his lip about the other Kloster letter; there were now only a few hours until Clark was due home, and though Emma had well and truly won his trust, Dan had made a promise to his brother. He parked the car across the street from the Gravesen Hotel’s imposing front entrance. “So will I see you tomorrow, or...?”

“Tonight isn’t finished,” Emma said. “Could you wait here for two minutes?”

“Sure.”

Dan watched Emma walk across to the hotel and enter through the glass doors. He couldn’t see her expression as she stood at the reception desk, but he could see her animated hands. After much less than two minutes, she returned to the car.

“Is everything okay?” Dan asked, though “what’s wrong?” would have been more appropriate.

“Could you drive me to another ATM? Theirs charges \$5, and I’m not giving them a penny more than I have to.”

Dan obliged, of course, but wondered aloud why Emma suddenly needed cash. She explained that both of her credit cards were linked to the firm and had already been cut off. And even though the firm had been charged in advance for the coming night, a valid charge account was needed to cover the deposit for things like incidental damage.

“But if your credit cards have been cut off...”

"I've got a debit card for my expenses account. There's hardly anything in it, so I'm hoping they won't have got round to locking me out yet."

"Couldn't the hotel take the debit card?" Dan asked.

"That's what I said, but they were worried about it being cut off. Can't blame them, I guess. None of this is their fault."

"So how much cash do you need?"

"\$1,200."

"For a deposit? Is the room made of diamonds?"

Dan's incredulity made Emma smile. "It's a junior suite."

"How much is the senior suite?"

"There is no senior suite," Emma said, not sure whether Dan was being serious. "Stop, ATM. Over there."

Dan's car screeched to a halt. Fortunately, it was a sufficiently mundane vehicle to avoid being recognised as his. Emma managed to reach the ATM without any more attention than someone in such a glamorous dress would normally receive, too, given that so little time had passed since her soon-to-be-headline-news interruption and slapping of Marco Magnifico.

She returned to the car quickly, protectively clutching a handful of banknotes. "Stupid daily limit. I could only get \$4,000."

"Only?"

"\$2,800 after the deposit. And they said the room is \$600. So, what's that, four nights?"

Dan focused on the road ahead, disbelieving that any room — junior suite or not — could cost so much. "You're not paying \$600 for somewhere to sleep," he eventually said in a flat tone. "You can stay at mine."

"Seriously?" Emma said, like she genuinely hadn't considered this as an option. "How much?"

"Nothing, obviously. I'm not running a hotel. And it's not like you're a stranger."

"Does anyone ever tell you that you're too nice for your own good?"

“You mean apart from Clark, my dad, the psychiatrist...?”

Emma laughed as she stepped out of the car again, back at the hotel to collect her things.

Dan listened to the radio while he waited, catching the end of an old country song about a man and his boots. He didn't much care for the tune, but the lyrics of the chorus jumped out at him:

*“So while you're out there in them old boots,
running from your rags to riches;
Spare a free thought for the dead man,
who gave them boots their stitches.”*

*IDA HEADQUARTERS
COLORADO SPRINGS, COLORADO*

Richard Walker sat smiling at his desk with Ben Gold, long after most of the IDA's staff had left for the day. Having watched Dan McCarthy's interview on Marco Magnifico's show end abruptly with an unplanned walk on from his XPR rep, Richard felt better than he had an hour earlier.

"Why is XPR such a big deal, anyway?" Ben asked, curious as to why Richard seemed so pleased when it looked to him like McCarthy had stuck to his story unnervingly well.

"There are things you don't know, Benjamin. Things you don't need to know."

Ben correctly took Richard cracking his knuckles as a suggestion that it was time to leave. "See you tomorrow, sir."

"Big day," Richard mused as Ben walked across the office.

Ben pulled the door open, noticing with some concern that it wasn't properly closed. His concern grew when he saw Richard's new favourite security guard, Raúl, standing right outside.

“How long have you been here?” Ben asked, closing the door fully and keeping his voice down to avoid alerting Richard. “Have you been listening?”

“No, Mr Gold. No, no. This is where Mr Walker asked me to stand. He told me to walk the corridor every ten minutes and stand here the rest of the time.”

“Did you hear anything?” Ben asked.

“I just got back to the door,” Raúl insisted, his voice pleading innocence. “The first thing I heard was Mr Walker saying that there are things you don’t know.”

“Good,” Ben said. He patted Raúl on the shoulder before walking away. “Stay alert.”

“Always, Mr Gold. For you and Mr Walker, always.”

D minus 50

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

Dan helped Emma carry her things into his bedroom, where she would be sleeping; Clark's room would soon be occupied, their father's was out of the question, and Dan didn't want to make Emma sleep on the couch.

"Where did the cheque for your Vostok article go?" Emma asked, noticing the space where the frame used to be, which was a fresher white than the yellowing paint everywhere else. "Did you take it down before the camera people came?"

Dan shook his head. "I had to cash it on Saturday."

"Why?"

"I needed the money."

Emma didn't ask what for; she was too busy feeling guilty about all the money she and the firm had made from Dan's name while he was forced to cash the cheque he had described as worth more to him than the money he could swap it for. The \$4,000 cash in her purse didn't make it any easier.

For his part, Dan was glad she didn't press for details. He opened the door to his bedroom and placed Emma's suitcase on the bed. "So what happens with the camera footage now that you're not with XPR? Do you think we should release it?"

"Definitely," Emma said. "The firm didn't want a war with Blitz, but the firm don't have a say anymore. We should do it soon, while we have everyone's attention on the back of the show. Speaking of which, can you remember anything you said to Marco when you were under?"

"Not really. I remember him saying 'extremely relaxed' and then nothing else until he counted up to five. How long was that?"

"Fifteen minutes, maybe. But it was good. Trust me. You sounded like someone who was telling the truth, and Marco being such a relentless asshole towards the end will have made millions of people take your side. And a sympathy vote is still a vote."

"What did he actually say that made you step in? I know you said he was asking the wrong questions, but what questions?"

"Stuff about you being an attention seeker, about not having any friends, about your parents. He was pissed off at being told what to not say so he just said all of it. Do you want to watch it?"

"Later," Dan said. "I'm going to work on something for Clark coming home. It's easier if I do it in my room, so can you maybe watch TV or something?"

"Is your brother going to be okay with me being here?" Emma asked, relieving Dan by again neglecting to push for details and thus saving him the trouble of avoiding the topic of the letter he was finally about to translate.

"He will be when I tell him how much you've helped me."

Emma nodded unsurely. "Is it okay if I get something to eat?"

"Sure."

"Do you want anything?"

"Not right now," Dan said, "I have to get on with this." He closed the door and quietly locked it.



After feeding his fish and settling his mind by watching them for a few minutes as he so often did, Dan got to work.

He opened the word document in which he had transcribed the near-impenetrable German letter and continued translating it word by word and sentence by sentence on the device Trey had purchased. Dan hadn't thought much about Trey in the last few days, but he owed him a lot; not just for delivering the translator and the book, but also for keeping the news of the game-changing letter's existence to himself.

Trey was the only person Dan had told before he promised Clark to keep his mouth shut, and he had done as good a job as Dan of keeping the secret.

The content of the letter made more sense when Dan entered entire sentences into the portable translator. As he moved through the document, he grew more and more excited. The level of detail, not to mention the nature of that detail, was far beyond anything he had hoped for.

The first part of the letter provided illuminating context: addressed to Hans Kloster's brother, the letter was a full confession of everything Hans knew about the incident at Lake Toplitz, written shortly after he was diagnosed with a then-incurable wasting disease.

"You should see this," Dan heard Emma call from the living room, around an hour after he started translating. The words could have been his own.

Dan walked through and stopped dead on the spot when he saw the headline on the TV: "Death Toll Reaches Nine In Latest "Alien" Tragedy."

"What's going on?" he asked, fearing the answer.

"It's a cargo cult somewhere in India," Emma said. "The leader, a really old guy in ceremonial robes, went into a village and tried to talk people into "saving" their children by sending them to join the

cult, who apparently are the only people who'll be spared when the aliens come. Someone stabbed the old guy in the heart, and the cult basically razed the village to avenge him."

Dan kept his eyes on the TV, which was tuned to an English-language Russian news station. "What does it mean by latest alien tragedy?" he eventually asked, fearing this answer even more than the last.

"That's the thing: everything seems to have kicked off today. There was a riot in Brazil after the police fired at protestors outside the US embassy, and someone in Turkey shot his whole family and recorded a video suicide-note saying he did it to protect them from the aliens. They're saying it's Godfrey's fault for talking about it."

"He's only talking about it because of me," Dan said, taking no pleasure from the words.

Dan then listened as the Russian news station's American reporter suggested that this was "only the beginning of the global chaos that will ensue should Washington follow London's lead and reveal all." The reporter made the now-familiar distinction between Godfrey's small-d disclosure and the potential capital-D Disclosure that could come from Slater.

"I'm not saying I believe McCarthy," the reporter continued, "but perhaps it's time he realised that some doors shouldn't be kicked down."

The worst-case scenario that the reporter then painted — one of burning cities and escalating conflicts in the aftermath of an announcement about potentially hostile aliens — struck Dan as overly pessimistic. Deep down, though, he felt that the truth likely lay somewhere between these unnerving predictions and Billy Kendrick's forecast of sunshine and rainbows.

"What are Blitz and ACN saying about this stuff?" Dan asked.

"Nothing. Blitz have been focusing on me and ACN have been talking about the British files and your interview. It's like the rest of the world doesn't exist." Emma briefly flicked over to Blitz News, which displayed a typically clickbait-like headline: "7 things you

need to know about Emma Ford RIGHT NOW!” Back on the Russian station, grisly footage from the Indian tragedy filled the screen.

Dan watched it silently.

“Don’t beat yourself up,” Emma said, reading the thoughts behind his downbeat expression. “Things like this were bound to—”

The sound of Emma’s phone vibrating on the couch cut her off.

“I should take this,” she said, standing up with her phone in her hand.

“Who is it?”

“Uh, Tara. My sister. I should really take it.”

“Okay,” Dan said. “I’ll get back to... the thing I’m working on.”

Emma ignored Dan’s vague language and headed for the back door to take the call outside, because the name on her phone’s screen was not Tara Ford.

Troublingly, but not unexpectedly, the name was Jack Neal.

D minus 49

WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON, D.C.

Jack Neal paced the length of his windowless office over and over again, hoping and waiting for Emma to pick up.

“What?” she said, catching him off-guard when he was almost ready to give up.

Having recruited her into the world of PR and mentored her for two years, Jack had something of a soft spot for Emma; despite there being just seven years between them, she had once felt like the closest thing to a daughter the unmarried and childless man would ever have, and he still felt irrationally protective of her even now.

Emma, on the other hand, rarely thought of Jack. She appreciated what he had done for her, but it was just business. On the few occasions they had been in the same room since Jack’s departure from XPR, the firm he founded, she had shown few signs of fondness.

“Listen, Emma...”

“What do you want?”

"Can you talk?" Jack asked. He sat down.

Emma looked around. There was no one else on the street and Dan's windows were all closed. "Make it quick."

"You really believe McCarthy's story, don't you?"

"So do you," Emma said.

"What makes you say that?"

"Slater asked you to call me. She knows the game's up."

Jack took a deep breath. "This is me talking to you as a friend, okay? This isn't spin, so listen to what I'm saying: President Slater doesn't know anything about this Kerguelen folder or anything in it."

"Of course she doesn't."

"Think about it," Jack pleaded. "If the President had anything to do with the files McCarthy leaked, do you really think he'd still have them four days later? You really think he'd be talking about them to the media?"

"Seizing the folder or coming after Dan would be political suicide," Emma retorted. "An explicit admission of guilt. You and Slater know that as well as I do."

"Emma... whatever this thing is or isn't, she's not in on it. How sure are you that McCarthy hasn't served up the greatest hoax of all time?"

"Do you live under a rock? The Australian letter is real, Kloster sent a letter to NASA that's just like the ones in the folder, and the Billy Kendrick thing makes perfect sense. Remember when you first uncovered what Blitz was doing with the illegal surveillance and harassment? The targets read like a list of the most powerful people in the country... plus Billy Kendrick. Now we know why. He had just started talking about a government cover-up, and someone didn't like it."

"But Richard Walker was on the list, too. If he had anything to do with Blitz spying on Kendrick, why would they be spying on him?"

"I didn't say I had all the answers," Emma said after a few seconds of fruitless thought. "The point is, the files aren't made up."

It's not like I'm just taking Dan's word for it. And trust me, I didn't come here expecting to start believing in aliens. The firm sent me to get what I could before his story fell apart, but it just keeps getting stronger."

Jack sighed audibly. "You've read his schoolwork. His lifelong goal was proving that aliens are real. How many kids think like that? How many people have goals like that?"

"He's not like other people. On Friday night he was too shy to look me in the eye, and tonight he agreed to be hypnotised by an asshole on live TV. What does that tell you? He hates the press and the makeup, he said no to \$50,000 for a two-hour ad shoot, and he did everything he could to leak the files anonymously. All of this media attention isn't fun for him, Jack. Sometimes it's felt like I've had to drag him out of his house."

"What are you telling me?"

"That he's not lying! Have you ever considered that maybe Slater didn't want to share the biggest secret in the world with her PR rep?"

"I'm her senior presidential advisor," Jack said through gritted teeth. "I know more about Valerie Slater than she knows about herself. And when something needs to be cleaned up, I'm the only one she turns to. That's why I'm here. So however sure you are that McCarthy isn't lying, I'm twice as sure that Valerie has nothing to do with this."

"Someone's lying," Emma insisted, "and I'm telling you it's not Dan."

"You've only known him for four days."

"I know a liar when I see one, Jack. If you taught me anything, it was that."

Jack closed his eyes and wracked his mind. "Let's pretend we're both right," he said, almost groaning. "For the sake of argument."

"Go on..."

"President Slater wants info on two people: you and Walker's number two. His name is Ben Gold. Have you done any digging on

him?”

“Dan doesn’t think Gold is in on it,” Emma said. “He said Gold has spent his career searching for habitable exoplanets and alien signals. Apparently he’s even published proposals for the kinds of signals we should be sending into space. He just doesn’t fit. He’s the total opposite of a good fit.”

“And who got Timo Fiore involved? Was that you or Kendrick?”

“No comment.”

“Emma, soliciting treason or espionage or whatever this would be is not a joke.”

“I know,” she said flatly. “And I’m sure whoever did it knows that, too. But if there’s no cover-up then there’s nothing else to be leaked, right?”

“Listen to me,” Jack begged. “You don’t understand how deep this could go. If Walker and whoever he’s working with really have been hiding this since the first date on those documents, they’re not just going to roll over. If this is a governmental thing from before Valerie’s time then you could end up in serious trouble. But if it’s not — if Walker is in with some kind of shadow agency or private group — you might already be in physical danger.”

“What are you talking about, shadow agency? What do you know?”

“Nothing. Honestly. But if this isn’t the government’s secret to keep, then whose the hell is it?”

Emma hadn’t given this much thought, and she didn’t see any point in starting now. “Who cares? Who cares who Walker is working with? If it’s a government secret, Timo’s reward will flush it out. Walker had the folder either way, and I can prove it. We can run fingerprints or DNA or whatever. And remember the spheres that the folder talks about? Once we prove the folder is real, the whole world is going to be looking for them. No amount of spin can deny physical evidence like that.”

“You need to get yourself out of this while you can,” Jack said. He stood up and started pacing his office once more. “Whatever the hell

this actually is, you need to get out of it.”

Emma knew that Jack would be assuming she was recording the call — in their line of work, this was rule one — so she took his advice as a sign of genuine concern. Given that he had been candid throughout and his thoughts were more jumbled than coherent, Emma got the sense that Jack, like her, really was trying to figure out what was going on. She didn’t say anything.

“McCarthy is already in way too deep,” Jack continued, “but you can still get out if you leave now. You have to leave now.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Emma, you’re not think—”

“I appreciate the concern, Jack, but you’re not my boss. Not anymore.”

Jack ruffled his hair in sheer frustration. He tried to compose his voice. “Remember your first day at XPR, when I told you that stubbornness could be your friend or your enemy? Right now, it’s not your friend, Emma. It’s not your friend.”

“Do you remember what else you told me on my first day?” Emma asked in return, taking him by surprise.

“Remind me.”

“You can hide the truth forever, but the lie always gets out.”

Jack Neal had nothing to say in response.

Emma ended the call and went back inside.

D minus 48

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

Emma watched the Blitz News coverage of her “violent attack” on Marco Magnifico out of morbid curiosity. There had so far been no comment from XPR, any former clients, or any of the countless public figures she had privately clashed with over the years. She liked to think that people knew better; even if she no longer had the backing of a global behemoth like XPR, she still had almost a decade’s worth of life-destroying dirt on more high-profile individuals than she could count.

The Blitz News anchor for this “unbiased” segment was Sarah Curtis. Sarah had enjoyed the good fortune of being on air with Billy Kendrick when Richard Walker first responded to the leak on Friday afternoon, and she had fronted much of the Blitz coverage since. Emma took solace in the fact that Sarah and her colleagues wouldn’t be laughing in the morning, when the news of a Blitz Media employee bugging Dan’s house belatedly came out.

Emma had already considered her options in regards to the

bugging like a chess player, factoring in what everyone else would be thinking and taking care to plan several steps ahead. Her former employers at XPR knew about the bugging, but they had explicitly insisted that Dan wasn't worth starting a war with Blitz over, so Emma saw little chance of them revealing anything. She likewise doubted that they would give Blitz a heads-up that they had been caught; however acrimonious Emma's split with XPR was, the firm's years of simmering antagonism with Blitz rendered any such courtesy all but inconceivable.

When Emma felt that enough time had passed to broach the issues raised by Jack Neal's phone call without raising suspicion over the call itself, she rose from the couch and knocked on Dan's bedroom door.

Dan came to the door, barely opening it. His eyes, looking flustered, greeted Emma at the side of the door.

"Are you hiding a girl in there or something?" Emma asked with a smile.

Dan's silence suggested that the joke had fallen flat.

"Are you okay?"

"What do you need?" Dan asked. He deliberately said need rather than want, assuming that Emma wouldn't bother him with anything that wasn't urgent.

"I was just wondering something. Do you think..."

"Do I think what?" Dan said, quickly impatient.

"Never mind. It's stupid." Emma turned away.

Dan opened the door further and slipped out, closing it right behind him. "Tell me."

"Okay," Emma said. Her eyes rested low, which Dan tagged as unusual for someone who normally made unflinching eye contact in all situations. "Do you think there's any chance that Slater doesn't know?"

"About what?"

"Everything. Walker's folder, Kloster's letter to NASA, the whole thing."

Dan looked at Emma's eyes, which still didn't meet his own. "Do you know something I don't?"

"I told you it was stupid."

"It's not stupid at all."

Emma finally looked up at Dan. "Really?"

"Presidents never know more than they have to," Dan said. "Think about how many presidents Richard Walker has outlasted. If this is his secret to keep, why would he tell them?"

"You really think he could hide it from a president?"

Dan nodded confidently. "A guy like Walker... well, that's the point: there isn't another guy like Walker. If he's dedicated the last thirty years of his life to suppressing this thing, which I think he has, he could easily have kept it from Slater and anyone else he didn't want to find out. It makes sense. This secret could be why he agreed to take the IDA job when he could have made another run for the White House. And Billy said that Hans Kloster lobbied hard for Walker to get the job in the first place, so it all fits together."

Emma didn't yet pick up that Dan knew something she didn't — something gathered from his ongoing translation of the German letter — but she took a deep breath and decided to tell Dan what had first raised the Slater question in her mind. "That phone call wasn't from my sister," she admitted, now back in the familiar habit of maintaining almost overbearing eye contact. "It was from Jack Neal."

"How and why does Jack Neal have your phone number?" Dan asked. Of all the questions Emma's revelation raised, this somehow found itself at the front of the queue.

"He hired me at XPR. It was his firm until he cashed out and went into politics. I've only seen him a few times since then, but I still have his number and he has mine."

"So what did he want?" Dan prodded, quickly getting to the more important questions. "Did he tell you to stop digging before you get hurt?"

Emma nodded, looking unnaturally vulnerable. "He thinks

Walker could be working with a shadow agency to keep this quiet. He swore to me that Slater doesn't know. I know you'll think I'm crazy for believing him, but I don't think he was lying."

"There's no shadow agency," Dan said definitively. "It's just Walker and maybe a few others."

"Ben Gold?"

"I doubt it. He's a scientist, not a politician."

Emma accepted that without too much difficulty, but she didn't understand how Dan could be so confident about the rest. "What makes you so sure there's no shadow agency?"

"Just because," Dan said, more surely than his choice of words suggested. "The only thing I never agreed with Billy on was his obsession with Disclosure. I thought the confirmation event was more likely to be a random civilian discovery or a deliberate message in the sky. I always kind of thought a cover-up was too far-fetched because it's just like the critics have been saying about the leak: too many people would have to know. And the bigger the number of people who know, the bigger the chance that one of them lets slip. So I reckon we're either dealing with a tiny political group or a tiny private group, but not the whole government and not a shadow agency. Walker might have used IDA projects as covers or diversions, but the low-level staff won't know. He didn't get where he is by trusting more people than he has to."

"So Jack isn't lying?"

"Why did you lie about the phone call, anyway?" Dan asked, ignoring Emma's question in favour of his own. "Before you picked up, why did you say it was your sister?"

Emma hesitated. "I don't know. Just because I didn't know what Jack was going to say, I guess."

In the near-symmetrical context of the secret letter Dan was halfway through translating, he couldn't reasonably hold this against her. "I should finish what I'm doing," he said.

"What are you doing?" Emma asked, finally forcing Dan to think of an answer.

“Reading something about Kloster,” Dan said, satisfying his conscience that omission was better than an outright lie. “I’ll be as quick as I can.”



Later in the night, and very near the end of the letter, Dan heard the front door open. He looked at the time in the corner of his screen: 03:53.

Dan jumped out of his seat smiling. He had been so busy translating the longer-than-it-looked letter that he’d temporarily forgotten about Clark being due home several hours earlier.

In the living room, the sudden movement woke Emma from her restful sleep. She turned away from the TV and saw a huge presence standing in the doorway with a large holdall bag slung over one shoulder. She then turned instinctively to Dan’s door when it opened, before flitting her eyes between the two brothers as though she was watching a game of tennis. Dan’s height had surprised Emma on their first meeting, but the difference in his posture compared to Clark’s now made him appear no taller than average. The brothers were in fact almost exactly the same height, but Emma would never have believed it.

The soft notes of Emma’s perfume filled the air, indicating her presence before Clark’s eyes confirmed the suspicion.

As Clark flicked the light on and walked towards Dan after a brief and unfriendly glance in Emma’s direction, the image her mind conjured was of two goldfish in the same undersized bowl, with the dominant one much larger than the other. Clark was broader than Dan to the point that it almost didn’t make sense, and he carried himself like he had something worth carrying.

Dan saw the way Clark looked at Emma — like she was dirt on his shoe — but was too glad to see him to take much notice.

“Are you okay?” Clark asked as he met Dan midway across the room. His voice was considerably deeper than Dan’s — almost

husky — and seemed to fit with his prematurely receding hairline.

Dan nodded wordlessly.

Clark patted him hard on the shoulder. There were no hugs or embraces, which somehow both surprised Emma and didn't.

"Good," Clark said. "I've been trying to get through to you all night."

Dan lifted his phone from his pocket and saw five missed calls. "I forgot to take it off silent," he said.

Clark shrugged then removed his holdall from his shoulder. "Can you dump this on my bed?" he asked, handing it to Dan.

Emma watched as Dan took the bag, which appeared to be a thousand times heavier than he expected; what had looked like nothing in Clark's hands now seemed to be filled with lead.

With Dan walking to Clark's room, Clark headed back to the front door and opened it. Rather than step outside to pick up another bag, as Emma had expected him to, Clark held the door open and looked straight at her.

"Get the fuck out of my house."

Dan, hearing the words, dropped Clark's bag with a thud. "What are you doing?"

"Now," Clark said, ignoring Dan and tilting his head towards the dark street.

Emma stood up.

"You don't have to go anywhere," Dan said. He turned to Clark. "You don't understand. You don't know anything about—"

"It's all over the news," Clark interrupted. "She's all over the news. I know who she is and I know who she works for."

"Worked," Dan contended. "She lost her job for stopping the hypnotism."

"The hypnotism that was her latest idea to make money off your name?"

Emma stood at the couch; silently, awkwardly, impotently.

"Clark, she didn't make me do it."

"But it was her idea, wasn't it? It was her fault you got

embarrassed like that, wasn't it? Look at what she's wearing! She was dressed for TV. You're being played."

Dan looked over at Emma, still in the anomalously glamorous blue and black dress. There was a perfectly good reason why she looked so chic tonight of all nights, but they both knew that Clark wasn't interested in hearing it.

"Her whole job is getting people to trust her," Clark continued. "She probably would have got me, too."

"She's on my side! I don't even want to think about where I'd be if she wasn't."

"How about not being made to look like a total dick on live TV?"

"Dan," Emma said, breaking her silence. "Maybe he's right. I should—"

"No. There's something you have to see," Dan said. "Sit down for a few minutes. And Clark, go into your room and unpack your stuff. Please. Five minutes."

Clark breathed deeply and closed the front door. He walked slowly across the room, stopping as he passed Emma at the couch. "You're a fucking snake," he hissed.

Whether it was the language or the slight on her character, Emma took strong and immediate exception to these words. To Dan's disbelief, she walked around the couch and squared up to Clark.

Emma looked up at Clark, her forehead barely reaching his shoulders. "I'm a what?" she challenged.

"Fucking. Snake."

Dan had seen Clark lose his temper too many times to count, abandoning words for fists and inevitably making a mess of whoever stepped on his toes. It wasn't so much that Clark had grown up with a short fuse as it was that he didn't have a fuse at all; when something annoyed him, he hit it. Clark's days in the army had knocked most of the insolence out of him and taught him to control and channel his anger, but as Dan saw the intensity build in Clark's eyes he worried that those days were now too far in the past

to have any bearing on the present.

But as the equally riled up Emma refused to back down, Dan knew deep down that Clark wouldn't touch her even if he found himself on the wrong end of the same kind of stinging slap that Marco Magnifico had endured earlier in the night. Henry McCarthy had instilled the "never hit a woman" rule so strongly that the only time Clark ever laid serious hands on Dan was when 8-year-old Dan pushed an older girl during a kickball game outside their house.

Even without such concrete assurances, Emma held her ground. "At least this snake was here for him," she said caustically.

Dan stepped in to physically prise them apart. He tried to reason with Clark, who he saw as the cause of the problem. "I'm only asking you for five minutes," he said. "Please."

"Tell her to stay out of my face," Clark said as he backed up.

"Tell me yourself," Emma pushed.

Dan led Clark away by the arm. "Just unpack your stuff," he said when they reached Clark's door, which was just to the left of Dan's.

"Where the hell's your cheque?" Clark asked, spotting the whiter square of paint where the frame had been. "Don't tell me you've been paying her?"

Emma started to answer, but Dan held his hand up to stop her. "I needed the \$85 to buy the thing I'm using right now. Ask Phil from the pawn shop. I cashed it on Saturday night."

Clark dropped the point, shot a parting look at Emma, and slammed his bedroom door behind him.

"Don't leave," Dan pleaded to Emma from outside his own room. "Whatever he says, don't leave."



Dan had only six lines left to translate. The letter seemed to be winding down into a farewell, but he had to keep going in case there was anything new to go on top of the incredible revelations he'd already uncovered.

With three lines left, Dan's concentration was broken by the sound of a door opening and Clark's voice booming: "How much money have you made off him since Friday?"

Dan tried to maintain his focus.

"The firm makes the money," Emma replied, calmly but firmly.

"Don't give me that," Clark shouted, using the exact tone and words their father had resorted to in countless arguments over the years.

The shouting reminded Dan of being a child; of his parents arguing in that same living room while he hid in this same bedroom, only back then Clark had been in there with him covering his ears, not outside stoking the argument's flames. Back then Clark would always reassure Dan that the fight wasn't about him, but Dan had no such consolation this time.

"You've been parading him around like a circus animal," Clark yelled. Dan was glad that it at least sounded like Clark was standing in his doorway rather than at Emma's area by the couch. "You're the agent they sent to—"

"Rep," Emma interrupted.

Clark shrugged, more with his palms than his shoulders. "You're the fucking rep they sent to talk him into all this shit. What was it worth to you?"

"It wasn't like that."

"How much would it have been for tonight?" Clark pushed.

"I said it wasn't like that."

"How... much?"

"Thirty," Emma muttered under her breath, too quietly for Dan to hear.

"Thirty grand?!"

Dan heard this. He didn't really mind; in a way he was glad that it wasn't an insulting amount, and Emma had been quite upfront with him that she would get "a good commission" for the live TV appearance as soon as she first brought it up.

"Was it worth it?" Clark asked. "Was it worth embarrassing him

in front of millions of people?”

“I didn’t know Marco was going to turn on him,” Emma insisted. There was no anger in her voice now, only a shaky kind of guiltless regret. “Dan knows that. He knows I’m sorry.”

“Everyone’s sorry when they get caught.”

“How did I get caught?” Emma snapped, shifting back towards anger at Clark’s incessant if understandable accusations. “In what world does going out in front of the cameras and throwing that money away to protect him equate to getting caught? Ask the guy across the street, Mr Byrd. He was there. He’s been here the whole time, trying to protect Dan when someone else was nowhere to be seen.”

Dan gave up any pretence of being able to concentrate with this going on outside his door. Emma, normally the most in-control person Dan had ever known, sounded almost hysterical. He felt responsible for giving her the false expectation that Clark would be grateful for what she had done, which had led to these accusations catching her completely off guard.

Having heard enough, Dan reluctantly opened his door again.

“Shut up!” he yelled, even though no one was talking at the time. “Both of you. I asked for five minutes, and you can’t even give me that?”

Neither said anything.

“Look, it doesn’t matter where you’ve been or how you got here,” Dan said, motioning to Clark and then Emma. “We’re all here now and we’re all on the same side, okay? I’m trying to finish something but all I can hear is you two arguing over nothing.”

Clark, standing much nearer to Dan than Emma was, tried to look past Dan into his room. “What are you doing in there, anyway?”

“The thing I told you about. Remember, the thing you told me not to tell anyone else about?”

Clark slowly tipped his chin upwards in understanding.

“What thing?” Emma asked whoever was listening.

Dan held up three fingers. "Three minutes. If you have to ignore him, ignore him. Just don't leave, okay?"

"Okay," Emma said.



Slightly more than three minutes later, Emma heard the sound of a printer in operation.

"What's he printing?" she called to Clark, who was now in the kitchen.

Clark stood still to listen for the printer. He walked back through the opening into the living room. "I don't know what it is," he said. "Did he tell you anything about... anything?"

"Like what?" Emma said. She stood up and walked into the kitchen.

Clark joined her at the table. His next question came quietly enough that Dan wouldn't have heard it even without the printer: "Do you believe him?"

Emma held Clark's eyes and nodded.

"Since when? And don't say the beginning. I didn't even believe him on Friday."

Emma allowed herself to smile. "Definitely not Friday. At first I thought he had some kind of autistic thing that makes him able to lie with a straight face."

"Opposite," Clark said. "A blind man could see a lie in Dan's eyes, and he's not autistic."

The printer stopped printing, causing Emma to lower her voice even further than she had already. "But he's definitely something, right?"

"He's the smartest person I know," Clark said.

"Well yeah, but—"

"But, yeah, he's not exactly 'people smart'. When it comes to people, how can I put this... he sometimes trusts the wrong ones."

"I've never lied to him," Emma said defensively. "I've never

taken advantage of him. He knew I didn't believe him at first. I told him straight that we were on the same side for different reasons; that he wanted people to believe him and that my job was to get his truth in front of a wide audience and protect him from people who were trying to silence it. That's all I've ever done."

"So when did you start believing him?" Clark asked, returning to his previous question.

"Sunday. When Kloster's letter to NASA—"

"Same." Clark interrupted. He was good at interrupting. "The Kloster thing is the—"

This time, the interruption came from Dan.

"Okay," he said as he opened his door and walked towards the kitchen, too focused on the dynamite evidence in his hands to take any notice of the fact that Emma and Clark were sitting near each other and talking civilly.

"Is that it?" Clark asked

Emma stared at the printouts. There were two piles of double-sided sheets. "What is it?"

"There was something else in the Kerguelen folder," Dan said. "It's big."

"What did you just say?" Emma asked. She sat bolt upright.

Dan held out the envelope containing the original handwritten letter. "I didn't leak this with everything else, and no one knows I found it. I just got through translating it from German, so some parts might be clunky. It's not too bad, though, because the thing has a "literality" setting and I changed it to very low so it would smooth the English out as much it could without losing too much accuracy. We can retranslate on the high setting later if you want; I just needed to do it quickly tonight. I needed to know what it was."

"So what is it?" Clark asked. The presence of an unreleased document wasn't news to him, but its nature remained a mystery.

"A confession," Dan said. "Dated 1988, signed by Hans Kloster, addressed to his brother Wilhelm."

Emma held out her hand to receive the printouts. "What does it

say?" she asked impatiently.

"Everything," Dan smiled, flashing teeth. "Absolutely everything."

Part 3

THE LETTER

“Power is not a means; it is an end.”

George Orwell

D minus 47

Dearest Wilhelm,

I hope these words find you in better health than they leave me. You surely know by now that my days are short, and that is why I have written this letter. For even though we have lived such different and isolated lives, I can trust no one else.

Never did I wish to burden you with this knowledge, brother, but I have no one else to turn to.

I have guarded a great secret for over four decades. The burden was not always mine alone, but I can count on my fingers the other men who knew the whole story. None of them lived to see 1946. It would serve no purpose to name them, but suffice to say they would likely be among those named by a layman asked to state the most prominent party officials.

The purpose of this letter is not to ease my conscience by burdening yours. This secret is unfortunately not of the kind which can safely die with its last keeper, for the secret is the existence of an alien artefact which was reluctantly discarded in the Atlantic Ocean, perilously close to a concentrated population base.

I well understand the difficulty you may face in believing these

words, and I endured the journey to this convention to place this letter in your hands with that in mind. If nothing else, you know these words are mine.

I cannot stress strongly enough that the rediscovery of the artefact and its contents would destroy everything we have both worked for, be it in Bonn or Washington. Such an event would be a disaster, its only winners the SED and KPdSU. In simple terms: knowledge of a non-human threat from above would be used as justification for a central world government; for redistributing wealth from west to east; for eliminating our well-earned economic and military advantages.

I will waste no more of your time with context. I beg your patience as I present the story as best I can, through the haze of time and the cloud of illness. The medications, worthless in their task, have only the effect of slowing my thoughts.

The tale I tell is necessarily shortened, but I am sure it contains everything you need to know.

Now, to the point.

On April 2, 1938, an alien craft was discovered during an exercise in Lake Toplitz. A month later, I personally decoded a message found inside the craft which led to the discovery of four spherical objects, each of which contained a further message.

In the eyes of the leadership, the craft was a gift. The craft landing within the newly extended boundaries of the Fatherland was taken as a sign that we had been chosen; for this reason the find was considered to be one of unparalleled racial importance.

The leadership was extremely protective of the find. The various teams assigned to analyse parts of the craft were kept apart and convinced that they were studying the wreckage of fallen Soviet spy planes.

While a decisive intercontinental weapon capable of securing the Reich's future did not come to pass, much of the rapid progress in rocketry usually credited to my former colleagues did in fact originate from the Toplitz craft.

As for the craft itself: despite intense study over several years, its precise material composition remained a mystery. The material was spoken of as an ultralight alloy, but this does not tell the whole story. I held a piece in my hands, and the term “ultralight” is quite simply insufficient. The piece I held, without exaggeration, was the size of a book and the weight of a single page.

The craft’s material was like nothing recognised by earthly science.

In a word, it was alien.

The four spheres and the plaques they contained were described to me as consisting of “impossibly pure” magnesium. The knee-high spheres were lighter than they looked but not remarkably so; nothing like the craft. All four spheres exhibited an intense multipolar magnetism like nothing any of us had previously encountered.

We all assumed that the spheres were dropped by the craft. My further belief is that the Toplitz craft had in turn been delivered to our vicinity by a still larger vessel, but that is speculation. To picture the Toplitz craft, consider a modern helicopter three times larger than normal. This was no behemoth. The shape was something akin to a bell which had been greatly compressed from top to bottom. It was not a saucer or a disc, nor like any other popular “UFO” projections of modern times.

Now, the spheres.

For reasons still unclear to me, the four spheres were scattered across a great distance. The leadership, again, considered this scattering part of the gift. They reasoned that no one else would have been able to locate and track down all four spheres, even had they somehow discovered the craft. This was no message in a bottle, they said: the spheres were supposed to be found, not stumbled upon. The locations I decoded supported this theory, since no spheres were dropped in the new world or in hostile communist lands.

You were still a child, but you may remember that by 1938 I was

gaining some renown as a physicist. I had recently written two papers on early Germanic astronomy which had been very well received, and to those papers I owed the visit which came on May 2.

On my doorstep stood two party officials, the junior of whom I did not recognise and the senior of whom you would not wish to know I had such close dealings with.

The two men invited themselves inside and showed me three photographs, each featuring a section of what looked like an engraved metal sheet. The first image was described to me as a “star map”. Its five markings were arranged in an unfamiliar manner; certainly no nearby constellation.

The next photograph showed a line of distinct dot-like markings, the third of which was underlined. The underlined third marking had another smaller marking extremely nearby. Unmistakably, this was a linear representation of our solar system.

The third photograph repeated the same planetary diagram with Earth and our moon curiously surrounded by a thin box. The area above the diagram contained twenty-four lines, perfectly aligned in three columns of eight. Without hesitation I shared my belief that that we were looking at a scale, with each line representing one twenty-fourth of the distance from Earth to our moon.

The men asked how I could be so sure about this and what I thought it might mean. I looked again at the so-called star map and shared my belief that the five engraved markings represented terrestrial locations.

This was the point at which the senior party official told me to gather my clothes and belongings.

On the way to Austria, the officials told me everything. I attempted to keep a straight face while listening to their descriptions of the alien craft. I asked no questions. When one of them then asked what I would need to continue the work of mapping the locations, I regrettably requested Mattheus Scholl.

You will surely remember Father’s regular visits from Mattheus, who I knew as a fine cartographer and who I wanted by my side to

help me through whatever I was about to find myself caught up in. Mattheus joined me on the evening of May 4. He thought I was insane and did not thank me for getting him involved, but he worked hard in the knowledge that success was our only way home.

One of the markings on the location map stood out in the same way that Earth did on the planetary legend — by way of being underlined — so we took that marking as a “home point” and assumed it to represent our discovery point of the craft: Lake Toplitz.

Armed with the relative distances and Earth-to-moon scale, we had little difficulty calculating the absolute distances from Lake Toplitz to each of the four other locations. Identifying the locations was another matter. Needless to say, modern technology would make this task immeasurably easier today than it was then.

Given that the craft had been found submerged in a lake, we focused our search on bodies of water. After several false starts and dead-ends, I found that Lake Namtso in Tibet was precisely the correct distance from Lake Toplitz when the “star map” was oriented at a particular angle. At this angle, another point appeared to fall on the Antarctic coast with the others more isolated in the Southern Ocean.

Ever diligent, Mattheus meticulously remeasured the distances and sourced the most detailed maps he could find. In the middle of the third night, he shook me awake.

Mattheus excitedly told me that when the map was oriented with one point on Namtso, the two points which looked to fall in the endless ocean actually fell on two of our planet’s most isolated islands. He insisted that he had already double-checked and triple-checked everything.

The islands in question — Kerguelen and Bouvet — were so small and isolated that their falling perfectly in the right places quite simply could not be dismissed as coincidence. We told our superiors at first light.

After remarkably short discussions, it was decided that expeditions would be sent to the four locations: Namtso, Bouvet,

Kerguelen and Antarctica.

For a brief note of background: The Ahnenerbe was established in July 1935. Its early expeditions looked at things like rock carvings in Italy and folk music in Finland. With the serious DFG funding that came in 1938, its sights were extended to Antarctica. This raised fewer eyebrows than I expected.

Though I was treated extremely well during my time in the party compound, the next thirty-two months were uncomfortable and inconvenient. For Mattheus, with a family at home, they were unbearable. Never a day passed without some expression of the hatred he felt for me, the man who had involved him in something he was beginning to realise he could never escape.

I did the work of evaluating weapon designs, in absolute isolation and to keep myself sane. Mattheus, meanwhile, shut off.

Enough digression, brother. Though it must be said: there is a certain catharsis in expressing that which has been contained inside for so long.

The first sphere was discovered on the Antarctic coast in January of 1939, during an expedition launched under false pretences which even the captain bought into. The four rings found in the Toplitz craft, which testing had shown to display bizarre magnetic properties, were taken on board. Eyewitness testimony from the few men sent to recover the sphere as covertly as possible told of an incredible sight as the sphere rose from the water near the cruiser and settled in one of the rings, held at arms length by a member of the search party. The ring then locked around the sphere, where it would remain until all four spheres were reunited almost two years later.

The Bouvet sphere was recovered without difficulty in February of 1939, during the Antarctic expedition's journey home. I feel now as I did then that the recovery team's success in covertly using the rings to attract these first two spheres without being seen by the rest of the crew is worthy of more praise than it received.

Next came Lake Namtso. Shaffer's long-planned expedition to

Tibet was already well underway, having left Europe in April of 1938. After some political complications his party entered Tibet in December, by which time its number had swelled with a carefully selected recovery team. Shaffer and his men, carrying out perfectly legitimate exercises in earthly sciences, moved southwest from Lhasa in March of 1939. The splinter group, however, continued 150 miles north to Namtso. Needless to say, the sphere rose out of the water and gently landed on the ring. Shaffer's team recovered vast samples of animal and plant life, making it simple enough for the recovery team to conceal the sphere among their own samples before reuniting with the main group.

Kerguelen did not go without a hitch. The war was underway by the first attempted recovery in November of 1939, which occurred during a pre-planned landing on Kerguelen. Nothing was discovered and we knew that a new dedicated mission could not be suggested without raising too many eyebrows and involving too many crewmen. Fortunately, a small recovery team sent aboard Rogge's Atlantis in late 1940 managed to recover the sphere without incident. No satisfactory answer was ever given as to why the first team failed the year prior.

Now, brother, even if time has played tricks with my mind regarding the dates and sequences so far, rest assured that the memory of what came next is as fresh as ever.

Along with the few senior officials I alluded to previously, I was there for the opening of the spheres.

The only visible marking inside the craft, which was now heavily guarded near the lake's shore, were four small circular ridges on the otherwise smooth floor. I and three others each placed a sphere on a ridge.

Immediately, with a sphere on each ridge, the craft's only opening — a sliding panel which had always been ajar but required no small effort to fit through — slammed shut like a door in the wind.

My mind was confusion; my heart was fear.

A torch defeated the unearthly darkness in time for me to see the magnetic rings relax and fall to the bottom of their respective spheres, accompanied by a chorus of loud hissing sounds not unlike those of a disturbed rattlesnake.

The alien spheres were opened then and there.

D minus 46

*McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO*

Dan sat silently as Emma and Clark read. Emma was much further into the letter than Clark, so Dan focused on her face to gauge her reaction.

As ever, she was difficult to read.

“Have you looked into this Mattheus Scholl guy?” Clark suddenly asked, looking up at Dan.

Emma, utterly focused, didn’t react in any way.

“Not yet,” Dan said, speaking quietly. “Just keep reading.”

D minus 45

To make a long story short, brother, we found a metallic plaque in each sphere, similar to those which had been left in the craft to lead us to the spheres in the first place.

No more than six men saw all four plaques. Unfortunately, I was not among them.

It happened like this: immediately after the spheres were opened, I was handed the first plaque. It contained a representation of our solar system on the right and what I assumed to be the Messengers' home system on the left.

One section of the second plaque contained what was almost certainly a timescale for the Messengers' return. I saw this plaque for mere seconds — no more than that — but long enough to see that the message established one year as a core unit. That alone is of little help, I admit, but it at least tells us that the timescale is not millennial or greater. The rest of the plaque, for all I saw, appeared simply to identify Earth as the target of their attempted communications.

As I tried to draw conclusions from the timescale, I suddenly heard a hushed but frantic concern in the air. I looked up to see the other men huddled around the final two plaques. Those plaques, along with the one in my hand and the first, were then taken away.

To confirm what I know: the first plaque showed an unfamiliar solar system while the second showed a timescale for the Messengers' return.

The third and fourth? I cannot be sure. But within days, Mattheus claimed to have found out from someone else that one or both contained images of the Messengers themselves. Mattheus became certain that the plaques were being suppressed because the representations of the Messengers' physical appearance had been deemed injurious to the Reich. These ideas soon consumed him.

I must confess to dismissing his theory out of hand. But with what I know now regarding earthly artefacts which were indeed destroyed for daring to present god-like figures with physical features which contradicted the party's racial mythos, I am not so sure.

The last I will mention of Mattheus is that he was eliminated in the days that followed. He considered the suppression of the Messenger's physical forms a grave offence against science, decency, and a thousand other things. When he refused to be quiet, he was silenced.

This is the entirety of what I know about the discovery at Lake Toplitz.

So why am I telling you?

Like me, you will almost certainly be in the ground before the return comes. I pass you the burden of this truth for one reason: to ensure that our enemies do not prosper in the meantime.

As I have told you, the alien craft at Toplitz was sunk and destroyed. The empty Namtso, Bouvet, and New Swabia spheres were looted from Altaussee, apparently without raising suspicion. The third and fourth plaques, to the best of my knowledge, were decisively destroyed by the leadership; I believe the spheres were stored to be studied, but that the risk of the wrong eyes seeing the suppressed plaques was deemed too great.

The looted spheres, devoid of context, present no threat to anyone.

My sole and great concern is the Kerguelen sphere, which was jettisoned in haste, intact, and with the two surviving plaques inside. If that sphere is ever recovered, whether by the Argentines, British, Americans, or anyone else, I fear that the global order we have worked so hard to establish will collapse overnight. If you see merit in trying to prevent such a night from coming, I implore you to focus your efforts on the Kerguelen sphere. I implore you to focus on the Argentine coast.

Just as in 1941 when we could not launch a dedicated mission to Kerguelen to recover the sphere without raising suspicion, I have been unable to recover it from the ocean.

You may be familiar with the stories of U-530 and U-977, both of which surrendered in Argentina in the summer of 1945. What the official records omit is that a third U-boat arrived in the second week of August, landing at Necochea after dumping the Kerguelen sphere due east of Miramar.

My sources for this information are utterly infallible.

The plan had been for the sphere and the two surviving plaques to reach Necochea and be transported safely inland. This changed when the crew received word that U-530, having already surrendered at Mar del Plata, had been swiftly transferred to the Americans. An understandable decision was made to dump the sphere rather than deliver it to the hands of the enemy.

I must leave for the airport very soon, but there are a few more points to be made.

The alien craft was annihilated in Lake Toplitz in the spring of 1945. Our detonations were more powerful than necessary. The discovery of the forged British currency dumped in the lake further reaffirms my confidence that there are no remnants of the craft; if there were, they would have been found.

When Toplitz is mentioned today, the one in one thousand men who know anything whatsoever about the lake will immediately think of either that forged currency or the gold that was supposedly dumped. I see no reason to discredit the persistent rumours of secret

gold, for they serve a purpose in distracting from the truth that must remain hidden: that Lake Toplitz was the site of the most important discovery in all of human history.

Such rumours, perhaps, should even be encouraged. Talk of searches for the Grail and the Ark certainly was, for such ideas occupied conspiratorial minds which may otherwise have turned to matters closer to the truth. Officials likewise went to great lengths to talk up fantastical stories of the Führer's escape to Argentina and of secret Antarctic bases, both of which have acted as barriers against serious discussion of what actually happened in the far south.

I have noticed the Americans increasingly utilising such practices as we did, dressing up their lies as secrets so as to placate those who are desperate to believe in cover-ups and conspiracies.

What I can say with total confidence is that no one in the American establishment knows anything. Their attempts to search for and communicate with extraterrestrial races follow no real pattern and make no sense in relation to what we found. There has been something of a surge in activity over the last two decades — with the Pioneer Plaques, the Arecibo signal, and the Voyager golden records — but as I said: these haphazard attempts do not suggest any knowledge of the Toplitz Messengers.

To ensure this remains the case I urge you to lobby against future attempts to communicate. Call SETI a waste of resources; if no one listens, say it is foolhardy and dangerous. I have had reasonable success with both approaches.

I have also so far succeeded in preventing any serious searching around Miramar by claiming that U-boats containing dangerous cargo were scuttled nearby.

One safeguard is that the Kerguelen sphere cannot easily be opened by brute force. Indeed, we were completely unable to forcefully reopen any spheres during extensive testing. The ring required to open the sphere was loaded aboard U-530, which, as you already know, fell into American hands. I have no reason to assume they believed the ring to be anything of importance, just as

the looters at Altausee had no idea that they were carrying their stolen gold in alien containers.

It is also worth blocking concerted attempts to dive or scan at Toplitz, where talk persists of a well-funded Israeli search for gold. Though I have repeatedly stated my confidence that nothing of the craft remains, I have no desire for this to be tested. If any major developments are ever suggested, particularly anything related to drainage, stop them. Push for an exclusion zone; accidentally leak a toxic chemical; do whatever it takes.

If an opportunity ever arises to search for the sphere without raising suspicion or involving too many people, seize it like your life depends on it. Utilising magnetism in any search you undertake, though no guarantee of success, would certainly not harm your chances. The most detailed information I have is that the Kerguelen sphere was dumped within Argentine waters, due east of Miramar.

If you search and succeed, I implore you to destroy the sphere immediately.

One final thought regarding the Americans: I do not know if the rumours of a new space agency have reached you, but any developments on that front should be followed with great care. In the little time I have left, I hope to shape the agency's future.

Should the agency indeed come to pass, I urge you to stay close to whoever takes charge. As unlikely as it may sound, I have spoken twice with Richard Walker in an effort to persuade him to put himself forward. If your reaction to this is the disgust I expect, try to keep an open mind. Walker is already notorious for attacking any and all perceived threats to absolute American sovereignty. Such single-mindedness, if directed appropriately, could be of tremendous assistance.

I have quietly shared with him my beliefs that any discovery of extraterrestrial life would threaten the sovereignty he so prizes and that he could greatly reduce the chances of such a discovery by controlling the proposed new agency. He seems receptive to the idea.

I truly must leave for the airport now. Rest assured that this letter will fall under no eyes and touch no hands between mine and yours.

I do not regret keeping this from you, but I do regret keeping myself. It would be too easy to apologise for not returning your calls and it would be too difficult to explain my reasons. Just know that I have been a sick man for a long time, brother, and both the responsibility of this secret and the burden of this life are great weights off my mind.

*Be well,
Hans.*

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

As Dan expected, Emma finished reading long before Clark. She sorted the printed pages back in order and straightened their edges against the kitchen table. After a few seconds of distant thought, she looked up at Dan.

“Say something,” he said, unable to read her expression.

Emma held her hand out towards the envelope containing the original letter. “Can I see it?”

Dan moved it towards her.

“No!” Clark yelled. He knocked Emma’s arm away with an open palm, more forcefully than intended. “Forensics!”

“What?” Dan asked.

Emma quietly rubbed the side of her forearm.

“She can’t touch it,” Clark said. “I can’t touch it. Think about it: do you really want our fingerprints to show up when they CSI the shit out of this thing?”

Dan pulled the envelope back towards his chest.

“He’s right,” Emma said. She turned to Clark. “But you could have just grabbed my arm without hitting it.”

"I didn't mean to hurt you," Clark said, almost but not quite apologising. He flipped through the pages in his hands to see how much more he had to read. Clark then blew air from his lips and put the pages on the table. "I'm still at the part where he's talking about the U-boats," he said. "What happens next?"

Dan quickly and excitedly explained: "He talks about blocking dives at Toplitz and Miramar, then mentions Walker.

"I can't believe you kept this quiet," Clark said, leaning back in his chair and rubbing his palms together in thought.

"Neither can I," Emma chimed in.

"It's not that I didn't trust you," Dan said, keen to stress that to her. "Well, I guess it kind of was, but I didn't even trust myself with this; that's why I didn't translate it until tonight. I've been driving myself crazy trying not to think about it because I didn't want to say anything on TV."

Emma didn't take it personally. "Why didn't you leak it with the rest of the stuff, though? That's what we're going to have to explain."

"I wanted to translate it first."

"Why?"

"So I knew what it said."

"Dan, I know what translate means. Why didn't you leak it then translate it?"

"In case it was nothing to do with the leak. I didn't want to cloud the real issue with something else. I obviously didn't know that Kloster wrote it. I didn't work that out until I saw his signature on TV and recognised it. I'll show you the writing; it's not as if you can make out the words without trying. I didn't know it said anything about Kerguelen or Toplitz until I went through it properly. I had to get a book about calligraphy and buy an offline translator and everything."

"When?" Emma asked. "Where?"

"I asked Trey to buy them on Saturday morning. He gave me them that night. I went to the drive-in, but no one else saw me."

Emma let go of her right arm, which no longer hurt, and pressed her ten fingers together as though they were arched around a ball. "Trey as in news Trey?"

Dan nodded.

"What does he know? What did you tell him?"

"Well, I didn't tell him anything, but he guessed that the piece of card I leaked that had the stuff about the spheres on it was a translated extract of something longer. That was on Saturday. Last time I saw him I said I hadn't started translating it. He swore from the start that he wouldn't tell anyone, and he didn't. Just like when I told Clark on Sunday morning: he made me promise that I wouldn't tell anyone else, and I didn't. Not telling you wasn't anything personal," Dan said, still desperate to make sure Emma understood this. "You know that, right?"

"I'm kind of glad you didn't tell me," Emma said, her tone relieving Dan as much as the words did. "I would have been legally bound to tell the firm, and who knows what they would have asked me to do. Seriously, you don't even want to know what kind of ideas I had to veto. It's definitely better that you didn't leak it, even if that will be hard to justify, because there's so much stuff in here... and some of it is so out there... there's no way anyone would have given this a chance on Friday. But now everyone knows that Walker lied about it all being fake and that Kloster really did talk to NASA and Argentina. It's like a one-two punch; first you had the jab, and this is the haymaker."

Clark shuffled into a more upright position in his chair. He looked at Emma with a softer expression than before. "So what happens now? Do you still have any influence in the media? I know you got fired, but is there any way you can still help Dan get this out and explain why it took so long?"

"It's not like I have anything better to do," Emma said, half joking and half serious. "And besides, I have plenty of good ideas that they vetoed."

"So what does happen now?" Dan asked, glad that Emma and

Clark's mutual dislike seemed to have eased and even more so that she was sticking around, but very much focused on their next move. "Do I just walk to the drive-in at 5:30 and tell everyone?"

"No. We'll tell them we have something, but not what it is. Make Walker squirm. Make him nervous. People make mistakes when they're nervous."

"What about President Slater?" Clark asked. "I got past the part of the letter where Kloster says no one in the government knows, but that was nearly thirty years ago. Slater must know, right?"

Emma and Dan looked at each other for a second. Dan raised his eyebrows to invite Emma to fill Clark in on her phone call with the President's right-hand man, Jack Neal.

She told Clark everything.

"How old are you?" Clark asked, surprised by Emma's claim that Jack had hired her almost a decade ago.

"32."

"I thought you were 31?" Dan said.

"I was, until yesterday."

"Oh. Happy birthday, I guess."

"Thanks."

Clark rose to his feet, palms upturned. "Are we finished counting candles? Because I want to talk about this sphere. If we know where it is, why don't we look for it? Because if you tell everyone, then the government is bound to find it first. And if there's a cover-up..."

"We're way past that," Emma said. "This letter is a primary document. It's the smoking gun. And if DNA or fingerprints or something else can decisively link it to Walker and Kloster, it moves from evidence to proof. The only way for Slater to save face now is to come out and say she wants to get to the bottom of this. Even if they did find the sphere, there's no way they could keep it quiet. Not with all the experts who would be involved in the search and then the analysis. That's not a secret they can keep; not when Timo is offering a hundred million dollars to whoever breaks it first."

"Dan?" Clark said hopefully.

"We're obviously not looking for it," Dan said. "That would be crazy if we were in a movie, never mind in real life. I still think the best move is for me to go to the drive-in at 5:30 and flat out tell everyone the whole story."

Three people, three ideas.

Emma shook her head. "We have to make an announcement that we're going to make an announcement. That's how you maximise coverage, especially when people are already interested. If we say we have something bigger than everything else so far, it's going to be a frenzy. It's called concentrated concentration: we want everyone to be concentrating on the same thing at the same time. It turns an announcement into a happening."

"Maybe she's right," Clark said, looking at Dan.

"So we announce the announcement at 5:30?" Dan said, more or less expressing his agreement with a question.

"I announce it," Emma said. "I have to explain who I am, why I'm with you, and why the whole Marco thing went down the way it did. It's better if you stay here. It's better if no one sees you again until you're showing them that letter."

"Which is when?"

"Tomorrow night. Well, tonight. What time is it anyway?"

Dan checked his phone. "4:48."

Emma's eyes widened. "Heat up one of those meals and get me one of those lemonades," she said to Dan, leaving the kitchen to get her suitcase as she gave the unusually curt orders. "And you... Clark... turn the shower on, as hot as it goes."

It wasn't a tone which invited further questions, so the two brothers did as they were asked.

A few minutes later, Dan heard Emma call his name. Her head and one bare arm were visible at the side of the bathroom door.

"Yeah?" he said.

Emma called him closer with her hand. "Put the letter in the folder and take it back to your neighbour's house," she said, as quietly as she could over the sound of running water. "Leave it

somewhere safe.”

“Why?”

“Just do it, okay?”

“But—”

The door closed in Dan’s face.

“What did she want?” Clark asked from the couch.

“She was just, uh, asking how to turn the temperature down,” Dan said. He carried the letter into his room and crouched down to pick up the folder.

WEDNESDAY

D minus 43

DRIVE-IN
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

With time against her after a frustratingly necessary makeup application, Emma asked Clark to drive her most of the way to the drive-in. He agreed, two strong coffees and one incredible letter having revitalised his mind even as his body remained weary from a full day of sleepless travel.

Dan took the folder across the street to Mr Byrd's as soon as they left. Mr Byrd's car was gone and his door locked, so Dan returned home for his emergency key then entered the house. He placed the folder inside the pillowcase in the guest bedroom he had slept in only 24 hours earlier.

Clark's plan to drop Emma off near the drive-in changed when he saw the extent of the media circus. He had seen a few vehicles when passing in the cab a few hours earlier, but the early morning light revealed around a dozen news vans and several times as many people.

"You're going too close," Emma said.

Clark kept driving. Faces came into view, with some of the reporters spotting Emma in the front seat and hurrying to get in position.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Clark drove into the middle of the lot, honking the horn when cameramen got too close. When he parked, the car was quickly mobbed. “Stay there,” he said. He stepped out and walked round to the passenger door. “Give her space or you’re gone,” he boomed.

“Clark!” someone yelled. It was Mr Byrd.

“What’s up,” Clark said.

Mr Byrd walked over, pushed through the crowd and shook Clark’s hand. “She stuck around?” he whispered in Clark’s ear.

Emma saw Mr Byrd, too, and tried to open her door. Clark pushed his weight against it and leaned in to whisper. “You saw her at the hypnotism, right? What do you think... can we definitely trust her?”

“No doubt.”

Clark stepped away from the door. His views on Emma had already shifted greatly, but Mr Byrd’s approval sealed it.

Emma stepped out, blanked Clark, and walked quickly towards the wall.

Everyone followed her, leaving Clark and Mr Byrd alone by the car. Clark looked around the lot, which had been empty for a full decade until just a week earlier.

“Crazy, right?” Mr Byrd said, reading Clark’s eyes.

Clark chuckled. “Wait until tonight. What are you doing down here so early, anyway?”

“Oh, you know, making sure everyone behaves. Phil is asleep in his car somewhere.” Mr Byrd scanned the parked vehicles. “Over there. He still owns the lot, so we’ve been taking shifts on lookout. There’s usually one or two of the boys here, too. Making sure none of the news crews disturb the town’s residents, you know?”

Clark saw two uniformed police officers respond to Mr Byrd’s hand gesture by walking over. Mr Byrd introduced Clark as “Big

Henry's oldest" as he shook hands with the two men, who solemnly passed on their best wishes before returning to the semi-circular crowd which was forming around Emma.

"You should wake Phil," Clark said, surveying the lot again and wondering how it would cope with the inevitable stampede of outsiders who would swarm to the night's announcement like worms to rain. "We need to talk to him about tonight."

"What's happening tonight?"

Clark nodded towards Emma, who had just begun addressing the assembled reporters.

Mr Byrd listened to her introductory remarks as he walked over to Phil's car, a well-rusted blue sedan that couldn't have been much younger than the Kloster letter.

Emma saw red lights and green lights on the cameras before her, knowing that she was going out live to millions of homes across the country.

Succinctly, professionally, and with no notes to fall back on, Emma delivered a full and candid rundown of the entirety of her history with Dan. He watched from home, assuming by now that Clark had opted to stay.

Emma began with XPR's initial order for her to fly to Colorado from Las Vegas at thirty minute's notice, and continued on to Dan calling her to help with the invasive news vans when he had nowhere else to turn. She then publicly thanked ACN and Blue Dish Network for agreeing to retreat to the lot she was speaking from and simultaneously slammed Blitz News for reneging on the deal by returning to take photos of the inside of Dan's car only hours later.

She spoke as though the speech was well rehearsed, commending Dan for how well he had done during his media appearances but revealing for the first time that she'd had to talk him into everything. She briefly touched on his refusal to film three short ad spots for "a high five-figure sum" and spoke of his outright refusal to deal with any outlet owned by Blitz Media as a result of their actions. Emma then called their publication of Dan's

schoolwork “out of order but not out of character” and promised to show the world how low they had stooped in a matter of moments.

Before doing so, she took a swipe at Richard Walker for using Dan’s medical history — inaccurate or not — as a weapon. There was passion in her voice as she called Richard’s words “as irresponsible as they were unfounded”, echoing Dan’s criticism that using a mental health condition to dismiss his voice as unworthy added stigma to conditions whose sufferers were already prejudicially pigeonholed by many.

“But back to Blitz,” Emma said, a smile creeping across her face as she reached into her pocket. She held up a small memory card for the cameras. “I hold in my hand concrete and incontrovertible evidence of illegality conducted by Blitz Media against Dan McCarthy. The footage on this card shows a Blitz employee bugging Dan’s house on Monday evening, while we were on the way home from Cheyenne. The individual in question was identified by my former employers at XPR, who vetoed the release of the footage for what can only be described as political reasons. I want to stress the key point here: Dan McCarthy, an innocent, honest, and upstanding citizen, feels unsafe in his own home because of Blitz Media’s unprovoked personal vendetta.”

Emma saw only approving nods from the reporters in front of her; everyone who worked in the non-Blitz media hated the corporation for its predatory practices, which included everything from passing off other networks’ footage as their own to insisting on exclusive deals with their advertising partners.

Someone in the crowd yelled an out-of-turn question about when and where the footage would first air.

“Everyone who’s here can air it at 6am,” she said. “I’ll pass it round. That’s the fairest way. If any of you air it a second before I give the green light, you’re gone. And trust me, you’re going to want to be here at 7pm tonight. This is nothing compared to what’s coming.”

Emma knew that announcing one major piece of news at a time

was a basic rule of PR, but the Blitz thing was more personal than productive. They deserved it.

Predictably, several of the reporters, keen to have their voices heard during a segment that was guaranteed to bring ratings, yelled out their similarly worded questions about what was coming.

“Decisive evidence,” Emma said. “I’m not exaggerating: this changes everything. Seriously, we’re willing to stake our credibility on the fact that you will not be disappointed. Dan McCarthy will be here tonight to tell you everything you need to know and more, live and in person.”

Reporters again shouted over each other. Having expected something more like stunned silence, Emma didn’t appreciate it. Fortunately, the word “Slater” rose above the others and gave her a way to end her statement with a bang.

“President Slater doesn’t know what we have,” she said, quickly silencing the crowd. “President Slater doesn’t know, period. This cover-up starts and ends at the IDA. I’ve already said more than I should have, so we’ll end it there. Every news outlet that’s here: you’ll get the Blitz footage in a few minutes. Every news outlet that’s not: you’re going to want to make it here by 7pm.”

Reporters crowded Emma as she walked towards Clark, Mr Byrd, and Phil Norris. “Give her space,” Clark shouted. The reporters parted. Clark didn’t ask Emma why neither she nor Dan had told him anything about the bugging; they’d all been preoccupied with other, more pressing matters.

Emma was glad to see Phil, who she knew owned the lot. “You’re okay with an influx tonight, right?” she asked, as though it wasn’t too late. “The more attention this place gets now, the easier it’ll be for you to monetise it later.”

“Oh, I’m counting on that,” Phil laughed.

“Good.” Emma took a half-step back. The U-shaped drive-in lot was surrounded by two high parallel walls connected by a disused retail complex. The complex, whose facade the screen had once been mounted on, used to be occupied by a handful of stores and

restaurants. Emma squinted at the space above the shuttered windows. "How would you feel about putting a big screen up there again?" she asked.

"Hell, as long as you bring it in and take it away," Phil shrugged. "But how big are we talking?"

"That's all I needed to hear," Emma said, walking to the quiet side of the lot and the parking space which Trey's Blue Dish Network van had barely left in the five days since arriving.

Clark followed and quickly overtook her. He recognised the name Blue Dish Network from Dan's story about the guy who helped him with the translator and assumed the guy in question was the one currently returning a camera to the back of the van. "You're Trey, right?"

"Dan's brother?" Trey said, seeing something of a facial resemblance.

"Right." Clark held out his hand; Trey shook it enthusiastically. "Seriously, that was a good thing you did. Not telling anyone."

Trey leaned in. "Is that the decisive evidence? The handwriting he was translating?"

"I need a big screen," Emma said, arriving at walking pace. "Like a drive-in. Tonight. Options?"

Trey blew air from his lips. "What's the budget?"

"Don't worry about that. Just give me some options."

"Well, you obviously can't get a real drive-in screen delivered and installed today, so I guess the main options are a standing projector screen or a wall canvas."

"Which is better?"

"For an outdoor location with a big crowd at short notice? I would definitely go for something on the wall. It can be as high or as low as you want, and it's going to be easier to get one in time."

"And that's all we need?" Emma said. "Just a canvas?"

"You'll need a projector, but you can get that pretty much anywhere. I can take care of sourcing one if you want, but you need to make sure you're paying for installation when you order the

canvas. You need the right fixings and ladders and all kinds of stuff I don't have. There's definitely a place in Denver that could do it today, but it won't be cheap."

Emma took her phone from her pocket, ready for some early morning business calls. "Thanks for keeping quiet about everything, by the way. Dan didn't even tell me until a few hours ago."

"It was nothing. He gave me his trust, I gave him my word."

"Are you doing well out of this?" Emma asked, changing tack without warning. "Like... where's the money?" Her words weren't loaded or accusatory; she sounded genuinely curious.

Trey laughed. "Pretty much gone. My business is built around getting footage of breaking stories before anyone else, but as you can see... I'm not exactly the only show in town. International outlets all have deals with the big networks, and all of them except Blitz are here. There's a few places I can send this bugging thing, but they won't pay big when it's going to be everywhere else. It's all about exclusives; that's why Saturday morning was so huge. That one interview Dan gave made me more than I usually earn in weeks, because only me and ACN had the footage and everyone needed it for their morning cycles. To be honest, I'd be better off getting back in the field now that this place is saturated, but I don't want to miss anything. This thing feels bigger than money, you know?"

"We'll work something out for you," Emma said.

"What do you mean?"

"Cash-wise."

"I couldn't accept any—"

"It doesn't have to be actual cash. We'll give you an exclusive on something in the next few days. I know you're having a kid soon; I saw your wife on Saturday."

Trey didn't say anything.

"And don't think it's charity, either. You could have sold Dan out or filmed him paying you for the translator. That's what the rest of this lot would have done."

"I guess. Anyway, you better start passing that memory card around."

Emma looked at the time; Trey was right. She handed him the card, which he quickly slotted into his computer.

"Let me know if you need help with the projector," Trey said. He turned to Clark. "Nice meeting you, man."

"Yeah," Clark said. "It's Clark, by the way. And thanks again. Seriously, we owe you."

Emma then gave the memory card to Maria from ACN, who had been keeping a respectful distance despite being in the closest vehicle to Trey's. Emma had built up enough rapport with Maria that she didn't need to reaffirm the pre-6am embargo.

Clark watched as she made her way around the lot. Two thoughts circled in his mind.

The first: Emma Ford was more capable than he ever imagined and had an unplaceable "It Factor" that made people listen to everything she said. She was a powerful ally.

The second: come 7pm, Birchwood, Colorado would be the media capital of the world.

D minus 42

WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON, D.C.

“What do they have?” President Slater demanded.

Jack Neal, equally in the dark, watched the computer screen silently.

“I’m talking to you!”

“Right, uh, yes.” Jack peeled his eyes from the screen, which now showed a wide-angle view of the drive-in, buzzing with activity as Emma passed the bugging footage around. “I don’t know any more than you do, but she wouldn’t have set a time and talked it up so much if it wasn’t something big. She knows how difficult it is to win people back when you over-promise and under-deliver. There’s no way she would demand everyone’s attention if she didn’t think she could meet their expectations.”

The President picked up her phone.

“Who are you calling?” Jack asked.

“If she won’t listen to reason...”

Jack reached over the desk and grabbed the phone from the

President's hand.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"It's over," Jack said. "Whatever this secret is, it's out. Listen to me, Valerie: you have to distance yourself from Walker. That's what we can still control. The whole world is waiting for McCarthy's next announcement, so trying to shut it down now would be absolute suicide."

President Slater eyed Jack with a concerned look mirroring his own.

"Emma's a lot of things, but she's no fool," he went on. "She wouldn't have stuck with him if it wasn't worth it, and she'll have everything uploaded and set up to be posted automatically if anything happens to them. We can't stop this."

"We? What about me?" Slater yelled forcefully. "How does it look being played for a fool by Richard fucking Walker? Hmmm? How does it look for him and his tinpot agency to keep this from the President?"

"This thing started more than seventy years ago. None of your predecessors knew anyth—"

"And Godfrey," Slater sighed, elbow on the desk, her head collapsing into her palm. "Godfrey is going to have a field day."

If Jack's mind had still contained any modicum of doubt over how much Slater knew, the pained expression on her face would have crushed it. "We can still come out of this clean if you act now," he said, as reassuringly as he could. "If you distance yourself from Walker today and shoot for humility, we can survive."

"And Godfrey?" the President repeated.

"I'll take care of that later. We have to focus on Walker."

President Slater sat upright. "What about Fiore? Timo. Where does he fit in here? Did Ford put him up to it?"

"Timo?" Jack said, buying himself some time. Any suggestion that Emma did urge Timo to put up the \$100,000,000 bounty for leaked evidence could land her in serious trouble, and Jack didn't want to risk that; not when it wouldn't benefit President Slater in

any tangible way. "I don't know; Timo is Timo. He probably reached out to Kendrick and asked to announce it in front of his crowd."

"And what do we know about McCarthy's brother? That was him in the car with Ford, right?"

Jack leafed through his notes. "Clark McCarthy. Military, straight out of high school. Let's see... flawless record until he was struck with a serious respiratory problem three years ago. Given a desk job when the health issues kept him from active duty. Couldn't hack it. Details, details, details. Eventually left on good terms fourteen months ago and moved into private security. Less stringent medical requirements, I guess."

Slater nodded, taking everything in. "Do you happen to know what time Walker usually arrives at the IDA?" she asked out of nowhere.

"Around 8:30 local time. Why?"

"Never mind why," Slater said, rising to her feet. "Come on. We've got work to do."

D minus 41

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

Dan spent the morning in his room rehearsing the statement Emma prepared for him.

Emma, having taken the car to see about the big screen and projector she wanted for the night's big reveal, had been gone for almost two hours by the time Dan felt confident he could deliver the speech adequately. Though he had made his live TV debut on Marco's show the night before, this was on another level. Thanks to Emma, the letter reveal had morphed from an announcement into a news event and a bona fide media happening.

Between writing Dan's speech and leaving for the AV store in Denver that Trey recommended, Emma had spent fifteen minutes designing T-shirts online. Dan saw the design — a plain black background with the slogan "Now Now Now" written in three bright colours, one word per line — and asked Emma what it was all about. She told him that it was part of an idea she'd unsuccessfully suggested to the firm; an idea called The Now Movement.

Once the T-shirts were ordered, she spent another twenty minutes or so working on a promotional video. Video editing wasn't Emma's forte, but she was capable of churning out something basic. She used footage from the small protest at the IDA building on Monday morning, which had allegedly ended with Richard Walker assaulting one of the protestors.

Emma spliced and auto-tuned audio from the calls of "Walker lies, truth now!" into a new and more impactful chant: "Truth, Truth, Now Now Now!"

She added rough cuts of protest footage and a picture of Richard Walker grinning, all arranged in a deliberately gritty and unpolished way. The video ended with the Now Now Now logo from the T-shirts. Dan didn't really understand but readily deferred to Emma's expertise. She then quickly posted the video on social media using a dummy account, mentioning Billy Kendrick and other public figures as well as herself. Finally, she signal-boosted the post with her real account, which was seldom used but well followed and constantly monitored.

As Dan finished feeding his fish after memorising as much of the statement as he ever would, he heard Clark's voice.

"Dan!" it yelled.

"One minute," Dan said. Before he could even put the tub of fish food down, he felt the floor shaking as Clark bounded towards his room like a child on Christmas morning.

The door swung open. "Dan, get through here. They found it!"

"Found what?"

"The sphere!"

Dan climbed across his bed, knocking his alarm clock to the ground with his hand, and sprinted to the TV.



"That's not it," Dan said after the briefest of glances. "That's a pressure sphere. Titanium. Probably Soviet."

The TV was tuned to ACN, relaying footage of a local Uruguayan reporter talking to a middle-aged man 150 miles east of Montevideo. The footage was live, with a sometimes-hesitant translation dubbed over the audio. A red banner headline of "BREAKING: SPHERE DISCOVERED IN URUGUAY" filled the bottom of the picture.

"The guy says his dad found it in 1992," Clark said, filling Dan in on what he'd missed. "He was a fisherman."

"I'm not saying he's lying, it's just not our sphere. Spheres like that turn up every now and then. The news talked about them on Friday night because one of the leaked documents mentioned them. There was a famous one in Argentina in 1991, so this could maybe be from the same vessel."

While the Uruguayan man continued to answer the local reporter's questions, stating that he hadn't thought the sphere was important until he saw the news coverage from the United States, the ACN headline abruptly changed.

"UPDATE: SPHERE BELIEVED TO BE RUSSIAN IN ORIGIN."

"See?" Dan said. He sat on the couch.

Clark joined him, disappointed. "I finally read the end of the letter, by the way."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I've been thinking about Walker."

Dan frowned slightly. "What about him?"

"I'm not sure he's the bad guy," Clark said.

"What?"

"I dunno. It's more like... I don't think he thinks he's the bad guy. No one ever thinks they're the bad guy. You know what I mean? For him, you're the bad guy."

Dan shook his head in disbelief. "Guys like Walker are in business for themselves."

"But what does he gain from this? Maybe Kloster and Walker really were just trying to protect the country?"

"Trying to protect the military industrial complex, more like,"

Dan said. "They're worried there will be no more pointless wars when everyone knows we're not alone. And the idea of peace coming from an alien discovery isn't some flowery hippy bullshit, before you say that. Ronald Reagan said it in speeches, more than once."

"You watch your mouth," Clark said firmly, rising to his feet and walking to the kitchen before he lost his temper.

"I didn't say all wars were pointless," Dan called after him.

Clark didn't reply.

Dan's eyes returned briefly to the TV, which still showed the Uruguayan man but now on only half of the screen while the ACN newsreaders emphasised on the other that his was not the Kerguelen sphere.

The sound of a car turning into the driveway captured Dan's attention. He walked to the door and saw Emma stepping out of the car and removing a cardboard box from the back seat.

"Dan McCarthy!" she said, smiling broadly, as though mocking her own XPR-era chirpiness.

"What's in the box?"

"T-shirts. Have you seen how The Now Movement is trending? It's crazy. I knew it would work, but the stupid firm didn't want to risk losing control of the narrative or turning it into a "leaderless movement" like Occupy or whatever. They never see the big picture."

"I guess not," Dan replied passively. "Did you see the sphere in Uruguay?"

"I heard about it. Your car doesn't have a TV."

"Ha ha." Dan walked outside to help Emma with the box, which was heavier than it looked. "How many did you get?"

"Enough for tonight. Anyway, guess who I just got a call from?"

"Jack Neal?" Dan guessed.

"Nope."

"Richard Walker?"

"I think I would have told you by now if it was him, genius."

“Billy? Timo? I dunno. Who else is there?”

“The woman we met last night,” Emma said. “Remember, the one who called herself Mr Magnifico’s management?”

Dan snorted derisively at the memory. “What did she want?”

“They wanted to do another show tonight at ten.”

“What did you—”

“I said no, obviously.”

“Good,” Dan said.

“Yeah. It’s probably better if I don’t tell you how much they were willing to pay.”

“Probably,” Dan grinned. He dumped the box of T-shirts on the couch.

“But don’t think I’ve forgotten about those ads you’re going to do after the big capital-D,” Emma said, grinning even wider.

Clark emerged from the kitchen with a can of beer wrapped in a wet paper towel. In that moment, Dan saw more of their father in Clark than he ever had before.

“Hey,” Clark greeted Emma, lowering the can to his waist as though he didn’t want her to see it. “Did you get the screen sorted?”

“Yeah. They’re on the way to install it.”

“How much?”

“Gratis,” Emma said, exaggerating the pronunciation. “I made them understand that having their logo on the edge of a screen that’s going to be seen by everyone and their dog is worth more than ten grand or whatever it should have cost. That’s why I had to drive out there; it’s easier to really talk to people when you can see them. Besides, when a pretty little thing like me has driven all that way, who could say no?”

“Good work,” Clark said. He sat down, placing his can on the floor beside the couch.

Emma took two T-shirts from the box and gave them to Dan and Clark. “I take it you’ve been over your speech?” she asked Dan.

Dan nodded and put the T-shirt on. It was a good fit, and the Now Now Now logo looked much better than it had in the online

mock-ups.

“Good,” Emma said. She turned to Clark. “What about you? Have you been watching TV all day?”

“Pretty much,” he replied. Emma had a natural air of authority that made Clark loath to disappoint her, so he quietly hoped that he wasn’t supposed to have been doing something else.

“Has the news said anything about Walker?”

Clark shook his head, relieved that this was why she’d been asking. “Not on ACN, anyway.”

Emma changed the station to Blitz News.

“Why, what’s going on with Walker?” Dan asked, folding his new T-shirt neatly and placing it next to the box.

“I dunno,” Emma said. “That’s the thing: he didn’t show up for work today, and no one knows where he is.”

D minus 40

STEVENSON FARM
EASTVIEW, COLORADO

The landline in Richard Walker's weekend home rang for the second time in as many minutes. His dog, Rooster, barked wildly at the sound.

"I know, boy," Richard said, staring out at the corn.

Rooster and Richard both relaxed as the phone stopped ringing. Only Ben Gold was supposed to have the phone number of the cottage, and Richard had told him in no uncertain terms that it was never to be used in anything less than a life-threatening emergency.

"There we are, boy. All gone."

Ring, ring.

Enraged, Richard limped to the phone as quickly as he could. "Quiet down, Rooster," he said, before picking the phone up and holding it wordlessly against his ear. He caught a glimpse of the time on the oven: 15:53.

"Sir, I know you said never to call this number, but—"

"For fuck sake, Benjamin!" Richard snapped. "I give you one instruction and you can't even—"

"Neal is here," Ben Gold said firmly, raising his voice over Richard's. "Jack Neal."

The line was silent.

"I told him I don't know where you are, but I don't know if he's buying it. He says it's in your best interests to open a dialogue."

"Open a fucking dialogue," Richard muttered under his breath. "Does he think this is a hostage negotiation? Listen: find Raúl and tell him to show Neal the exit, face first."

"Sir, I really think it would be—"

"I think there's something wrong with my phone," Richard said.

"Oh?"

"Mmm. It almost sounded like you were questioning my orders."

Ben said nothing. Richard could hear him breathing.

"So, are we clear?"

"Clear, sir," Ben confirmed.

"Good. And when you see Raúl, tell him "Mr Walker said don't be scared to leave a mark." Okay?"

"Sir, he's President Slater's—"

"My phone seems to be going again," Richard said flatly. "Will I have to ask Raúl to take care of that problem, too?"

"No, sir," Ben said. "I'll give him the message."

"That's the spirit."

With the phone down, Richard sat next to Rooster and began to question for the first time whether Ben had been a wise choice of assistant. Richard had initially seen Ben's near-spineless deference to his authority as a distinct positive, but Jack Neal's unannounced arrival at the IDA building had revealed it to be something of a double-edged sword.

How would Ben react if forced to choose between loyalty to Richard and deference to another, higher authority?

At this moment, Ben Gold was the only person in the world who had a line of communication with Richard Walker. As such,

Richard's immediate plan of staying out of the spotlight depended entirely on Ben's trust and cooperation. Jack Neal's presence in Colorado was not part of this plan, and Richard feared that the next few minutes and hours might prove a bigger test than Ben Gold could handle.

Rooster barked furiously as a small bird settled on the window ledge.

"I sure as shit hope he's quieter than you, boy," Richard sighed.

*IDA HEADQUARTERS
COLORADO SPRINGS, COLORADO*

Richard Walker's most trusted security guard, known to him only as Raúl, bundled Jack Neal to the IDA building's back exit.

Jack was no large man and went without protest.

At the door, Raúl pushed Jack firmly in the upper back, sending him to the ground. "And don't come back."

Jack held his hands out to break his landing. This worked to an extent, but his hands were raw and his suit scuffed. Fortunately for everyone, there was no one else around to see the incident.

Jack Neal walked round the side of the building, sticking to the wall to avoid being visible from any of the higher windows. He kept his head down and climbed into the back of the waiting car.

"Where to, sir?" the driver asked.

"Two minutes," Jack said, raising a finger to request the partition.

The driver held down the button to separate the front and back sections of the car.

Jack took his phone from his pocket and called President Slater.

"Well?" she said.

"He's really not here."

"What do you mean he's not there?"

"I mean he's not here. What else could that mean?"

"Who told you? Ben Gold?"

"Not just Gold. I asked the first security guard at the door if Richard had left yet and he said he hadn't shown up this morning. I didn't see his car, either."

"So where the hell is he?"

"I don't know," Jack said, frustration in the words.

Slater picked up on it. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Just a little run-in with one of his security guards. Nothing more than a few scrapes and grazes. My suit came out of it worse than I did."

"Did he know who you were?" Slater asked, doubtful that even Richard would permit physicality against Jack.

"You know, that line really doesn't work as well as you think. Forget about it. The main thing is Gold."

"What about him?"

"I'm 99% sure he knows where Walker's hiding, but I'm 100% sure he doesn't know anything else."

"You mean..."

"Exactly. He doesn't know it's real."

"How can you be sure?" Slater pushed.

"You would be too if you'd seen him. He looks like a lost puppy, so far out of his depth you'd almost feel bad for him. He's protecting a guy who's been treating him like a fungus for a decade; keeping him in the dark and feeding him you-know-what."

"But Ford thinks the cover-up 'starts and ends at the IDA'," Slater said. "And if Walker's number two doesn't even know..."

Jack sighed. "You've known him longer than I have, but if anyone could do something like this alone — if anyone would choose to do something like this alone — well, Walker would be top

of my list. And if I learned one thing at XPR, it's that you don't bring in more people than you need. When it comes to secrets, there's safety in solitude. And if Kloster kept this to himself for forty years before passing it to Walker, why would Walker bring anyone else in?"

"But aliens?" Slater said, as much to herself as to Jack. "How could we not know? We have the most advanced... everything. All of our agencies! How?"

"I know," Jack said, almost but not quite as dumfounded as the President. "But our agencies didn't exactly have a big presence in 1930s Austria."

After a lingering silence, Slater cleared her throat. When she spoke, her voice was more like its usual, authoritative self: "Jack, we need to find out what McCarthy is going to say before he says it."

"I've tried calling Emma a thousand times. I think she's blocked my number."

"You know what to do."

"Plan B?" Jack asked, hesitant.

"Plan B."

Jack gulped. "Okay."

"Keep me informed," Slater said.

"I will."

The call ended.

Jack Neal tapped on the glass partition in front of his seat. It lowered.

"Where to, sir?" the driver asked.

Jack forced the word out: "Birchwood."

*EN ROUTE TO THE DRIVE-IN
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO*

“Holy shit,” Dan said.

“Fuck me,” Clark added eloquently.

Emma smiled from the back seat. “Told you.”

As soon as Clark stopped the car at the hastily erected roadblock and rolled down the stiff window, a cacophony of engines and voices and even helicopter blades filled the car. It was only 18:25, and the drive-in was still the better part of a mile away.

“Sorry, boys,” the police officer said, rushing to move the block. Clark recognised him. “I didn’t see you coming.” The man and his colleague shifted the temporary fencing — not unlike an elongated hurdle — out of their way.

“Thanks, Jay,” Clark said. “Bill.”

Jay leaned down to window height and winked in at Dan. “Good luck, son.”

“Thanks.” Dan didn’t know Jay, or Bill, or seemingly half of the people Clark did.

Clark kept the window open as he drove towards the drive-in. Every junction had a manned roadblock. "This is too weird," Clark said.

"How are we going to get through the crowd?" Dan asked. He still couldn't see the crowd, but the noise was growing ever louder as the car continued.

"We're not," Emma said.

"We're not?" Clark and Dan said in unplanned unison.

"I sorted it out with Phil. He's going to be waiting inside the empty building. I think he said it used to be a restaurant."

"Fries & Fries," the brothers said, again in unison.

"Whatever. He said you'd know how to drive round the back, and that he'll be waiting for us inside. We just have to knock on the back door."

Clark pulled the handbrake and spun the car around recklessly.

"Woah!" Emma called. Dan was calm, like it happened all the time.

"You couldn't have told me that before I went the wrong way?" Clark complained.

"But there's only one road to the drive-in," Emma said.

Clark accelerated in the direction they had come from then bore left towards another residential street before stopping at its roadblock. "I don't recognise either of these two," he said to Dan. "They're not local."

"Home address and identification," the police officer on Clark's side of the road said in a disinterested tone, still seated in his foldout chair. Clark noticed the man's badge; he had been brought in from two towns over.

"We're actually part of the event," Clark said, downplaying their role ever so slightly. "We were told to take the dirt track by the mound and follow it to the back of the old restaurant. The owner of the lot is waiting for us."

"Home address and identification," the man repeated.

"Are you deaf?"

"Clark," Dan scolded under his breath.

"Home address and identification," the man said in the same robotic tone.

Clark opened his door.

"Clark," Dan said again, pulling his arm.

Clark brushed it off without effort. "Listen," he said to the man. "You can move it, or I can move it."

Classic Clark, Dan thought. He opened his own door and stepped out.

Emma stayed in her seat, deciding to give it a few seconds to see how things went.

"Karen," the man said; same dull tone, still in his seat, but this time with a lazy hand gesture to beckon his colleague from the roadblock on the other side of the street. "We have an uncooperative vehicle."

The second officer, Karen, rushed over. Her eyes shot daggers at the man. "Jesus, Frank, those're Henry McCarthy's boys!"

"Oh," the man said. He rose immediately from his seat.

"You'll have to forgive him," Karen said, embarrassed and apologetic all at once. "He's not from around here, and apparently he doesn't have a TV."

Clark laughed. "No harm done."

Karen and her sorry colleague moved the roadblock. Clark drove on.

"You can't talk to the police like that," Dan said. "That whole 'you can move it or I can move it' thing. Are you trying to get arrested?"

"As if that guy could have arrested me. He was skinnier than you!"

Dan shook his head; he always struggled to tell how much of Clark's bravado was an act.

The car continued on a path that Emma thought was taking it further away from the drive-in, but she naturally deferred to the brothers' local knowledge. When Clark finally took one left towards

the apparent end of a side street then another slower and more careful left onto a highly distinct dirt track, Emma heard the volume of the crowd begin to rise again.

“So is your dad, like, a godfather or something?” she asked, aiming the question at Clark and only half joking. “How does everyone we meet know him? And why are they all more impressed that Dan’s his son rather than the most talked about guy in the world?”

“You didn’t tell her anything about Dad?” Clark asked.

“She didn’t ask,” Dan replied.

Clark turned towards Emma for a second. “He’s a firefighter.”

“Was,” Dan said quietly.

“Is.”

Emma didn’t say anything. Henry’s job explained why people in his small town knew who he was and thought well of him, but the level of renown still didn’t stack up. She didn’t know much about the debilitating injury that had left Henry in a coma, and she could only imagine that its nature or source had somehow contributed to the universal esteem he was held in.

The only thing Emma knew for sure was that Dan had sounded slightly hurt when he said “she didn’t ask”, and she now felt more than a little regret at not showing greater interest during all the time she had spent with him.

The dirt path continued. It was clearly marked, as though once heavily used. Emma looked out of the right-side window at desolate fields. She shifted to the left of the back seat and saw fences at the back of the houses along the main street. When the houses and fences stopped, trees took their place. Before long, the drive-in complex came into view up ahead. The walls and the main structure looked much larger from this angle.

Clark parked right outside the central unit’s only door. He knocked three times and waved at the camera above.

“Come in, come in,” Phil Norris said, answering immediately and greeting them warmly. His voice rang through an unseen

speaker.

Dan stepped inside. The building showed absolutely no evidence of its former life as a restaurant. It looked like a warehouse with no stock.

"This way," Phil said. He led them through two doors until they entered a small but well-equipped office, better lit and more fit for human habitation. To Dan's surprise, Trey was waiting inside.

"Hey, man," Trey said, rising from a padded chair. "You ready?"

"Pretty much," Dan said.

"He's ready," Emma confirmed. "Projector, screen, camera... where are we?"

"Good to go," Trey said. "I just need the card."

Dan handed Trey a memory card containing the scans of the letter and his best attempt at a functional translation. "Am I controlling the slides?" Dan asked.

"Trey is doing it," Emma said. "I don't want you to have too much to think about at once. Just read what's in front of you, look up at the cameras every now and again, and we'll do the rest."

"Is the stage definitely safe?" Dan asked. Every little thing was starting to concern him now. His breathing quickened.

Clark put a hand on Dan's shoulder.

"It's a solid scaffold," Trey said. "It could hold ten of you."

"There's nothing to worry about," Emma said.

As if on cue, a warning tone rang through the speakers of the computer on Phil's desk in the far corner of the room. He looked at the screen. "Are we expecting anyone else?"

Dan and Clark looked at each other then back to Phil, shaking their heads.

Emma walked over to the computer.

"You didn't tell Byrd to come to the back?" Phil asked.

"No," Clark said. "No one."

"Okay. Gimme a sec 'til I figure this thing out."

"It's that one," Emma said, pointing impatiently at a box on the screen. "The one that says Rear Cam."

Phil Norris clicked the box. His mouth fell open.

An unsure male face looked directly into the camera.

Emma's hands instinctively shot to the back of her head as she gasped. They then settled in front of her face, cupped around her mouth.

Dan had never seen any serious worry on Emma's face — it was normally so stoic, even in difficult moments — but for all the world it looked now like she had just seen a ghost.

After four or five seconds, which felt more like forty or fifty, Emma's eyes left the screen and found Dan's. She lowered her hands, took a deep breath, and spoke:

"It's Jack."

DRIVE-IN
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

“Jack Neal?” Dan asked. “Jack Neal is here?”

Emma walked to the small office’s exit, grabbing Clark’s arm as she passed him. “No one else,” she said firmly.

The others, confused by everything that was happening, crowded around Phil’s computer to watch the camera feed. Jack looked to be alone; there was no sign of another car.

“What’s the plan here?” Clark asked, hesitantly following Emma through the poorly lit warehouse-like interior of the old restaurant.

“I open the door, you hide behind it. He steps inside, I close the door. He turns round, you restrain him. Got it?”

“But he works for President Slater,” Clark tried to reason. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to—”

Emma stopped, now only a few paces from the door, and looked at him. “Clark, it wasn’t a suggestion.”

Clark looked back at her silently.

“Go,” she said, pointing to the side of the door.

With Clark in place, Emma opened the door.

"Emma," Jack blurted out. "Thank God."

"Get in."

"Thank you," Jack said, stepping inside. When the door swung closed, he saw Clark, standing further away than he was supposed to be. Jack stared up at him.

Emma nodded to Clark.

"Hands against the wall," Clark said.

Jack's eyes dashed back and forth between the two of them. "Emma, come on. I just want to talk."

Emma turned away and set off towards the office. "Empty his pockets, check for wires, and bring him back to the others," she ordered.

"Mr McCarthy," Jack pleaded, ruefully accepting that reasoning with Emma was a lost cause. "I really didn't come here to cause—"

"There's two ways we can do this, dude," Clark said. He didn't like the situation Emma had put him in, but he knew he had to get himself out of it as quickly and as cleanly as possible.

Jack put his hands on the wall and closed his eyes.

"Nothing stupid," Clark said. He then proceeded to thoroughly frisk President Slater's trusted advisor, finding nothing more exciting than two phones and a wallet. He seized them and placed them in his own pockets. "Turn round. And don't talk."

Woefully outsized and outmatched, Jack again obediently followed the order.

Clark pointed off in the direction of the office. "Walk."

Jack began to walk, quite briskly, with Clark watching carefully from a few paces back. They reached the door of the office without incident. Clark held Jack's arms firmly behind his back, as though he had been doing so the whole time, and kicked the door to knock.

Emma opened it.

"I can't be part of this," Trey said when he saw Jack Neal being frogmarched through the doorway.

"No one is in trouble," Jack said, reassuring Trey with a

surprisingly amiable tone. He looked around the office, relieved to see only two more people than the three he already knew of.

Emma instructed Clark to release Jack. "Who knows you're here?" she asked. "Slater?"

Jack shook his head. "Well, she knows I'm in Birchwood to talk to you. My driver is the only person who knows I'm here."

"Why the hell are you here? Especially tonight, when the whole world is watching?"

"That's the point," Jack said. "We need to know what you're going to say. I went to the IDA to talk to Walker, but he wasn't there."

"Who did you see?" Emma asked.

"Ben Gold. And some idiot security guard," Jack said, pulling at the rip in his suit. "I think Gold knew where Walker was, but he doesn't know anything else. Valerie wanted to distance herself from Walker before this event you're having, but we needed to have some idea what the big secret is before we could commit to saying we're not in on it."

Phil and Trey, unaware of both Emma and Jack's personal history and also the fact that President Slater had all but conceded that the leak was true, looked completely lost.

Emma looked at her phone, which told her that the 7pm reveal was only twelve minutes away. "Leaving it a bit late," she said.

"I've been here for hours but I couldn't get near you," Jack explained. "There are more roadblocks than houses in this damn town."

"Did you really come alone? No security?"

"Emma, I swear: Valerie hasn't told anyone else that I've spoken to you about this, let alone that I was flying to Colorado. What would she even tell them? We don't know what the hell is going on! A few days ago we thought McCarthy was making this whole thing up, just like he thought we were trying to bury it. Now Walker is in hiding and you've got whatever new evidence you've got."

"Slater won't look too bad, though," Emma said, trying to shut

Jack up. "I've already stated publicly that we don't think she knows anything."

"You don't think it looks bad for a guy like Richard Walker to keep this from her? For a cover-up like this to be going on right under her nose?"

"I don't really care," Emma said. "This is bigger than her."

"Emma," Dan chimed in from the far side of the room, "we don't have long." These were the first words he had spoken in a while; the presence of someone as famous and important as Jack Neal intimidated Dan, bringing home just how far in over his head he really was. Without Emma to keep him afloat, he knew he would have drowned in the choppy political waters days ago.

Emma checked the time again. Dan was right about not having long. "Okay," she said, still thinking. "Phil... can you stay here with Jack? I need Clark and Trey out there."

"Sure thing," Phil said. He didn't cut as dominating a figure as Clark, but the old man still looked more than capable of handling a manicured city-mouse like Jack.

"Does everyone else know what they're doing?" Emma asked. Trey and Clark nodded. Dan just looked at her. "Everyone out there is on your side," she tried to reassure him. "You're not talking to a studio in New York or an asshole Hollywood hypnotist. This is your crowd. This is Birchwood."

"But they're all media people," Dan said. "Outsiders."

"Not even close," Trey insisted, placing a hand on Dan's shoulder. "I've been out there, man. Sure, the drive-in is full of media, but there are hundreds of regular folks outside the gate, along the street, and even at the top of the hill."

"Hawker's Hill?"

"Yeah."

Dan's face visibly relaxed. He turned to Emma. "Let's do this."



Dan stepped out into a surreal scene. The drive-in, typically deserted and recently quite busy, could only be described as packed. Each microphone and camera competed with every other, hoisted high above the crowd by desperate reporters and journalists.

The lot was fully lit and Dan made out two portable coffee stands and a food truck, no doubt allowed in by Phil Norris for a share of their takings.

There were several huge satellite trucks parked on the other side of the gate, including one belonging to Blitz News. They were much larger than any vehicles Dan had previously seen in or around the drive-in.

And, sure enough, at the top of Hawker's Hill, Dan saw the reassuring moonlit silhouettes of a crowd of locals.

After climbing two small flights of stairs with Emma to reach the scaffold stage from which he would address the swarming mass of people below, Dan noticed two laser pointers aiming down at him from the hill. Far from annoying him, these laser pointers settled Dan's nerves. He remembered sitting at the top of Hawker's Hill with Clark and some other kids while movies played on the drive-in's giant screen, and he remembered Clark getting in trouble when he was caught shining his own laser pointer. Dan didn't mind that this Birchwood tradition had been resurrected; it reminded him that he was home.

The red and green laser pointers distracted some of the crowd, but Dan didn't mind as long as the kids didn't aim for his eyes.

Clark stood below the stage, guarding the stairs. Mr Byrd and a few of the police officers who had been stationed at the drive-in on rotation since Saturday stood further forward, behind a low metal railing which created a buffer zone between the crowd and the scaffold.

The screen on the wall right next to Dan's stage was much bigger than he'd expected. Emma had excelled herself. Dan couldn't see exactly where Trey had gone or where the projector was, but the screen suddenly burst into life, relaying a live image of Dan and

Emma. At Emma's suggestion, a small watermark in the top right corner of the screen read: "Pictures via Blue Dish Network".

All of the reporters except those right in front of Dan looked up at the screen. Like at a large sporting event, the elevated screen offered the best view of what was going on, particularly for those at the back.

Dan fought a grin as the two laser pointers moved around the screen before settling childishly on Emma's chest.

"I'm glad you like the new T-shirts," she said into her clipped-on microphone, masterfully disarming the hilltop pranksters without veering off message. "These are available online at cost price for anyone who wants to add their voice to The Now Movement."

Emma, Dan, Clark, Trey, and Mr Byrd were all wearing the T-shirts. The three-lined and three-coloured Now Now Now logo came across vividly on the big screen. Dan had never before seen Emma in anything as casual as a T-shirt, but he wholly agreed with her point that easily identifiable branding would be beneficial.

"The Now Movement is about one thing," Emma continued. She checked her phone as subtly as was possible with hundreds of cameras pointing at her. It was only 18:58; she had to stall. "We're here tonight, as we have been since Friday, to call for honesty."

Dan noticed Emma make a deliberate hand gesture at waist height. Seconds later, the image on the screen changed. The live picture of Dan and Emma still filled the left-side of the screen, but the right-side was divided horizontally into two sections. As Emma had explained to Dan earlier, the original German letter would appear above Dan's translation. And Trey, wherever he was hiding, was going to highlight important sections of the text while Dan was talking about them.

The entire thing was scheduled to take no more than ten minutes. Emma estimated that Dan would have taken around thirty minutes to read the whole letter, which was far too long to hold the average person's attention, even with subject matter as explosive as

this. Emma had prepared Dan's speech with the goal of making it snappy, quotable, and rife with soundbites.

She thanked everyone for coming out and used other stalling techniques until seconds before the advertised start time of 7pm, loath to begin early given that highly viewed stations that weren't dedicated to 24-hour news couldn't cut away early from their programming or commercials. Many such stations had already changed their schedules to accommodate Dan's reveal, keen to retain viewers who would otherwise have turned to a news network for this must-see TV event. Erring on the side of caution over how long Dan would take to say his piece, Emma had told them all to allow fifteen minutes.

"Live in ten seconds," Emma announced on the stroke of 7pm, fully aware that most networks were already broadcasting. She covered her mic and whispered in Dan's ear: "Game face."



Dan checked one final time that his notes were in order then introduced himself. In defiance of all logic, he felt a calmness verging on serenity as he looked out at the crowd. The scene before him, of neon lights and bustling bodies, was genuinely surreal; so surreal that it didn't faze him.

The most important part of Dan's speech was the beginning. Emma had made this clear and he understood it perfectly well. They both knew that the letter would take care of itself, but they both knew that Dan had to explain why no one had seen it in the five days since the initial leak. Emma hammered into Dan's mind that explain was the operative word; he wasn't going to defend his decision to withhold the Kloster letter, he was going to explain it.

And explain it he did.

"I have a letter written by Hans Kloster," he began. "It was in the Kerguelen folder I found near the IDA building on Friday morning."

Flashbulbs went off in Dan's face, which struck him as somewhat quaint.

From there Dan told the world what he had already told Clark and Emma, aided this time by the easy flow of Emma's writing. His initial spur-of-the-moment, booth-of-the-library reason had been a genuine concern that the inclusion of an untranslated and almost unreadable letter would have detracted from the other files in the leak, thus lessening their impact.

He then explained his decision to withhold the letter even after he had been identified and some of Kloster's other correspondence had been verified. Dan made clear that he didn't always know the letter was Kloster's, and added that he wanted to present his own attempt at a translation before releasing the original so that people could make up their own minds rather than learn about the letter's content second-hand, "through a biased filter and with a news agenda woven through it."

"In light of the way certain news outlets have behaved," Dan continued, looking deliberately at the Blitz News truck at the gate, "I feel that this decision has been vindicated."

Without having to turn round, Dan flicked his eyes sideways to the screen and saw Emma nodding approvingly. The hardest part was over.

Dan delivered the rest of the speech with only a few stutters, none of which were too bad. He looked up when the notes said "look up" and also managed to raise his eyes while reading some of the more familiar points. Trey controlled the projector without a hitch, scrolling through both versions of the letter at once and highlighting the right sections at the right times.

The speech didn't address the letter's revelations in a strict order, but rather in the order deemed most impactful by Emma. Dan didn't argue; by this point, he would have given the speech with a traffic cone on his head if she told him it was for the best.

The only amendment to Emma's first draft Dan lobbied for was the inclusion of a few lines about the kind of meta-conspiracy he

and Billy Kendrick had long believed possible. Their view was supported by Kloster's mention of Nazi officials encouraging far-fetched rumours of searches for the Holy Grail and the Ark of the Covenant to distract "conspiratorial minds which may otherwise have turned to matters closer to the truth."

As Dan said, Kloster was basically making Billy's "laughter curtain" argument in grander terms. Emma let him have this — and even a shout out to Billy — but she put it near the beginning.

Each big reveal brought more flashbulbs and commotion: "On April 2, 1938, an alien craft was discovered during an exercise in Lake Toplitz"; "It was not a saucer or a disc, nor like any other modern "UFO" projection"; "What I can say with total confidence is that no one in the American establishment knows what we found"; "The alien craft was annihilated in Lake Toplitz in the spring of 1945"; "The Kerguelen sphere was dumped within Argentine waters, due east of Miramar"; "The second plaque contained a similar representation of Earth, along with what was almost certainly a timescale for the Messengers' return"; "Treasure hunters have so far been blocked, but you must ensure this remains the case"; "This secret is not of the kind which can safely die with its last keeper"; "In hope of securing a functional ally in the new agency, I have spoken twice with Richard Walker in an effort to persuade him to put himself forward for its leadership".

"Richard didn't show up at the IDA today," Dan said, going off script to Emma's mild concern. "He knew this letter was in the folder, and he knew we were going to reveal it tonight. Most of all, he knows he's guilty."

The next words Dan said were from the script. Emma breathed a sigh of relief that he hadn't ad-libbed anything harmful.

The Kloster-Walker issue still wasn't clear cut, since Hans Kloster explicitly told his brother not to tell Richard. Emma and Dan knew that Wilhelm Kloster died in an accident just days before the convention at which Hans planned to give him the letter, but that still didn't explain how Richard had ended up with it.

Though they both assumed that Hans, with no one else to turn to, had given Richard the letter before his own surprise recovery from the wasting disease which had prompted him to pass the burden to Wilhelm in the first instance, Emma instructed Dan in the strongest possible terms that there was no room for speculation. “Everyone else can speculate,” she had told him. “We say only what the letter tells us.”

Dan did exactly that.

“We are of course willing to make the letter available for forensic analysis,” he continued, reading the part Emma had included to make sure that no one could dismiss the letter as easily as they dismissed the Bigfoot corpses and UFO fragments that people claimed to have found every now and then but uniformly refused to hand over for closer inspection.

“Providing that certain conditions of transparency and accountability are met, that is,” he added. “Richard Walker is and Hans Kloster was an employee of the federal government with high-level security clearance, so both of their fingerprint profiles should be on record. I’ve read that fingerprints on well-preserved paper last more than long enough for this letter’s origin to be easily verifiable. It goes without saying that I’ve held the letter, so my fingerprints will show up, too. The same goes for the folder itself and every other document within it; I’m happy to make them available for transparent analysis by a reputable lab. But let me make one thing clear: this letter will not end up in a government lab to be cooked and tampered with behind closed doors. Not today and not tomorrow. Not on my watch.”

Dan realised only as he said these words that they were a direct play on Richard Walker’s famous comment about red flags on the red planet. He flicked his eyes to the big screen and saw that Emma was sporting a rare grin.

Dan then reached the end of his notes, telling the crowd that both versions of the entire letter — original and translated — would be available online at 7:30, which was now seventeen minutes

away.

Emma talked for the final two minutes of the promised fifteen, impressed by Dan's ability to maintain the agreed-upon pace. Rather than thank everyone again, she took this time to call for unity in the coming days and weeks. She made the point that anger, though natural, was a pointless response to deceit. "Demand transparency," she suggested, "not apologies."

She then made the more personal point that Dan had done everything he could to get the truth out and now deserved a respite from the invasive media attention that had been building.

"And as for recovering the Kerguelen sphere," Emma said, quickening her voice, "it's not for us to say what happens next, but one thing's for sure: no one can hide it any longer."

"We want to know exactly what's written on the plaques inside that sphere," Dan said, butting in, "We want the truth, and we want it now."

Emma nodded with the words; his enthusiasm was infectious.

Caught up in the moment, the flashbulbs, and the attention of the world, Dan then surprised himself by shouting the slogan from Emma's viral video: "Truth, Truth, Now Now Now!"

Dan had shouted the words rather than chanted them, but the non-media people at the very back of the crowd chanted them back at him. The green and red laser-pointers, respectfully absent during the presentation, now returned and danced around on Dan's Now Now Now T-shirt. Dan raised his hand and waved at the crowd.

Emma signalled for Trey to turn his camera — wherever it was — towards the back of the crowd. Trey successfully did so after a few seconds, and the final image seen by viewers around the world was the sight of several hundred ordinary citizens chanting for the truth.

"Nailed it," Emma whispered.

WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON, D.C.

“Now you pick up?” President Slater boomed furiously into her phone.

Jack Neal hesitated. He was safely back in his car and headed to the airport, but explaining where he’d been without landing Emma in felony-level trouble wouldn’t be easy.

“Jack? Where are you?”

“Don’t blame me that there’s no cell reception in Hickville, Colorado,” Jack eventually said, picking his path with a reluctant white lie. “I didn’t send myself here.”

“So what the hell happened?”

“I couldn’t get to them,” Jack said. “There were roadblocks at the end of every street, and I couldn’t exactly get out of the car to negotiate. I was about as welcome in Birchwood as a fart in a spacesuit.”

“So you completely failed with both plans,” Slater lamented. “With every objective.”

“That’s hardly fair. Walker wasn’t there, and I couldn’t get near McCarthy’s place.”

“What about the media area?”

“What about it?” Jack said. “There were a thousand cameras. Why would I have gone there?”

“She was there, you idiot! McCarthy was there. If you couldn’t talk to them, you were supposed to stop them.”

“Valerie, I tried. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s my fault for sending a boy to do a man’s job.”

“I told you to distance yourself from Walker this morning,” Jack said firmly, ignoring Slater’s jab. His age — 38 — was certainly young for a man of his unconventional political influence, and cheap fodder for lazy satirists around the country. By this point, it was water off a duck’s back. “I told you she wouldn’t have made a big deal of the 7pm event if it wasn’t something game-changing.”

President Slater thought in silence for several seconds. Jack had been proven right, whether she would concede it or not. But Jack sometimes failed to understand the responsibility on her shoulders. Publicly distancing herself from a political heavyweight like Richard Walker, while an easy thing for Jack to suggest, was too drastic and too risky a step to take on a hunch. Aside from the personal ramifications, she also had to worry about things way above Jack’s pay grade, like the effects that the slightest presidential suggestion that aliens might be real — aliens! — would have on the stock market, not to mention public order or the world’s myriad religious conflicts.

But now, of course, Slater no longer had any choice. Walker’s brand had become fatally toxic, and the only sensible thing for the President to do was make a short statement which acknowledged the magnitude of Dan McCarthy’s revelations and affirmed her support for lawful attempts to get to the bottom of them.

“Do you have a flight tonight?” Slater eventually said, abandoning the squabble with Jack that was positively petty compared to the volcano of problems erupting all around them. No

one in the world could do damage limitation like Jack Neal, and his skills were needed now more than ever.

“It’s going to be tight,” Jack said, “but I should make it.” He held his phone to his shoulder and spoke to the driver: “Seriously, you need to step on it.”

President Slater drummed her fingers on her desk as the ACN feed on her computer screen replayed the highlights from Dan’s revealing of the Kloster letter. “Let me know,” she said. “I’ll be at my desk all night.”

“Okay. And Valerie, don’t beat yourself up over this. You’re not the only one he kept this from.”

Slater put the phone down on her desk, sat back, closed her eyes, and shook her head.

Richard fucking Walker.

THURSDAY

D minus 35

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

Dan, having slept on the couch to allow Emma a well-earned night's rest in his bed, yawned awake shortly after 8am. He could hear Clark snoring from halfway across the house.

The previous night had been a strange one, with Emma and Clark glued to the TV as reactions to the letter poured in while Dan lay with his eyes closed on his bed, unable to sleep for hours despite being physically and mentally exhausted by a week of non-stop thinking about nothing but the leak. He eventually gave up and joined them in the living room, where he ultimately faded off to sleep around 4am.

With a few hours of sleep behind him, Dan now felt like he had done all he possibly could to give the truth a fighting chance, and that it was now over to everyone else to take it from here.

The crushing pressure of keeping quiet about the letter no longer weighed on his mind, allowing room for broader thoughts about the train he had set in motion. Government recognition of intelligent

alien life really would change everything, and capital-D Disclosure was now closer than ever before. The complication of Jack Neal and President Slater apparently being as in the dark as everyone else didn't trouble or surprise Dan too much; his mind had always been open to the possibility of a small, private group being the keepers of the secret. That such a group might contain only one living member was a slightly harder possibility to swallow, but Dan knew better than to underestimate Richard Walker.

Having been concentrating so hard on exposing the lie, Dan hadn't had much time to consider the full implications of the truth. After waking up, he lay on the couch for a while thinking about the likely political fallout from capital-D Disclosure. His mind was still too wrapped up in all of this to give much thought to what the aliens themselves might be like and what kind of benefits their return might bring.

Before long, Dan tiptoed to the kitchen and fetched himself an ice-cold bottle of Houghton's Home Fresh Lemonade. He smiled as it hit his lips; he would forever associate the drink's earthy taste with the last week, and Emma in particular.

Lemonade in hand, Dan returned to the couch and turned on the TV. He lowered the volume from its default roar as quickly as possibly; neither Emma nor Clark had slept properly for days, and the last thing Dan wanted to do was disturb them.

The TV was tuned to ACN. Maria Janzyck stood in her usual position at the drive-in, which looked to be a lot busier than normal but nowhere near the level of the previous night's madness. She was talking live, referring to relatively minor developments that Dan had apparently slept through.

Maria name-checked the same Yale-based handwriting expert who had drawn Richard Walker's ire after the initial leak. The man then appeared in a brief interview segment which looked like it had been pre-recorded on his home computer's webcam. Dan didn't give too much weight to the man's words — the letter was real, whatever this guy said — but listened nonetheless as he stated his

personal opinion that the letter was “either the work of Hans Kloster or an extraordinarily sophisticated forgery.”

Dan learned that a similarly calligraphic but topically mundane letter penned by Hans Kloster to an uncle in Germany shortly after his move to the United States had been handed to a German news station by a museum owner in Dusseldorf, enabling a comparative analysis. The expert homed in on irregularities in the way that Kloster’s lower-case “r” joined whichever letter followed; such irregularities, which he described as “highly idiosyncratic”, were common to both letters.

When Maria asked if he would stake his reputation on this letter being Kloster’s, as he had on the initial handwritten documents being Walker’s, the expert chose his words carefully: “Well, if I didn’t know what these words meant, I would have no hesitation in saying yes. I’ve stated my professional opinion on the origin of this writing, but that’s as far as I’ll go. Interpreting or evaluating the content of this letter is way above my pay grade.”

Maria, who Dan had liked from the start, then mentioned in passing a few more names he was familiar with, including Mark Shaw, the history professor from Dan’s appearance on Focus 20/20. Though Shaw hadn’t directly spoken to ACN, he had also uploaded a recording of his post-letter thoughts. Maria introduced a snippet of the video, which soon filled the screen.

Shaw had been relatively open-minded about Dan’s claims on Sunday evening, and the letter seemed to have finally convinced him. He isolated individual facts from the letter which he said Dan couldn’t possibly have known, particularly those related to Mattheus Scholl, Hans Kloster’s cartographer accomplice.

“Scholl’s name is nowhere,” Shaw said. “Nowhere. The first time I saw that name was last night and the second time was an hour ago, when the museum letter surfaced. Writing from Texas, Hans asked his uncle to forward some money to Scholl’s surviving family. Now, from what I’ve read since last night, Mattheus Scholl appears to have been, with respect, a mediocre cartographer with

no clear links to the party hierarchy. Knowledge of his relationship with the Kloster family is the kind of esoteric fact I said the initial documents were lacking. I see no way in which Dan McCarthy could have known anything about it, much less the exact date Scholl was forcibly recruited, which has already been verified by a relative.”

Shaw then corroborated the leaders, dates and paths of the Nazi expeditions mentioned in the letter. Though admitting that these facts were more readily accessible, he stressed that they had never before been put into such a compelling context. Shaw’s eyes were bright and his words quick; as a historian, the developments excited him.

He finished by discussing the translation of the letter itself, calling Dan’s digital effort “a surprisingly good attempt” but suggesting that everyone should begin quoting from and analysing one of the many superior professional translations that had already been made available. Despite some variation across these translations, the word “Messengers” remained capitalised in common usage following Dan’s initial decision to treat it as a proper noun.

After Shaw’s video ended, Maria shifted gears to cover grander matters of international politics.

The posturing had begun overnight when the Norwegian government, less internationally disliked than those of the US and UK, made a measured but firm declaration of interest in future developments relating to the Kerguelen sphere.

“While all of humanity has an interest in these developments,” their statement read, “as administrators of the dependencies where two of the four spheres are said to have been discovered, we feel that Norway has a legitimate right to a prominent role in the coming discussions.”

Though William Godfrey had not yet issued an official response to the letter’s publication, his new Deputy PM John Cole appeared extensively on British television throughout the morning. Cole blasted the Norwegians for “arguing semantics over their claim to

the wartime plunder of a fearsome enemy against whom Great Britain stood alone.” He also refused to refer to Bouvet Island by its “Norwegian name” and instead urged the press to call it Liverpool Island, as christened by the Briton who made the first landing in 1825; a full 102 years before the Norwegians showed up. Within minutes of Cole’s comment it was pointed out to him that Bouvet Island was in fact named after the Frenchman who discovered it in 1739. Cole shrugged this off as an irrelevant detail.

Kerguelen was indisputably French while Namtso, in Tibet, fell under Chinese influence. The world continued to wait patiently for Beijing to issue any kind of response to the IDA leak.

Like Bouvet Island, the Antarctic location of the first discovered sphere was also a Norwegian dependency, this one known as Queen Maud Land. Queen Maud Land had been claimed by Nazi Germany as New Swabia immediately prior to the sphere’s discovery, but the current German government understandably had no desire to draw any attention to that point.

When asked whether attempts to recover the Kerguelen sphere should proceed only with Argentina’s blessing, John Cole scoffed at the notion and responded with a typically provocative question of his own: “If you want to talk about respecting international boundaries in the South Atlantic, why don’t you ask the Falkland islanders if the Argentines’ word can be trusted?”

Dan couldn’t understand why Godfrey had allowed Cole to make the first comments. Emma had explained to him that Cole was a political liability, for one thing, and she had also fully expected a crowing and gloating Godfrey to greet the press at the earliest opportunity.

He hadn’t, and Dan wondered why.

Maria handed back over to the studio with her usual sign-off: “From Birchwood, Colorado, I’m Maria Janzyck.”

When ACN cut to commercials, Dan switched over to Blitz News to see what perceived holes in the story they were desperately clinging to now. The topic they were discussing when Dan first

switched over was the overnight deluge of photoshopped spheres which had flooded the internet.

The Blitz News team were slightly less derisive than Dan expected. All but one of the images they focused on set Dan's bullshit detector off at the first glance; Dan was no computer whizz, but even he could have thrown together some more convincing fakes in a few hours at most.

The best fake was an aged photograph showing two proud fishermen standing next to a pockmarked sphere, one posing at each side like they would have done for any other impressive catch. The sphere was waist-high.

Despite the size discrepancy — Kloster described the spheres as knee-high — this image more than any other had apparently captured the media's attention overnight. Dan appreciated the quality of the photoshop job but wasn't surprised when Blitz displayed the recently uncovered original photograph of the two men posing beside a large stingray.

Dan kept watching Blitz News even after four minutes had passed and ACN had returned from commercials. Something about Blitz was just so slick and easy to watch; there was, after all, a reason they were number one.

As the dramatic music played before the next bulletin, Dan wondered what headline they would lead with. Maria's ACN coverage had touched on several headline-worthy developments, and the story of the letter itself — only thirteen hours old — would still be breaking news for some viewers.

Two words and a question mark, the headline could hardly have been simpler:

“Smoking Gun?”

Dan shifted in his seat. Could Blitz be switching sides?

His hope proved short-lived as the studio lights went up, revealing the anchor to be none other than Sarah Curtis, the most experienced member of the Blitz News team and a woman who had personally belittled Billy Kendrick on Friday before expressing great

amusement at Emma's altercation with Marco Magnifico on Tuesday.

For the next two minutes, however, Sarah Curtis delivered an open-minded rundown which wouldn't have been out of place on ACN. Dan watched and listened in quiet amazement as she used phrases that didn't fit in the slightest with the previous Blitz stance — phrases like “Dan McCarthy last night continued his push for government transparency” and “we at Blitz News look forward to using our platform in support of The Now Movement's commendable goals.”

Curtis and Blitz didn't attempt to rewrite history so much as they opted to completely ignore it. While they didn't pretend to have supported Dan from the beginning, there was equally no mention of the hit-piece written about him on Saturday morning; no mention of the schoolwork published to embarrass him on Monday; no mention of the spy drone; no mention of the illegal bugging that had since been publicly exposed.

This brazen flip-flop brought to Dan's mind a point that Billy Kendrick often made. Billy said that the people and organisations who most vocally opposed a particular cause would inevitably switch sides when their previous position became untenable, usually turning into the most vocal proponents of the same cause they had argued against.

“With the tipping point comes the flipping point,” as Billy put it, and Dan had just seen Blitz News flip before his very eyes.

Dan would have appreciated an apology for the harassment that Blitz Media's TV and newspaper wings had inflicted on him over the last five or six days, but he knew it was foolish to expect so much from such a shameless corporation. On balance, he was just glad that their relentless fire had finally ceased. Having never really wanted a war with Blitz in the first place, Dan was happy to take allies wherever he found them.

Just as Sarah Curtis began to touch on an unrelated story — something about a tsunami approaching Thailand — she looked

down and swiped on an unseen tablet computer on her desk.

“Okay, folks,” she said, watching something on the tablet’s screen, “we’re going to cut to some incoming footage of... uh, what appears to be... yes, an escalation of some kind at this morning’s demonstration outside the IDA building in Colorado Springs.”

Footage of the demonstration, which was really too weak a word, filled Dan’s TV. The turnout was literally hundreds of times greater than the last protest Dan had seen there on Monday morning. The mass of demonstrators, many wearing homemade Now Now Now T-shirts, had suddenly swarmed an incoming vehicle.

As the camera zoomed in on the car’s window, Dan jumped off the couch and ran towards the bedrooms. He briefly stalled at the adjacent doors — his and Clark’s — then made his decision over who to wake first.

“Emma,” he said, knocking frantically.

She groaned in reply. “Hmmm?”

“He showed up for work,” Dan said. He heard a thud as Emma’s feet hit the floor.

Still in last night’s clothes, Emma opened the door, rubbed her eyes in protest at the living room’s natural light, and stumbled over to the TV.

Clark opened his own bedroom door seconds later, evidently roused by Dan’s knocking. “What’s going on?” he asked.

Dan beckoned Clark with his hand and answered on his way back to the couch: “Walker’s at the IDA.”

*IDA HEADQUARTERS
COLORADO SPRINGS, COLORADO*

Of the countless news networks whose vans and satellite trucks had congregated at the IDA building to cover The Now Movement's largest demonstration yet, none had dared to dream of what happened next.

In the middle of a hostile and under-policed mass of protestors, Richard Walker calmly stepped out of his car. His building's security guards, including Raúl, quickly rushed over to create a barrier. Richard walked slowly towards the main entrance, limping only slightly, and with something like a grin on his face.

He ignored the handful of personal comments from the crowd, most of whom were loudly chanting Emma's immediately successful slogan: "Truth, Truth, Now Now Now!"

Emma didn't arrive at this slogan, the T-shirt design, or The Now Movement's name by chance. She had weighed up the options on her shortlist and wisely decided that a "Now Movement" was preferable to a "Truth Movement" or a "Disclosure Movement" for

two key reasons. First, both of the alternatives carried certain connotations; the former was too close to 9/11 terminology, and the latter conjured up images of hardline UFOlogists who dismissed Billy Kendrick as a line-toeing moderate.

But more importantly, a “Now Movement” presupposed both Truth and Disclosure. The Now Movement took the value of Truth and the inevitability of Disclosure as its starting point, and by doing so was able to focus its energy on the urgency of its goal.

There was also a secondary benefit that the word “Now” resonated better with restless youth than did the abstract concepts of Truth and Disclosure. One look at the size and average age of the IDA crowd vindicated Emma’s thought process. As everyone around her recognised, she knew what she was doing.

As Richard reached his building’s revolving doors, he stopped and turned to the crowd. Police officers had waded in by now, creating a proper cordon. Richard pointed to a reporter off to the side and called her in. Her microphone said Blitz News.

From his couch at home, Dan gleefully assumed that Richard didn’t know of Blitz’s shameless flip-flop.

“I want to say something,” Richard said. To his visible chagrin, the crowd didn’t stop chanting. If anything, their intensity increased.

“Truth, Truth, Now Now Now!”

“I want to say something,” Richard repeated more firmly.

“Truth, Truth, Now Now Now! Truth, Truth, Now Now Now!”

Richard shrugged. He held the microphone close to his mouth. The Blitz News cameraman capturing the footage that Dan was watching sidestepped around Richard until his view included much of the unruly crowd as well as a side-on view of Richard, capturing his famous scar in the centre of the frame in a way that had to be deliberate.

“This is insanity,” Richard said, talking directly to the reporter whose microphone he had taken rather than to the camera or the crowd. “What’s changed? What did I miss? Has McCarthy shown the

world an alien corpse? A section of a spacecraft? Anything that didn't originate in his own mentally ill mind?"

"So you're confident that DNA and fingerprint testing will exonerate you?" the reporter asked, leaning in towards the mic.

"Exonerate me?" Richard barked. He stared at the reporter for several seconds, taken aback by her antagonistic question. "From what? If I write a letter confessing to a murder then smear a sample of Valerie Slater's DNA all over it, does she go to prison?" He pushed the microphone towards the reporter's face.

"I, uh..."

"Exactly. Of course she doesn't. There's no body, because there was no murder. Just like there's no sphere." Richard turned to the crowd. "Now Now Now!" he yelled, mocking them. "Now what? Where's the sphere? Show me the sphere! Why has it never turned up? Seventy years. Ask yourself that. Seventy years! It doesn't strike anyone else as a little too convenient that the story happened so long ago, so that everyone involved can be too dead to deny it?"

The reporter took the mic again. "Just because the sphere hasn't been found yet, that doesn't mean—"

"No," Richard said, grabbing it back. "It does. Let me make this clear: when the entire world is looking for something, absence of proof is proof of absence. So you can have your contrived little DNA test to go with every other contrived episode in this sorry affair. It's been a circus from the start. Credit to the PR girl... I will say that. She's protected McCarthy like a lamb while convincing you all he's a lion."

The Blitz News reporter stayed quiet.

"And sure," Richard went on, "he'll play along with jesters like the hypnotist; he'll join the tamest Focus 20/20 line-up I've ever seen, via satellite; he'll stand next to good ol' Billy Kendrick in front of a roomful of idiots; he'll give an exclusive first interview to ACN's resident Chinese agent; he'll read whatever speeches Ford puts in front of him, waving to the adoring press like he's Mandela The Second. And now they're selling T-shirts!" Richard rubbed his

hands together, smiling broadly. "Talk about a brass neck."

Many people near the front of the crowd had by now stopped chanting to try to hear Richard's words. The last thing anyone had expected was this kind of fighting talk.

"Now, I'm late for work. Yesterday was my fourth sick day in almost thirty years, so I have some things to catch up on. I won't be here to play your games this afternoon, but all legitimate media outlets are invited as ever to my weekly press briefing tomorrow. I'll have a properly prepared response then to these ridiculous accusations, but for now I ask you only to remember what I said last week. McCarthy had been sitting on these "leaked" documents for who-knows-how-long and seized the opportunity to publish them in the aftermath of the robbery. Funnily enough it took him five days to come forward with this "Kloster letter", which just so happened to fill in the blanks and answer the questions everyone was asking. But why did no one see him picking the folder up from the street? Winchester Street is a busy street, and the police responded to the alarm almost instantly. Think about it. That's all I ask." Richard looked out at the crowd before walking through the doors. "Just think about it."

"Richard Walker," the Blitz News reporter said, now facing her cameraman. "Defiant as ever."

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

While Dan and Clark's expressions betrayed their concerns over Richard Walker's unexpected confidence that the Kerguelen sphere would never be found, Emma paid more attention to the implicit concessions he had made.

Emma reassured the brothers that Richard's attempts to pre-empt the inevitably damning results of fingerprint or DNA analysis by questioning the test's integrity was the act of a desperate man. Richard hid his desperation behind a well-practised facade, but Emma and many others could see right through it.

She re-watched the part of the impromptu speech when he yelled "show me the sphere!", playing it several times and each time pointing to his throat as he gulped deeply after saying it.

The celebratory mood of the previous night returned slightly over breakfast as Clark and Emma caught up with the assorted developments Dan had already seen. ACN and Blitz each gave Richard's appearance no more than a few minutes of their hourly

cycles throughout the rest of the morning, backing up Emma's point that his credibility had already been irreversibly tarnished.

The news cycles now included new footage of citizens in Argentina crowding the coast as an uncountable number of boats and ships searched for the Kerguelen sphere due east of Miramar. Before long, news helicopters arrived to reveal the full scale of this spontaneous and unmanaged treasure hunt.

"Looks like Miramar is the new Birchwood," Emma said.

Her phone then buzzed on the floor beside the TV, where she had left it charging overnight. She picked it up. A sophisticated virtual assistant app redirected Emma's calls and messages based on dozens of sorting rules and contact groups, meaning that only important calls and messages made it to the stage of an automatic notification.

By now, Dan knew this, too. "Who's it from?" he asked.

"Tara," Emma said. "My sister. Really, this time. It just says: 'Don't worry, I'm nowhere near it.' What's she talking about? Has there been an attack?"

Dan flicked through all of the rarely watched international news stations on his TV, looking for anything that wasn't coverage of the leak. "I don't think so, but there was something about a tsunami earlier. Does she live in Thailand?"

"She doesn't really live anywhere," Emma said. "Last time I spoke to her she was in India. Or maybe it was Indonesia. Is that near Thailand?"

"She said she's nowhere near it, anyway," Clark said. "Whatever 'it' is. Don't worry about it. She's fine."

Something about Clark's tone — as straightforward as Dan's, but deeper and more authoritative — made these words more reassuring than they should have been.

Emma replied to her sister's text with a request for more details, then scanned the overwhelming number of calls and messages received in the last twelve hours, beginning with those starred as potentially important. These were from contacts Emma had spoken

to recently but not added to her very short whitelist, which included only family members, important media figures, XPR staff, recent clients, and Jack Neal. Conveniently, all voice messages from non-whitelisted contacts were automatically converted to text for ease of searching and sorting.

Emma quickly saw that almost all of the overnight correspondence came from media outlets and marketing departments keen to have Dan appear on their shows or promote their products. She added two new rules based on the terms “your client” and “mutually beneficial”, which immediately moved 80% of these messages to a folder marked “non urgent”.

Of the now manageable list of messages, three were from outside North America. Emma’s attention immediately fell on the message with a Chinese flag icon next to it. She read the message and turned to Dan.

“A university in China wants to give you an honorary degree in International Cooperation,” she said.

“They want to what?”

“You’re not going to China,” Clark butted in.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” Dan said.

“He’s right, though,” Emma said. “It’s a political invitation. We don’t do politics.”

“Especially not Chinese politics,” Clark said. He looked at Emma and pointed to her phone. “Tell them where to shove it.”

Emma swiped to the next message. “What would you think about going somewhere else?” she asked when she read it, her face giving little away. “Getting out of Birchwood for a while might not be the worst idea. We’ve done all we can do here, and international pressure will make it harder for the government to try anything funny with the sphere.”

“Do you really think they’d try something?” Dan asked. “Jack Neal sounded resigned that it would turn up.”

Dan was right; Jack had been resigned. He was surprisingly calm and almost understanding about being locked in the office with Phil

Norris during the letter reveal, as though he knew Emma was just doing what she had to do.

Emma shrugged. "I'm not really talking about Slater and Jack. A government — or an administration, or whatever — isn't really the sum of its parts like people think, because all of those parts are competing for their own interests and pulling in opposite directions at the same time. It's like an organism at war with itself. There are a lot of people who want to see the back of Slater and I'm pretty sure this is out of her hands now, anyway. You heard Jack last night: his focus is on getting her through this alive. It's damage limitation."

"So where is it this time?" Clark asked, bored by the talk of Slater and keen to find out more about this "somewhere else" Emma spoke of.

"London," she said.

Clark weighed it up, looking favourable.

"Godfrey has invited us to a private reception," Emma explained, "like the kind he has for athletes who win medals. That's if this really is the number for Downing Street's press office; I'll have to check it out."

"And how is that not a political invitation?" Dan asked. "Godfrey just wants to use me for a photo-op to get one over on Slater."

"Maybe, but he's the highest-profile figure who's been on your side from the start."

"But everyone hates him," Dan said, the words dripping with derision. "It would taint me. What happened to being careful who I associate with?"

"At least think about it," Emma said. She clicked into the third of the three international messages. This one had an Italian flag and came from an existing contact. "Or think about this," she said more excitedly, holding the phone out so they could read the sender's name.

Clark saw it first. "Timo Fiore?"

"Where does he live?" Dan asked, not instantly dismissing this

possibility as he had the last one.

“Somewhere near Milan,” Emma said. “Most of the time, anyway. Do you have a passport?”

Dan nodded.

Timo Fiore, having been born in Naples to an Italian father and a Swiss-born mother of French and German parentage before spending most of his formative years in England, self-identified primarily as a citizen of Europe. Timo tended to keep himself out of the political arena but was known to support the European Union’s broad goals as staunchly as he criticised its bloated and ill-functioning bureaucracy.

And unlike Godfrey’s, Dan knew that Timo’s interest in the leak was anything but political or opportunistic, well aware of the billionaire’s years-long involvement in deep-space observation and of the no-strings funding he had offered Billy Kendrick for touring expenses.

Dan turned to Clark. “Anything against Italy?”

Clark clapped his hands together as if squashing a fly. “When do we leave?” he asked with a smile.

D minus 32

DRIVE-IN
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

Emma returned the call from one of Timo Fiore's many assistants and ironed out the details of the invitation with Timo himself. It was quickly agreed that Dan would leave for a six-night stay on Monday, now four days away.

Timo, delighted by the news, extended his invitation to Billy Kendrick. Unfortunately Billy was unable to accept; Dan's return would fall on the final night of Billy's long-planned ET Weekender, which marked the end of his months-long tour. When Emma contacted Billy on Dan's behalf to explain why he could no longer attend, Billy was highly supportive and insistent that those who had purchased tickets expecting to see Dan would understand that it was more important for him to spread the word to Europe.

Now, at the end of a long if surprisingly uneventful day, Emma found herself alone at the back entrance to the drive-in lot's former restaurant. Dan and Clark were none the wiser.

The invitation came at 11pm from an unexpected source.

Prime Minister Godfrey and President Slater were yet to make any public comment in the wake of the Kloster letter's publication, while Richard Walker stuck to his word of not talking to the media again by leaving the IDA via a secret exit. Emma had expected this to be a day when everyone commented given it was the first time since the initial leak that something tangible had happened. She justified the conspicuous collective silence by reasoning that the high-profile figures involved were being more careful with their words now that the whole thing felt real.

Godfrey had previously made grand pronouncements about aliens safe in his belief that they were hollow political barbs. Slater, meanwhile, had dismissed out of hand what she didn't believe was possible. But now that Slater's suppressed fears of a cover-up from below seemed well-founded and Godfrey's expressed hope of further evidence emerging had come true, both wisely decided to bide their time and measure their words.

Emma's phone had buzzed while she was on the way to the bathroom during a commercial break on ACN, just out of the brothers' sight and earshot. The message came from a whitelisted contact who she had been watching only minutes earlier: Maria Janzyck.

"Meet me alone ASAP. Dirt path round back."

"Where can I get good coffee around here?" Emma asked as she returned to the couch, grasping at a spur-of-the-moment exit strategy.

"Mr Wolf's bookstore," Dan said with a hint of pride in his voice.

"Is it open?"

"Nowhere is open at this time," Clark butted in. "You're not in New York."

"There must be somewhere in the city? Surely some of the big chains stay open?"

Clark shrugged. "If you want to drive five miles for coffee, I guess."

"Does anyone want anything?" Emma answered with a

question, hoping they would say no.

Dan shook his head.

“Get me a muffin,” Clark said. “Actually... make that four muffins.”

“Straight to four?” Emma asked, laughing.

Clark grinned. “Five would just be greedy.”

Emma grabbed her coat and Dan’s car keys. “How come you don’t have a car?” she asked Clark as she opened the door.

“I’m hardly ever here,” he said.

The streets were predictably quiet, with far fewer roadblocks — officially described as checkpoints — than the night before. There were still roadblocks at both main entrances to Birchwood so that the police could keep track of which media outlets were arriving. No media vehicles at all were permitted through the main roadblock between the drive-in and the area of Birchwood where Dan lived; since this area was entirely residential and provided no throughway, it was decided that media vehicles had no legitimate reason to pass. These measures were exceptional, of course, but so was the sudden influx of outsiders and the relentless global spotlight.

Emma remembered the turn Clark had taken to the dirt path the night before and slowly followed the same route. She dimmed her lights and pulled up outside the back door of the old restaurant. There was no sign of Maria Janzyck or anyone else. The area was too dark and isolated for Emma to consider stepping outside alone, so she slowly continued forward. At the end of the path, which came very soon, she turned round and returned to the door.

Still no one.

Less impatient than concerned, Emma picked up her phone and called Maria.

“I can see your lights,” Maria said, picking up immediately. “Stay there.” She ended the call as quickly as she had answered it.

After a few nervous minutes, Emma saw Maria Janzyck approaching on foot, alone. Emma reached across the front seat and

unlocked the passenger door. Now that she knew Maria was here and safe, Emma's unusually worried thoughts turned to the bigger question: Why?

"Sorry to call you out here so late," Maria said before she even sat down. "But you're going to want to see this."

Emma grasped Maria's tablet computer in her hands. "What am I looking at?"

Maria pressed play. "Just watch."

"Is that what I think..." Emma began, stopping when the video zoomed in of its own accord to answer her question. Speechless, she watched the eighteen-second clip three more times.

"So?" Maria said.

Emma finally looked away from the screen. "Where did you get this and who else knows?" she asked, straight back to business.

"My researcher," Maria said. "And my researcher."

"No one else? No one at the network?"

Maria shook her head.

Emma watched the clip one more time. "How much do you want?"

"Nothing. I just want to see his face."

"So why didn't you just take this to ACN?" Emma asked, scanning Maria's expression for clues.

"They would have just run it with no fanfare or buildup. You're more... creative. You know how to hurt people."

Emma took Maria's last remark in the spirit it was intended, despite how it came out. She was more than glad that Maria had brought this to her first, but still didn't see her angle. "What do you have against him? Personally, I mean."

"Walker?" Maria said, scoffing at the mere thought of him. "Did you not hear him this morning when he called me 'ACN's resident Chinese agent'?"

Emma shook her head slightly; she had been focusing so much on the gist of Walker's defiant outburst that some details had slipped by.

“That’s not the first time, either,” Maria said. “When ACN did a retrospective of his quarter century at the IDA, he point-blank refused to talk to me. We were sitting in his office — just me and Mike, my cameraman. Walker came in with Ben Gold and sat down. I introduced myself, and I swear... I’ve never seen him move so quickly. He stood up like the chair was on fire and then just looked at me. He kept looking at me when he spoke to Gold, in that raspy voice he does when he’s angry. I’ll never forget what he said: “Tell them to send another interviewer, Benjamin. An American.” Then he left. Ben couldn’t say sorry enough times, telling us that Walker was having a bad day or whatever. So that was it. The network pulled the piece, obviously, but they didn’t want to make a big thing of it; they didn’t want to get on his bad side. No one ever does. Seriously, I’ve been doing this for a long time and you’re the first person I’ve met who’s not been scared to make an enemy of Richard Walker.”

Emma didn’t say anything for a while. She couldn’t imagine being judged or treated like that based on her ethnicity, so she didn’t want to pretend that she understood.

“He’s doing his weekly press thing tomorrow,” Maria said. “Maybe you could—”

“Two steps ahead of you,” Emma grinned. She watched the clip one final time.

Maria took the tablet back. “Do you want me to email this to you or put it on a card and give you it tomorrow?”

“Card,” Emma said. Favouring physical over online security was perhaps the only thing she had in common with Richard Walker.

Emma drove Maria back to the end of the dirt path. She asked if Maria wanted to go with her to get Clark’s muffins, which were necessary to justify her trip, but Maria politely declined.

“Thanks for coming to me with this,” Emma said as Maria stepped out.

Maria nodded. “I just want to see his face,” she repeated.

“I don’t know whose face I want to see more when we play this,”

*Emma said, her eyes glinting as she imagined the moment.
“Walker’s or Dan’s.”*

FRIDAY

D minus 31

*MUNICIPAL HALL
MIRAMAR, ARGENTINA*

From the crowded steps of a municipal building in Miramar, just a few miles inland, a uniformed public official made a short early morning proclamation regarding the previous day's hectic search for the Kerguelen sphere.

The statement was not the one that the hundreds of Argentinian journalists outside the building and the millions of people watching on TV around the world had been hoping for. Instead, the official announced a tightening of maritime restrictions in the area around Miramar.

Only licensed fishing vessels would now be allowed within this restricted area, he said, and even then only during unusually limited hours. Though the term "exclusion zone" was never uttered, the official stressed that the restrictions applied to all vehicles and all persons, ruling out private searching by motorboat or even diving. A no-fly zone was also announced for all but government aircraft, which the official promised would have little to no commercial

impact given how small the restricted area was.

Reporters filed away from the building to make their way back to the coast where they would rejoin the thousands of everyday citizens optimistically looking out to the sea.

Enterprising salesmen did a roaring trade in plastic binoculars and cheap alien-themed balloons. Coastal cafés and hotels did their best business in years.

Throughout Argentina and beyond, the air buzzed with excitement.

D minus 30

*McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO*

As underwhelmed by the anticlimactic Argentinian announcement as anyone else, Clark rose from the armchair to get the last of his four muffins from the kitchen.

Emma took delight in seeing that Now Movement demonstrations had spread from the IDA building in Colorado Springs to government buildings around the country and US embassies around the world, including those in strongly allied nations like Canada and the UK.

ACN and Blitz News played footage of rowdier protests in parts of southern Europe, where protestors had clashed with police throughout the night and where it didn't take much to stir up latent anti-American sentiment.

The images of these violent overnight clashes were completely at odds with the scenes coming in from cities all over the United States.

Much later in the afternoon, a three-minute ACN piece on the diversity of Now Movement demonstrators reflected just how far the

pendulum had swung towards acceptance of a truth that many would have derided only a week earlier. Although countless surveys and studies often cited by Billy Kendrick consistently showed that most Americans believed in the existence of intelligent extraterrestrial life, many had previously been hesitant to say so in public for fear of ridicule. But with the weight of evidence recently brought to light, many quiet believers had quickly become vocal campaigners.

Billy himself had appeared on multiple networks throughout the morning, giving his first extensive comments since the letter was revealed. He described the letter as “the smoking gun to end all smoking guns” and talked in excited tones about the potential imminence of the sphere’s discovery.

Although passions were running high around the world, ACN’s Now Movement feature relayed scenes of good-natured protestors and family-friendly atmospheres. If the pictures from Italy and Greece resembled smaller-scale throwbacks to the fiery anti-G8 protests of the late 20th century, the US demonstrations brought to mind the anti-war marches of the early 21st.

An ACN reporter in Portland interviewed a group of students who had created a banner some forty feet in length, brandishing the full “Truth, Truth, Now Now Now!” slogan in bright neon paint that bordered on garish. Another group in Carson City had bulk-ordered hundreds of Now Now Now T-shirts and sold them on the street at cost price, selling out within minutes. Such stories were not uncommon, and it looked as though most of those unable to source a T-shirt had simply made their own. Some used white tape on plain black T-shirts and some used coloured pens on white; either way, the words Now Now Now filled every shot from every camera.

What was clear and heartening to Dan as he watched the ACN feature was that most of the people who had taken to the streets on this weekday morning were evidently not people with long-standing histories of involvement in UFOlogy, SETI, or anything else related to aliens. The saturated media coverage of Dan’s leak,

combined with Emma's masterful viral campaign, had combined to truly amplify the call for immediate capital-D Disclosure.

The feature closed with a mother carrying her sleeping toddler at the edge of a medium-sized march in Baltimore. A local ACN reporter approached her and asked what had brought her out.

"We have a right to know," the woman said. "We have a right to know what the government knows about aliens. I have a right to know, and my kids have a right to know."

"Even if it's bad?" the reporter asked.

The woman's eyes widened. "Especially if it's bad."

"Can't argue with that," Clark said.

Dan didn't say anything. He still didn't know quite how to feel about the revelation in Kloster's letter that one of the plaques inside the Kerguelen sphere displayed a timescale for the Messengers' return. On one hand, he didn't see why a hostile entity would give warning of its return. On the other, though, he acknowledged the folly of projecting human thought processes onto non-human beings.

"Nope," Emma agreed. "What do you guys say we go to the drive-in to watch Walker's press conference?" she then suggested, changing track less subtly than usual. "It's in forty minutes."

"Why?" both brothers asked at once.

"Just to show our faces," she said, feigning indifference. "There's hardly anyone there, anyway; most of the news teams are at the IDA and most people are at work."

"I don't think we should go," Clark said.

"No?"

"What's the advantage? If Walker says something we don't expect, suddenly Dan's on the spot in front of everyone's cameras."

Emma had no answer to this. "I've got a surprise," she reluctantly admitted. "It's a video we're going to play on the big screen right before Walker's press conference starts. And once he sees this, he won't be saying anything."

"What is it?" Clark asked.

“Who’s we?” Dan added. “Who else is in on it?”

Emma answered Dan first. “Maria Janzyck showed it to me last night. That’s why I had to go “for coffee”; she texted me to meet her alone. Turns out she hates Walker more than anyone and her researcher found something even he can’t weasel his way out of.”

“So what is it?” Clark repeated, naturally impatient but not quite annoyed.

Emma gave a highly exaggerated shrug. “One way to find out...”

The brothers looked at each other. Dan saw the funny side. Clark rolled his eyes and groaned. “I’ll get the keys,” he said.

Dan turned to Emma. “This better be good,” he said, semi-seriously.

“Dan McCarthy,” she replied in her chirpiest voice, reminding him of the first night. “When have I ever let you down?”

D minus 29

DRIVE-IN
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

The crowd of reporters at the drive-in, while still larger than anything Birchwood had seen before the leak, was nowhere near the level that had descended on the town for Wednesday evening's letter reveal. With Emma having suggested that Dan wouldn't be at the drive-in very often and most of the outside news crews now at the IDA to hear Richard Walker's full response, Dan imagined that this busy-but-not-packed drive-in scene would be the new normal.

Clark drove directly into the lot, prompting an explosion of activity. Phil Norris waved to greet them from his lookout position in the far corner. Jay and Bill, two of the local police officers who had manned the roadblocks on Wednesday, calmly asked the reporters to keep their distance from the car.

Emma took Dan by the arm and headed straight to the ACN van. "Where the hell is Maria?" she asked the man leaning against its bumper. Though smartly dressed and with an expensive-looking haircut, he lacked the "It Factor" of someone who spent their life in

front of a camera.

“Kyle Young,” he said, smiling too much. He held out his hand.

“I didn’t ask what your name was,” Emma snapped back. “Where’s Maria?”

“Jeez,” Kyle said, pulling his hand back and reaching into his pocket, “and she said you were nice!” He then held the same hand out again, this time with a small memory card in his palm. “She wanted to cover the thing at the IDA. Here’s the footage.”

Emma took the card. “Maria told me she would be here,” she said once it was safely in her pocket. “That was the plan.”

“Tell me about it,” Kyle groaned. “I’d been at the IDA all day and then she suddenly called me. “Don’t go inside,” she says, “I want to be there.” So then I had to wait for her to arrive, get this card from her, and rush over here.”

“You’re a reporter?” Emma asked. “I thought you were her researcher.”

Kyle laughed. “Is that what she said? I used to be her researcher, but this year I’ve been doing more—”

“So you have seen the footage but you haven’t told anyone else?” Emma interrupted, too focused on the matter at hand to even pretend to be interested in the trajectory of Kyle’s ACN career.

“I didn’t just see it. I found it. And no: I took it straight to Maria.”

“Why? Why not go straight to the network and impress your bosses?”

“It’s her story,” Kyle said, “and she’s always helped me out. I dunno, I guess it’s the same reason she’s decided to give it to you. Well, that and wanting to see Walker’s reaction. Did she tell you about their history?”

“Yeah,” Emma said. She thought back to Maria’s words; after how Walker had treated her, Emma could hardly blame her for wanting to be there in person. A text would have been nice, though.

“Oh,” Kyle said, “and she also told me to tell you that she’s definitely not going to say anything about this until word reaches Walker.”

Emma nodded approvingly. She left Kyle and led Dan by the arm to Trey's nearby spot. Clark was already in the far corner catching up with Phil Norris.

"Why do I get the feeling you've got something up your sleeve?" Trey asked with a smile. As he always did, to his credit, he had kept his distance while Emma was talking to Kyle.

Emma handed him the card and asked him to check that it contained a single short video, as Maria had promised. "But whisper in my ear," she said. "Dan doesn't know what it is."

"Holy shit!" Trey called from the back of his van barely ten seconds later. "Where did you get this?"

"What happened to whispering?" Emma grinned when he returned.

The beaming smile on Trey's face made Dan irrationally annoyed. "How long until you play it?" he asked Emma, beyond impatient.

She looked at her phone. "Four minutes."

Dan leaned against the back of Trey's van, trying not to look into any of the cameras being pointed at his face. Some were broadcasting live footage since a real-life sighting of Dan McCarthy was apparently now newsworthy in and of itself.

He looked up at the drive-in's giant screen, which Trey had hooked up to play various news networks on a rotating basis. ACN filled the screen at the moment, playing a pre-recorded segment of Maria talking to the camera from outside the IDA building. Her voice resonated around the drive-in lot through the powerful speakers Trey had set up for Dan's letter reveal two nights earlier.

After a few more minutes, Emma unlocked the metal door at the bottom of the stage's steps with a key Dan didn't know she had. She clipped a small microphone to her neckline and walked up the steps. Trey, with very brief written instructions from Emma, went back into his van and pressed something on his computer which brought her face onto the big screen. The sudden change got everyone's attention.

Dan straightened his back and took a few steps away from Trey's van. This was it, he realised. Whatever Emma was doing, she was doing it now.

Clark ran across the lot to rejoin Dan, pushing his way through the cameras and reporters who had congregated around Emma's scaffold stage. "What do you think it's going to be?" he asked, panting only slightly.

"It can't be the sphere," Dan said. "The guy wouldn't have taken that to Maria."

"What guy?"

Dan brought a finger to his lips. "Shut up, she's starting."

Sure enough, Emma had begun introducing the new and apparently game-changing footage. Dan checked the time. 15:57. She was cutting it fine.

"The Kloster letter was the smoking gun," Emma said, "and these eighteen seconds of footage are the fingerprints on the trigger." She held an open palm towards the screen. Like magic, the picture changed to a still image of a hotel lobby. A news reporter in dated clothes stood in the foreground, her mouth open mid-word.

"Is it supposed to be playing?" Clark said to no one in particular after a few seconds, breaking a silence which was remarkably total given the number of people gathered.

"No," Trey hissed from his van. "Shut up!"

Dan elbowed Clark in the side to add emphasis to Trey's words. Clark elbowed him back, much harder. Dan pretended it didn't hurt.

"This footage was recorded inside the Hildorf Hotel in Bonn in 1988," Emma continued, "six days after Hans Kloster wrote the letter to his brother Wilhelm and three days after Wilhelm died suddenly in an accident. We've muted the audio from this news footage since the local reporter is speaking German. The man you can see in the background, next to the second pillar from the left, is Richard Walker."

Dan and everyone else squinted at the screen. On cue, the still image zoomed in. It wasn't HD quality and Trey's computer didn't

magically enhance the image, but the unmistakable shape of Richard Walker's trademark scar was there for all to see. He looked much younger, quite understandably, but stood with the same ruler-straight posture in the same shade of grey suit as he still did almost thirty years later.

"Now watch," Emma said.

The footage zoomed back out slightly, showing Richard's full body at a decent resolution. A man, older than Richard, appeared from off-camera.

"Hans Kloster."

Kloster approached Richard and extended his hand. Richard cupped both of his hands around Kloster's and held them there for a second. He then patted Kloster on the shoulder in consolation.

Then came the key moment.

Kloster leaned in close to Richard and whispered something in his ear. Unfortunately there was no dramatic pan of the camera; no focus on Richard's shocked face. But still, the way his body stiffened suggested that the whispered words had been shocking.

Richard and Kloster both scanned their peripherals before Kloster produced an envelope from his left trouser pocket and handed it to Richard, who immediately placed it in his own inside breast pocket and headed straight for the hotel's entrance, walking towards the camera as he went.

"Richard Walker failed to give his scheduled speech that night and reported feeling unwell," Emma said. "As we all know from the letter, Hans Kloster thought he had very little time left. So when his brother died three days before this conference, he had no one else to turn to. No one else but Richard Walker."

Emma held her hand out to the screen again. Following her written instructions, Trey skipped the video back and zoomed in tight on the envelope. A dark blue seal was visible on the back, though not in great detail.

"This envelope and marking might look familiar," Emma said. She kept her hand out, waiting for Trey to follow the next

instruction. After a slightly awkward four-second wait, Dan's high resolution scan of the letter's envelope appeared side by side with the archival footage. Emma didn't have to say anything else.

The reporters stood in stunned silence; this was as red-handed as Walker could ever be caught, and no one knew how to react.

"It's four o'clock," Clark shouted, continuing his 100% silence-breaking streak.

Emma looked more grateful than annoyed. She signalled for Trey to put one of the news networks back on the big screen.

"We've done our part," Emma said, walking down the steps from the scaffold stage. "Now let's see what happens when Walker finds out what you've all just seen."

D minus 28

*IDA HEADQUARTERS
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO*

With space inside the IDA's press room strictly limited, priority was given to the local media outlets and freelance reporters who had covered Richard Walker's weekly press conferences since long before the influx of outsiders. The number of such regulars was small, however, so many large national and international news agencies found themselves in the unspectacular room, excitedly awaiting Richard's arrival.

The mood outside the IDA building was tense. A much larger police presence now surrounded the perimeter, and some of the protestors near the cordon seemed more combative than their counterparts in other American cities. There were no young children or families to be seen as ACN's newscopter relayed its last few seconds of outdoor footage; the crowd consisted largely of young men and young women with stern expressions and aggressive tones.

ACN's pictures cut inside as Richard Walker took his position at

the speaking podium. Ben Gold, though not by his side, was only a few steps out of shot.

“Before I begin,” Richard said, quietening the jostling crowd. He took a few seconds to reposition the countless network-branded microphones on his podium. After moving most back by a few inches, he lifted the Blitz News mic and held it up for the cameras.

“I’d like to take this opportunity to dissociate myself and my staff in the strongest possible terms from the underhand and indefensible tactics employed by Blitz Media in their targeting of Dan McCarthy. Yes, he is a compulsive liar, but that does not justify illegal surveillance. I won’t embarrass the reporter from Blitz News or the correspondent from The Daily Chat by asking them to leave,” he continued, pausing until everyone else in the room turned to fire scornful looks at the Blitz employees, “but they won’t be getting in again. Until I have sufficient proof that the editor of The Daily Chat and content editors at Blitz News no longer engage in these kind of activities — which they have been involved in for far longer than most of you know — no Blitz employees will be welcome in my building.”

A few flashbulbs went off from the right-hand side of the crowd. Richard, keen to get through his speech, didn’t stop to rebuke the photographers as he usually would have.

“That said, almost every other media outlet represented here today is equally guilty of something else, and that is talking about my relationship with Hans Kloster as though it’s supposed to be some kind of secret; as though I wish for my admiration of Hans’s work and character to be unknown. Nothing could be further from the truth. Hans Kloster was a giant among giants, and I will not sit back and watch his name be dragged through the mud by snot-nosed millennials like Dan McCarthy and his self-serving XPR puppet-master.”

Changing pace, Richard reached under his podium and lifted out a framed picture, roughly 12x18. More flashbulbs went off, capturing a shot of Richard’s much younger self shaking hands with Hans

during their first meeting in Dallas. The picture had been taken in 1976, twelve years before the Bonn conference and only a few months after Richard joined the Office of Science and Technology Policy.

Back in Birchwood at the drive-in, Emma could hardly believe her luck. This is too good, she thought to herself as everyone watched the big screen. He's setting himself up perfectly.

Richard, meanwhile, could barely recognise himself through the haze of time as he looked at the picture in his hands. The joy of meeting a hero like Kloster gave his face a truly boyish quality, but his infamous lip-scar had been even more prominent in those pre-surgery days.

"Hans endured times far more turbulent than these," Richard said, "and the stain of party membership, compulsory or not, never left him. But Hans was never one to make a fuss of himself. He did his work and he did it well, and that was enough. The retirement speech he gave in Dallas resonates with me to this day, so allow me to share the closing lines."

Richard cleared his throat and quoted Kloster directly:

"Forget what the onlookers think, for a man's thoughts die with him. Remember instead that the children of tomorrow will view today with the clarity of hindsight. All lies will be revealed and all truths will emerge. So jettison your preoccupations with the respect of your peers in favour of a promise to do right by generations unborn. The present has passed before we can touch it, but the future is ours to shape. Serve posterity, not power, and hold legacy before ego."

Richard caught two reporters near the front whispering to each other. "Have some respect," he boomed.

The whisperers took no notice, instead turning to those behind them and passing on whatever the big news was.

Maria Janzyck stood quietly in the middle of the pack, relieved to have secured a position inside thanks to both Kyle's agreeableness and ACN's habit of sending a junior reporter to cover Richard's

weekly briefings. The message hadn't reached her yet, but she knew what it was. Fighting a losing battle, she tried to keep herself from grinning.

After a long twenty or thirty seconds, a reporter just in front of Maria shouted something about the letter and the drive-in.

Richard, lost as to what was happening, turned to Ben Gold. Ben very quickly looked at his phone then spoke to Richard loudly but without shouting: "They just played something on the big screen."

"Who played what?" Richard asked.

Ben asked for a moment to check the details.

For the next minute or so, the scene was more pantomime than press conference. Several reporters were quicker than Ben to find the full story. One, representing a local station based in Boulder, took it upon himself to tell Richard what had happened.

"It's archive footage from a German news station," the man said in a smooth, radio-quality tone. "Shot in the lobby of the Hildorf Hotel during the Bonn conference in 1988. It shows Kloster handing you the letter."

"What letter?" Richard asked, almost indifferently.

"McCarthy's letter."

Richard chortled. "At least you're calling it by its real name."

"I mean the letter McCarthy leaked," the man said, his tone still smooth but the words now a little shaky under the pressure of a conversation with Richard Walker. "They showed footage of Kloster handing it to you. It has the same stamp on the same envelope and everything."

"How is no one else bored of this?" Richard asked. "How is no one else bored of this piecemeal release of so-called evidence, one breadcrumb at a time? I've said a thousand times that the PR girl knows what she's doing, but none of you seem to be catching on. They obviously found this footage of Hans handing me an innocuous letter — an invitation to his brother's funeral, if you must know — and created a similar-looking envelope for their fake letter. Again, I've never said McCarthy is an idiot. He's a liar, not an idiot."

At first, no one knew what to say. Richard was uncannily convincing in what he said, but everyone had heard and seen the letter being exhaustively broken down by historians and other experts. It just didn't seem possible that Dan or anyone could have concocted such an elaborate hoax; one which had already provoked responses from governments around the world.

"Timo Fiore is bribing our government officials with obscene amounts of money yet nothing has come out," Richard went on. "What does that tell you? It tells you that there's nothing to come out! At the risk of sounding like a broken record: when the entire world is looking for something, absence of proof is proof of absence. But I have to stress that what McCarthy is doing isn't even whistleblowing or selling secrets; this is making up lies and selling them as the truth. I've been saying this for a week. He didn't make a one-off poor decision to leak something he saw in the course of his duties, as we've seen with other whistleblowers. He and his associates have conducted a calculated campaign of disinformation designed to destabilise our country."

The Boulder-based reporter, still the focus of Richard's gaze, felt compelled to respond. "You don't really expect anyone to still believe this is some kind of stunt, do you?"

"Not just any kind of stunt," Richard said, addressing the whole room again. "I don't think anyone, even someone as psychologically challenged as McCarthy, would go to these quite extraordinary lengths just to prove themselves right. There are easier and less dangerous ways to get rich, too. What is becoming clearer by the day is that there are unseen forces at work here. Again, re-read my words from last week: this leak, not to mention the circus surrounding it, represents a very real threat to our national security. A very real threat."

Maria Janzyck had heard enough. She knew Emma and Dan better than any of the other reporters in the room, and she knew Richard Walker better than most of them, too. She knew who was lying and she wasn't prepared to let him away with it for another

second.

“Mr Walker,” she said firmly, projecting her voice more than necessary.

He laughed heartily. “Look who it is.”

“Hans Kloster wrote the letter for his brother Wilhelm, who died just after it was written and just before the conference in Bonn. Hans had nowhere else to turn, so he turned to you. As is well documented, he then used his scientific and political influence to ensure that you were appointed head of the IDA just months after this conference. The truth won’t go away just because you deny it.”

“Was there a question in that, or are you just here to say your piece?”

“The question was—”

“I was being rhetorical,” Richard interrupted. He looked around the room. “I should explain to the rest of you that Maria here has been, how can I put this, rather snug with Team McCarthy since the beginning. And really, who better to illustrate Chinese infiltration.”

“I’m from Denver,” Maria snapped back.

Richard half-grinned. “And tell me, was Janzyck your surname at birth?”

“None of this has anything to do—”

“It was a simple question,” Richard said, still smiling to himself and now back in his groove. “I know it was Chan, but I don’t think many of your colleagues do.”

“Chan is my maiden name,” Maria said, flustered to the point of sounding almost childlike. “Not than any of this is any of your—”

“And why, in this day and age, would a high-powered career woman like you take her husband’s name?”

“That’s a personal matter.”

Richard nodded in mock understanding. “Of course it is. So tell me, Miss Chan... sorry, Mrs Janzyck... how do you, personally, feel about China’s aggressive and expansionist plans for our moon?”

“Whose moon?” Maria asked.

Richard rubbed his hands together and laughed, smiling freely

like the young man in the photograph he had held up a few minutes earlier. He then held his hands up, palms out to the crowd. “No further questions.”

“No,” Maria said, in something more like her usual firm voice. “I could rise above your prejudice if that’s what this was, but we both know it’s not. You’ve had decades worth of sensitivity and media training; you know better than to say these things, even if you think them.” Several of Maria’s fellow reporters nodded along with her words. “What you’re doing here is saying deliberately offensive things and making deliberately controversial statements to distract everyone from the real issue, and people can see through it.”

Richard’s expression changed in an instant. “That’s what you’re doing!” he said, feigning incredulity. “You and your puppet-masters with their tentacles all over our industries and our media... it’s you who is saying controversial things to distract us from the real issue, which is and always has been expansionist Chinese aggression.”

“That’s patently ridicul—”

“No!” Richard yelled, thumping the podium with his fist. “I won’t stand for it any longer. I have to get this off my chest. You can talk about media training... fine. I don’t care anymore.” He looked directly into the main camera in front of him. “Cut me off if you have to, but this is happening. I’m saying this. I’m 68 years old, and I’m sick and tired of watching the country I’ve defended for so long being torn apart from outside and in. China’s prerogative is China’s prerogative; fine.

“But Slater?” Richard continued, shaking his head in absolute disgust. “We might as well call her Valerie Chamberlain. Her administration, her recent predecessors, and indeed the nation’s political establishment as a whole, have all done nothing to curb Chinese expansion. We ignore and we appease them because we “need the trade”. Why do we need the trade? Because we don’t make anything anymore! Why don’t we make anything? Because we ship it all in from China, of course! And while China’s politicians are busy buying up swathes of Africa to source their raw materials

more cheaply than we could ever hope to, our politicians are busy toeing party lines and dancing to the tune of a four-year cycle of empty promises and popularity contests.

“This is no sob story but you all know fine well that I had no family to fight for, so I fought for my country. I fought for its flag; its freedom; its forefathers. Slater and the rest? They fight for themselves. The individualism that made this country great has corrupted our political system to breaking point. These are the things I’m not supposed to say, but I care too much about this country to care about propriety.

“And I can’t deny that most of us who were around before Slater didn’t see China coming, because we were all too busy patting ourselves on the back for winning the cold war by default. Our Soviet enemy destroyed itself from within, just as China’s American enemy has been doing ever since.”

Ben Gold looked at the floor. He had known Richard for years and never seen him lose his cool like this.

“But one man saw China coming,” Richard said, lowering his voice to a much calmer level. “Hans. Even before the wall came down, he knew that our biggest threat was the risk of being surpassed and overtaken by China and India. India hasn’t quite followed the trajectory he expected, but China?” Richard paused, scanned the room, and shook his head in dejection. “We’re arguing about Nazi UFOs, and they’re going to Mars. Hans must be turning in his grave.”

Richard tucked the framed photograph under his arm and limped to the door. “See them all out, Benjamin,” he said.

D minus 27

BLITZ TOWER
MANHATTAN, NEW YORK

Among the tens of millions of viewers who tuned in for Richard Walker's press conference was Jan Gellar, former Head of Content at Blitz News and current editor of The Daily Chat.

Jan and Richard had a long history, none of it friendly and some of it positively hostile. Their most recent interaction ended poorly for both, with the bugs Richard blackmailed Jan into ordering for Dan McCarthy's home having been discovered within hours and since exposed on national TV.

The Kloster letter came at the perfect time for Jan and everyone else at Blitz, utterly capturing the media and public's attention. Emma Ford gave the bugging footage an initial boost by releasing it to all news networks at once on Wednesday morning, but her promise of a bigger announcement that night reduced the footage to a side-story even before the letter was out.

The Blitz employee who had been caught red-handed wisely claimed to have been working on his own initiative when he

planted the bugs. Blitz made a public show of terminating his contract, of course, but not without an under-the-table reward for his loyalty and silence.

All things considered, Jan was just relieved it hadn't been worse.

The entire point of ordering the bugging was to placate Richard Walker so that he wouldn't reveal that Blitz had, once upon a time, bugged and otherwise harassed him. Jan was highly reluctant to illegally target Dan, then an XPR client, for a related reason: XPR's founder, Jack Neal, had been the one who first uncovered Blitz Media's wide use of such tactics.

Jan ultimately opted to satisfy Richard's demands for a reason best conveyed in his own words: "If you're worried that XPR might put you in the shit if you do this, let me make it clear that I will put you in the shit if you don't."

But now that the bugging story was out and already old news, Jan realised she had been worrying over nothing. The world didn't just know about Blitz Media's shady information-gathering techniques; the world had seen them. And yet, no one seemed particularly interested. Even more fortuitously for Jan, Emma Ford's unceremonious departure from XPR meant that the powerful firm no longer had a professional interest in Dan McCarthy.

Having seen the damning footage of Kloster handing Richard the letter just seconds before Richard's press conference began, Jan had watched in anticipation of a public breakdown. Instead, Richard stood defiant and shifted the focus as only he could.

His slipperiness frustrated Jan, but this was nothing compared to the fury she felt over his opening remarks. Richard's decision to "publicly dissociate" himself from Blitz Media and to lambast their "underhand and indefensible tactics" was too much for Jan.

She refused to let it slide.

As soon as Richard left the podium after his aimless rant about China's unchecked rise to superpower status, Jan opened an instant messaging window on her computer and sent a simple message to Paula Dunne, her successor as Head of Content at Blitz News. As

usual, both were working late.

“Room for an exclusive tonight?” Jan wrote.

“Always...” Paula replied.

Jan dragged an audio file onto the conversation window, sending it to Paula. She twiddled her thumbs, waiting for Paula to listen. At a few points the window told her that Paula was typing a reply, but after two minutes Jan was still staring a white space.

It irritated Jan greatly to think of Paula working on a higher floor, sitting in the chair that used to be hers.

The move was originally sold to Jan as a promotion; The Daily Chat was in serious trouble and needed a maverick editor to revive its sales, the executives told her. Jan turned the offer down, only to be told in the gentlest possible terms that she had already been replaced.

A professional rivalry now existed between Jan and Paula, who Jan’s former underlings loyally told her was nothing more than a younger but inferior version of herself.

Paula had proven herself capable enough but frequently complained that Jan was stepping on her toes by running ever-increasing amounts of video in the online version of The Daily Chat. The executives didn’t pay much attention to such complaints, blinded by Jan’s unequivocal success in boosting circulation in a post-smartphone era when another historic newspaper seemed to go out of business every few weeks.

Eventually, Paula’s reply appeared. “You know we can’t run this,” it said. “But I appreciate you bringing it to me.”

“If you don’t run it tonight, I’ll lead with it in Monday’s Chat,” Jan typed. She hit send before she had time to reconsider.

“Jan, I’m only thinking of you. This implicates you, not me...”

“I was a victim of blackmail! No one care’s what we do, anyway. We’re the money-hungry bad guys, McCarthy is the good guy, and Walker is Walker. He’s not throwing us under the bus and getting away with it.”

Paula Dunne is typing a reply

“Are you running it or not?” Jan typed, impatiently hitting send again.

“I’ll have to run it by the board.”

Jan Gellar leaned back in her chair and exhaled. The board only spoke in numbers — dollars and ratings — and this audio footage would cost none of the former and deliver plenty of the latter. Convincing Paula had been the only potential stumbling block.

It was controversial footage, for sure, but Jan knew that all the heat would be on Richard Walker. He was the one being exposed as a hypocrite; he was the one whose last few shreds of credibility were about to be incinerated; he was the one whose career was about to die by its own sword.

Walker was a cockroach; the greatest survivor in American politics. But this? This was one self-inflicted mess that Jan couldn’t imagine even Walker finding a way out of.

“I have something else, too,” Jan typed. “A video. I’ve been considering running stills in Monday’s Chat and putting the footage online, but trust me: this deserves to be on TV. I know you’ve been having budget issues, so you can have it on me.”

Paula Dunne is typing a reply.

Jan imagined Paula weighing it up; a big scoop for Blitz News versus a big boost for Jan’s ego.

“Is it anti-Walker?” Paula’s reply read, shorter and more straightforward than Jan expected.

Jan took a few seconds to think of the best way to word it without giving too much away. “Not really... more pro-McCarthy than anti-Walker. I acquired some private footage on Monday. Not cheap. I bought it to kill it — it didn’t fit our editorial stance — but obviously the tide has turned since then. I’ve had the Kloster footage since Sunday, too, but there’s no way ACN are getting this. No one has seen it, not even Ford.”

“Do you want me to run it tonight?” Paula asked.

“Yes, but I need it in writing that this new video won’t go out within two hours of the Walker audio. I want the Walker story to be

the only story for a little while, at least.”

“It won’t go out within two hours,” Paula promised.

“Good,” Jan typed. She smiled and dragged a video file onto the conversation window. “Go nuclear.”

*McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO*

By 6pm in Colorado, Dan was back home with Emma and Clark. He felt more optimistic than he had before seeing the footage of Kloster handing an envelope to Richard but less so than immediately before Richard surprised everyone by denying that the envelope in the video had contained the recently published letter, which he continued to dismiss as a malicious concoction.

The mood at the drive-in after Richard's press conference ended had been oddly flat, and Dan was glad to be home. He was eating with Emma in the kitchen when her phone rang.

"Someone on your whitelist?" Dan asked. He knew it had to be.

Emma looked at the screen, both surprised and confused. "Jan Gellar."

"Who's she again?"

"She edits The Chat," Emma said, bringing a finger to her lips.

Dan was sitting close enough to Emma's phone to hear both sides of the conversation.

"Good evening, Ms Ford," Jan said, sounding a lot more formal than Emma remembered.

"What do you want?" Emma asked, more obliviously than accusingly.

"Are you watching Blitz News?"

"Why would I be doing that?"

Jan laughed slightly. "It's gone downhill since I left, I'll give you that. But anyway, I think you'll like what's coming up on the hour."

Emma looked at Dan and shrugged.

"Oh, I'm not being cruel," Jan sought to clarify. "You really will like it."

"What is it?"

"An audio recording of Walker blackmailing me into having someone bug McCarthy's house," Jan said, leaving nothing to surprise.

Dan lifted his plate off the table and ran through to the couch with it.

Emma walked towards the back door and lowered her voice. "What do you want?" she asked again, this time full of suspicion.

"From you? Nothing. This is Walker's receipt. No one throws me under the bus in front of the whole world and gets away with it. Not even him."

"Why are you telling me this?" Emma said. She had dealt with Jan and others like her too many times to easily believe there was no angle.

"I know how highly Jack Neal thinks of you," Jan said. "And more importantly I know how much he's told you about certain incidents. I don't know why you didn't escalate things when XPR let you go, but you didn't. Walker did, though. As soon as his back was against the wall, he broke the rules. He fired the first nuke."

Though she didn't hear an answer in any of that, Emma was reluctant to push for one. She let Jan talk.

"Oh, and there's going to be something else in a few hours. I've had it under wraps since Sunday, but now that the game's over

we're going to run it. Walker's not in it, but he won't like it."

"What is it?" Emma asked impatiently. She hated being so out of the loop, and particularly when she knew how much Jan would be enjoying holding this power over her.

"It's pretty much on a par with the letter footage from Bonn."

Emma looked at the flashing time on Dan's rarely used oven. "If you're not going to tell me, I should get going before I miss the audio release."

"Okay. And you're welcome, Ms Ford."

"Whatever," Emma said, ending the call. She joined Dan in the living room and sat on the couch, trying to get comfortable.

Only Clark didn't know why they were watching Blitz News or what to expect from the 6pm bulletin. Emma was amused by his surprised reaction, having thought Dan had told him.

"Walker planted the bugs?!" Clark yelled excitedly, looking between Dan and Emma and wondering why they weren't as ecstatic as he was at this concrete evidence of Richard Walker's wrongdoing.

Emma quickly explained that they had found out a few minutes earlier. She then listened to what came next. A huge headline reading "Underhand And Indefensible" filled the screen as the audio played, turning Richard's own words against him.

After a minute or so, Dan suggested switching to ACN to watch the news break there, too. ACN played the full audio, safely assuming that Jan Gellar wouldn't enforce her ownership rights over audio footage about illegal surveillance that had itself been recorded without one participant's knowledge.

"Walker will twist it and come out clean," Dan said, dampening the mood with his sudden pessimism. "He'll just say something ridiculous about me working with China and it being his duty as an American to monitor my communications. He'll make a bullshit non-apology for taking the law into his own hands and that will be it. Rinse and repeat."

Emma and Clark looked at each other.

"Dan, this is pretty big," Emma said.

"So was the letter, though. So was the footage of Walker getting the letter. So was the other letter Kloster sent to NASA. So was the Australian letter, and that was last week! Walker's the Teflon Don. Nothing sticks."

"I know it's been an insane week for you," Emma said. "I've been here, too. But this thing is like a marathon, and right now you're hitting the wall. It happens. The good thing is, the wall comes right before the end. You just have to keep going."

"Except you don't even have to keep running," Clark said. "You've done everything. It's a game of patience, man. We'll go to Italy and chill for a few days then take it from there."

"I want to go back to work," Dan decided.

Emma was so used to prima donna clients with "do you know who I am?" attitudes that Dan's apparent obliviousness as to how famous he had quickly become, not to mention how irreversibly his life had changed, was as refreshing as it was surprising. "We'll see what happens," she said, sharing a look with Clark that suggested they both knew there was nothing to see about.

"Yeah," Clark said. "Let's just not think about Walker or any of that for a while."

Emma tried to shift the focus. "So what do you losers do for fun around here, anyway?", she asked, faking an '80s movie mean-girl accent.

Clark pointed to the TV.

"Basically," Dan said.

Emma half-laughed-half-sighed and sat back down.

"No news, though," Clark said.

"No news," Emma agreed. She and Clark looked at Dan.

"Uh, no news," he said, belatedly catching on.

Emma already knew that they didn't get any premium channels, so she was pleased to see Clark slide open a piece of the TV unit she had always thought was a solid panel. The previously hidden section housed around fifty films and games in neatly arranged

boxes. She walked over to see what there was.

“Get something about aliens,” Dan said from the couch.

“No aliens,” Emma and Clark both replied, pulling off the “same answer at the same time” trick that was usually reserved for the brothers.

Clark found something and pushed Emma away. He held the box behind his back. “What’s the opposite of aliens?”

“Humans?” Emma guessed.

“Zombies,” Dan said, more authoritatively.

“No.” Clark put the box down, out of sight, and held his left hand horizontally. “This is land, right? This is the sky,” he said, pointing above his left hand with his right, “which is where the aliens are, and this part underneath is the...”

“Core,” Emma said.

“Is it *The Core*?” Dan guessed. He knew Henry had that movie.

“This part is the sea,” Clark said, shaking his head at their guesses like a disappointed charades player.

“The sea is underneath the land?” Emma asked, laughing.

Dan joined in. “It’s *Jaws*, though, right?”

Clark applauded sarcastically and produced a *Jaws* box-set from the unit behind him. “Any objections?”

“We’re gonna need a bigger screen,” Emma said.

“Forty inches is fine,” Clark said, “it might not be what you’re used to, but—”

“Clark,” Dan interrupted. “It was a joke.”

This made it all the funnier for Emma. She excused herself to the kitchen while Clark inserted the first disc, taking the opportunity to send a message to Jan Gellar: “Text me when the other thing is about to air. I’m busy right now.”



Dan and Emma teased Clark mercilessly when the movie came to the “we’re gonna need a bigger boat” line, taking turns to act out

the parts and argue that forty feet was fine, even if it wasn't what the other was used to. Clark took it in good humour.

Around thirty minutes after the film ended, by which point Clark was preparing to drive to the coffee place where Emma got his muffins the night before, Emma received a one-word text from Jan Gellar: "Now."

"I know I said no news..." Emma said.

Clark groaned. "Dan, want anything when I'm out?"

"Nope."

"Emma?"

"Something is going to happen on Blitz," she said. "I don't know what, but the same person who told me the Walker thing was going to air at six just told me that something else is coming up now."

"The guy from The Daily Chat?"

"She's a woman, but yeah. She said she bought this new footage to bury it, but obviously the Blitz agenda has flipped since the letter came out."

Intrigued, Clark took his shoes off and sat back down in his armchair.

The Blitz News anchor on-air to reveal the footage for the first time was Sarah Curtis, perhaps the one individual who epitomised the great Blitz flip-flop more than any other having gone from openly ridiculing Billy Kendrick on the day of the leak to delivering the station's first pro-McCarthy statement six days later.

"News coming in from Colorado," Sarah read from the autocue, her eyes widening sufficiently to convince Emma that this really was the first she was hearing of it. "News of footage, I believe, given to Blitz by a citizen of Colorado Springs. I think we can roll that now..."

"No way," Dan said. He jumped to his feet. "That's me! That's Friday! That's the folder!"

Unlike Dan, Emma and Clark didn't recognise the scene. They both watched as Dan cycled into view of the parked car's dash-cam. Seconds later, a man dressed all in black ran straight into the side of

Dan's bike, knocking both men and the thief's loot to the ground.

Clark watched the ensuing stand-off nervously, as though he didn't know how it ended. When the robber flashed his weapon at Dan, which came across very clearly, Clark's expression stiffened. "If that guy ever gets caught and I ever see him," he said, pausing to think through his options, "I'm going to be the last guy he sees."

Emma was too engrossed in the footage to hear any of what Clark was saying. It completely vindicated Dan's story; he did exactly what he said he did, right down to hesitating before picking up the folder. She felt bad for ever doubting him but too happy with the footage to be bitter at Jan Gellar for withholding it for so long.

After a brief moment of joy, Emma's mind went back into focus mode, searching for holes. She knew that Richard Walker's instinctive reaction would be to claim the footage was staged, but the length of Dan's hair in the video confirmed that it had been recorded before Saturday. Everyone knew that the area around Winchester Street had been closed off immediately after the robbery, meaning that the footage had to have been recorded before Friday morning. And, of course, no one knew that the IDA was going to be robbed.

Emma smiled again. Unless Richard was going to completely change his story and claim that Dan not only faked every piece of evidence but also organised the robbery, there was quite simply no way he could come out of this clean. Not even him.

"See," Dan said as the footage ended with him putting the Kerguelen folder safely in his backpack. "I told you."

"Fuck yeah you did," Clark said, taking a shortcut over the coffee table to give Dan an excited brotherly hug.

Dan looked at Emma, as though waiting for her approval or a sign that everything was alright.

"Dan McCarthy," she chirped, smiling broadly and joining the hug.

SATURDAY

D minus 25

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

The joy of Friday night was short-lived, quickly dampened by a major news story.

Saturday morning's sobering development wasn't a refutation of either the audio footage which exposed Richard Walker's role in the bugging or the video of Dan finding the folder, though, as Emma had previously considered the worst case scenario.

No; what she saw on Blitz News before either of the brothers were awake was much more harrowing than that.

Friday had been a very late night and Emma felt a little worse for wear after more celebratory drinking than she was used to. Dan passed out and had to be carried to his bed by Clark, who quietly kept the party going long after Emma called it a night on the couch. She didn't expect to see either of them walking anytime soon.

Not yet aware of the overnight developments, Emma walked into the kitchen for a drink to ease her dry throat. With only one bottle remaining of the fancy lemonade everyone liked so much,

Emma left it for Dan, expecting that he would wake up feeling a thousand times worse than she did. She instead took one of the many bottles of Houghton's Home Fresh cloudy apple juice and relaxed back into her groove on the couch, which she found comfortable if a little short. She couldn't imagine how Dan, nearly a full foot taller than her, ever managed to sleep on it.

Emma turned on the TV and immediately felt a lump in her already dry throat. A collage of smiling faces filled the screen, which only ever meant one thing.

There were four rows of victims: six in each of the top and bottom rows, and four in each of the middle two rows. In the centre of the middle rows there was an image four times larger than any of the others.

The middle-aged man in this central image had narrow eyes and wispy white hair. Unlike the other photographs, his looked to be a mugshot.

Emma's tired and dehydrated brain counted the faces individually.

Twenty, plus one.

He had to be the perpetrator of the attack, she thought, and surely there were too many victims for it to have been a shooting. The banner headline at the bottom of the screen — "Horror At Hemshaw" — didn't offer many clues.

Restless to know where Hemshaw was and what had happened there, Emma shifted her weight in preparation for the effort of standing up again to get her phone from its charging point beside the TV.

As the time on the screen changed from 08:59 to 09:00, Blitz News didn't cut to its usual bulletin. The anchor did, however, acknowledge the time before announcing that the full seven-minute recording of the incident was about to be replayed. "This footage contains scenes that some viewers may find disturbing," he warned. "Needless to say, Blitz News does not condone the views or actions of Christopher Jordan."

Within milliseconds of the first frame appearing on the screen, Emma knew what she was looking at: a mass suicide.

Christopher Jordan, the man from the central picture, stood in front of a makeshift altar, barefoot in an all-white suit and with two white stripes painted under each eye. The footage looked to have been shot in a dingy and ill-lit barn or storage building.

Emma knew more about this kind of thing than she would have liked to, having studied Jonestown and other lesser-known incidents of its type during her time at college. As charismatic as they were sinister, cult leaders who could talk their followers into committing suicide or murder were in many ways the ultimate influencers. As such, their speech patterns and mannerisms had long been studied by marketers and politicians, even if few would admit it.

Jonestown's victims had numbered in the high hundreds, eclipsing Hemshaw in terms of scale. But the Jonestown tape, as haunting as the crying children and the brainwashed adult voices were, didn't show the victims. Unlike this Hemshaw video, it didn't show bodies contorting on the floor as others formed an orderly queue to take their own sips of the clear liquid their white-suited leader was liberally pouring into plastic cups.

Christopher Jordan's voice was undeniably hypnotic. Before anyone else appeared on-camera, he explained why "this regrettable course of action" had been necessary. The catalyst, to Emma's dismay, was Dan's leak.

In an authoritative tone that left no doubt that the man believed his own madness, Jordan provided the context of an intergalactic war between two alien races. One, the Kamanoids, were "evil beyond our understanding of the word." The Benorians, meanwhile, were a peaceful race who often communicated directly with Jordan. He claimed that his recent attempts at communicating with the friendly Benorians had been "blocked by an unseen force" and that the last message he received was a warning about an upcoming Kamanoid invasion under the guise of a friendly visit.

Jordan then spoke in graphic terms about the fate which would befall anyone still alive when the Kamanoids arrived, urging others to “seek the sanctity of death while you still can” and even going so far as to call for parents to “fulfil your duty of care and express your love by giving your children the solace of a peaceful passage before it’s too late.”

Aside from everything else she was feeling, Emma couldn’t believe that Blitz were irresponsible enough to air this part of the video. As insane as Jordan’s suggestions and as laughable as his intergalactic war stories sounded to Emma, he presented them in a sufficiently assertive and polished way to concern her that unstable individuals might sit up and take notice. After all, twenty of them already had.

And Emma reflected again on the importance of the fact that Jordan’s call to action wasn’t coming across through a cryptic note or grainy audio; this was HD video of a well-spoken man calmly and articulately stating his absurd position.

As Emma tried to ignore selfish thoughts about what this was going to do to Dan’s public image, her mind instead turned to wondering just how unstable or vulnerable Jordan’s victims must have been to buy into the level of nonsense he was spouting.

This question was quickly answered.

“Marlena, my love,” Jordan called towards the camera, extending his hand. A young woman walked forward, at least fifteen years his junior and with the unmistakable hollow cheeks and desperate eyes of an addict. She stumbled slightly as she walked. Jordan kissed her on the forehead, promised that everything would be okay, and handed her a cup full of whatever poison he had chosen for the job.

Marlena grasped the cup in two hands and drank quickly. Jordan pointed to a spot on the floor. Marlena slowly sat down and crossed her legs. By the time the next victim was at the altar, Marlena’s head was on the ground and her body was convulsing.

“Come, come,” Jordan said, calling more people forward. “Three

at a time.” Each of these next three victims were thin and wore the same vacant expression that Marlena had. Jordan poured their drinks, handed them their cups, and pointed where to sit.

This pattern continued. With only two victims remaining, Jordan urged them to hurry up. He addressed the camera again, referencing the fact that he was live-streaming the group’s “peaceful passage” and that he knew it wouldn’t be long until the police arrived. He made a cryptic comment about taking them with him “if that’s what they want”, but reaffirmed that he would rather go peacefully.

With the final two victims writhing on the ground and most of the others now disturbingly frozen in contorted positions, Christopher Jordan poured his own drink. “Sirens,” he said, looking around. He smiled, only slightly. “Too late.”

Jordan then walked towards the camera, stepping away from the altar for the first time. Emma’s heart sank when she saw what was stuck to the front of the altar: a picture of Dan.

It was media’s go-to photo, taken from his appearance on Focus 20/20. There were two other photos — Hans Kloster and a woman Emma didn’t recognise — as well as symbols from various incompatible religions and belief systems. Had this happened four of five days earlier, Emma reflected, Blitz would have been calling for Dan’s crucifixion for causing so many deaths.

Christopher Jordan signed off with a final warning about the “unspeakable horrors” which would soon fall upon Earth’s inhabitants. He then drank his own poison and placed the camera on the floor to capture the exact moment of his death. His head eventually settled on the ground, facing the nearby camera.

Slightly disturbing, Emma thought. Slightly?

No more than twenty seconds later, police officers broke through the door off-camera. After a brief view of one officer’s feet at close range, the video cut out.

Back in the Blitz News studio, the anchor revealed that the responding officers found “a significant arsenal of weaponry” in an underground shelter and also discovered evidence that multiple

buildings at the Hemshaw Gardens site had been used for large-scale production of methamphetamine.

Emma heard one of the bedroom doors opening and turned to see whose it was. She hoped it would be Clark's so he could see the news and assume the responsibility of telling Dan.

It was Dan's.



Dan walked into the living room, shielding his eyes from the daylight with one hand while the other lay on his stomach. "It feels like my stomach is full of wet cardboard," he groaned.

"It'll pass," Emma said. She stood up to guide him towards the kitchen.

He looked over to the TV and tried to focus on the rows of images which had returned to the screen. "What happened to Christopher Jordan?" he said, squinting to make out the smaller faces. "Is he dead?"

"You know this guy?" Emma asked. She gave up on the kitchen idea and fell back on the couch.

"I know who he is."

"Who?" she pushed, keen to get Dan's view on Jordan before he found out what the maniac had done.

"He's bad news," Dan said, leaving it at that. "Is he dead?"

Emma patted the couch, inviting Dan to join her. She told him as succinctly as possible that Jordan had killed himself and taken twenty vulnerable-looking people with him, using the apparently imminent hostile invasion as his justification.

Dan looked at the screen quietly, still studying the faces of the dead while the anchor ran through their names and backgrounds. Now sobered up as abruptly as Emma had been, he asked the first question in his mind: "Did he say anything about Billy?"

"Billy?" Emma echoed. "Kendrick? What does he have to do with anything?"

“Good. Did he say anything about me?”

Emma thought for a second. “I don’t think so, but there was a picture of you. Kloster, too, and someone else I didn’t know. Do you want me to rewind to it?”

“Is there a clip?”

“The whole thing,” Emma said. “It’s pretty graphic.”

Dan turned his head towards the kitchen. “Get it to the part with the picture and pause it. I don’t want to see anything else.”

Emma respected his wish, and the fact that he had it. “Okay, there it is.”

“That’s his wife,” Dan said. He turned away again.

Emma turned the TV off. “It looked like he was with a different woman. Is his wife dead?”

“Officially missing,” Dan said, air-quoting the second word with his fingers. “He said she was abducted, but he killed her. Billy grilled him about his story once and there were holes all over the place. It never went to trial because there was insufficient evidence and she didn’t have any family or anyone else to push for it.”

“That picture was a mugshot, though, right? So they must have suspected him of something...?”

“DUI,” Dan said. “Nothing else.”

After a few moments of silence, Emma turned away from the blank TV to face Dan directly. “None of this is your fault,” she said.

“I know,” Dan said quietly. He stood up. “Thanks, though.”



As Dan ate a light breakfast in the kitchen, Emma took a look at how ACN was covering the Hemshaw incident. The newsreader relayed a short statement from President Slater, promising a full investigation into how Christopher Jordan had been able to build up such a large stash of illegal weapons and such a sophisticated meth lab without being on the authorities’ radar.

Slater also expressed her condolences to the families of the dead

and urged news networks to rethink their decision to air the grisly footage. She didn't acknowledge Jordan's stated justification or the pictures of Dan and Kloster. Emma wasn't sure what to read into that.

ACN then reminded their viewers of Prime Minister Godfrey's earlier comments.

"Dan," Emma called. "Godfrey."

Dan ran through from the kitchen.

Unlike Slater's written statement, Godfrey's was a short video recording of him at a mahogany desk. He had made no public comment about the leak since prematurely declassifying Britain's UFO files on Tuesday, instead leaving John Cole to respond to the Kloster letter's detailed revelations. Dan was eager to hear what he had to say.

Godfrey expressed his deepest condolences before reverting to type and implicitly blaming President Slater. "Government lies breed citizen paranoia," he said, "and questions should be asked of those at the top."

The way Godfrey shifted gears wasn't unlike his speech at the Manslow Monument, when he turned the anniversary of an industrial disaster into an opportunity to score points.

His response to the mass suicide at Hemshaw ended with an appeal to the American public: "While you send your thoughts and prayers to the victims' families, try not to let this tragedy quell your hunger for the truth or forget how much Dan McCarthy has risked to bring us all so close to it."

"I don't want him on our side," Dan said.

"I know," Emma sighed. "Me neither."

The Horror At Hemshaw, as everyone was now calling it, dominated the news cycle all day. A few minutes here and there referenced the previous night's more positive developments, but the networks seemed to revel in the tragedy. Profiles of the victims filled most of the cycle, complete with eulogies from sobbing friends who told familiar stories for each victim. A pattern soon emerged of

homeless addicts and former sex workers taken in by Christopher Jordan for reasons that weren't yet clear. Many speculated that he used them as disposable partners in his drug business, but some of the pop psychologists who appeared on TV throughout the day argued that sociopaths like Jordan often sought followers for the sake of having them.

Clark, when he eventually woke up, was less enthralled by the coverage. "People die all the time," he said after Emma explained why she looked upset.

"Not in mass suicides," she replied.

"Exactly! These idiots chose to go."

"They were vulnerable people. How can you be so cold?"

Clark shrugged. "I'm guessing no one's ever died in your arms, staring into your eyes and fighting for one last breath. Because once you've seen that, it's not so easy to feel sorry for people who decide to stop breathing."

"I'm not saying—"

"And I'm not judging anyone," Clark interrupted. "But don't ask me to cry for them, either."

Emma didn't know what to say to that.

"Anyway," Clark said, raising his eyebrows and shifting gears blatantly enough to make William Godfrey blush, "is there a beach at the place we're going to in Italy?"

"Uh, probably nearby," Emma said.

"Sweet. I'm going to the mall to get some stuff for the trip. Anyone want anything?"

"I don't think so," Dan said.

"And you won't need the car?"

Dan shook his head.

Clark grabbed his coat and left.

"Wait, is he okay to drive?" Emma asked after a few minutes.

"It's three o'clock," Dan said.

"Yeah but he was practically drinking until the sun came up."

"He's a big guy," Dan said. "It takes a lot. And obviously I

wouldn't let him go if there was any doubt. Not that he would."

"I was just checking."

Dan didn't say anything, annoyed by the insinuation but not wanting to make a big thing of it.

After another hour or so, ACN aired an interview with someone who used to live with Christopher Jordan at Hemshaw Gardens, thirty miles east of Sioux City. The woman, who didn't want to be identified, said that "cult" was the only appropriate word to describe the group and that Jordan hadn't shied away from using it.

"He said cult was the world's name for people whose knowledge scares them," the woman said, her face obscured and her voice morphed. She went on to say that she and many others had worked in the site's two main meth labs until they were too exhausted to continue. "But we had nowhere else to go," she said, slowly and weakly. "And he told us he loved us."

The woman went on to say that Jordan had been talking about a "mass exit" for a long time and that he was always looking for a justification. This eased Dan's conscience slightly, since he no longer felt that his leak had been the cause. The catalyst, perhaps; but not the cause.

Clark returned after another few hours with supplies for their trip to Italy, now just a day away. He handed Dan some earplugs for the flight and a pocket-sized Milan guidebook. "Pizza tonight?" he suggested.

Emma and Dan supported the idea, Dan more animatedly.

Clark called to order the pizzas then sat down in his armchair. "Have you two been watching this all day?" he asked.

"Pretty much," Dan said.

"This stuff's not good for—"

Dan waved his hand to silence Clark. "Kendrick," he said.

Sure enough, the exclusive comment from Billy Kendrick that Emma, Dan and millions of other ACN viewers had been waiting for was finally here.

Billy's face was weary, like his skin weighed twice as much as

normal. He was in an otherwise empty hotel conference room, sitting at a long wooden table.

Billy shared his memories of Christopher Jordan, who he described as “the second most hostile guest I ever had on my show, after Joe Crabbe.” He retold how Jordan had screamed at him for being a government shill and accused him of working with the hostile Kamanoids to pave the way for a global takeover. Billy shared his admittedly unqualified opinion that Jordan’s obsession began with the abduction story he concocted to get away with killing his wife, and that Jordan’s mind slowly began to “believe its own BS” as a way to cope with the guilt.

“Is your show tonight going ahead?” the ACN interviewer asked, his back to the camera.

“It has to,” Billy said. Unlike Godfrey, Billy had too much class to seek to make the tragedy about himself; that much was clear from his pained expression. “I’ve received messages from ticket-holders who have taken two days off work and travelled 400 miles because this was their closest show. What happened at Hemshaw is a tragedy, but the world keeps spinning.”

The interviewer didn’t push him on this reasonable response. “And what about the pictures of Hans Kloster and Dan McCarthy?” he asked instead, changing tack. “What can we read into their presence?”

Kendrick’s expression hardened. “Nothing. Dan McCarthy has done nothing wrong, if that’s what you’re getting at. Everything he’s said has been true, as the video of him finding the folder proved. Jordan’s demented mind probably saw Kloster and Dan as prophets, since Kloster located the spheres in the first place and Dan rediscovered their existence. That’s all you can read from it. Nothing else.”

“Prophets of doom?” the interviewer asked.

Billy almost smiled for the first time in the interview. “There’s no doom. I hope we can all pull together to make sure these are the last lives lost to irrational fear, because the Kerguelen sphere is an

olive branch, not a smallpox blanket.”

The term “smallpox blanket” had been thrown around by some commentators who worried that the alien materials inside the sphere might contain harmful viruses or bacteria to which humans had no natural immunity. Hans Kloster’s long but eventually successful fight against a rare wasting disease was held up as a cautionary tale, since Kloster was the only person known to have handled the sphere and survived the war. But Dan and most others had no doubt that the sphere and the plaques within it would be treated with the utmost care once discovered, so such concerns didn’t permeate deeply into the general public mood.

“I used to think that guy was crazy,” Clark said as Billy’s interview ended.

“Me, too,” Emma said.

Dan didn’t say anything. He shared Billy’s hope that no more lives would be lost to fear, but he didn’t share his confidence. With something like this happening merely because Disclosure seemed imminent, Dan hated to think what might happen when the big capital-D actually came true.

Christopher Jordan was insane, for sure, but so were plenty of others. So were some of the religious sects with biological and chemical weapons that made Jordan’s guns look like children’s toys.

Dan recalled his exchange with Joe Crabbe on Focus 20/20, when Crabbe had lambasted him for pursuing “truth for its own sake, consequences be damned.”

For the first time, Dan was having second thoughts.

SUNDAY

D minus 24

*MUNICIPAL HALL
MIRAMAR, ARGENTINA*

On the same steps from which he had addressed local journalists 48 hours earlier, Juan Silva, head of the Miramar regional Coast Guard, stood now before a much larger media contingent.

On behalf of the national government, he expressed his condolences to the victims of the Hemshaw tragedy. The incident had been treated respectfully by Argentine networks and blamed entirely on Christopher Jordan. Unbeknownst to Dan, his own image and the faces of the fallen victims had been pixelated beyond recognition in the short snippets of footage shown in Argentina, which included only Jordan's initial speech and his sign-off.

Much of Saturday's news coverage in Argentina, like elsewhere in the world, had focused somewhat on the incriminating audio of Richard Walker ordering the bugging and largely on the absolving video of Dan finding the Kerguelen folder.

Juan Silva, broad-shouldered and stone-faced, then segued into the main order of business. To the audible dissatisfaction of the

journalists below, Juan announced that an American naval vessel had encroached into the restricted zone overnight during “ostensibly routine manoeuvres.”

While stressing that the vessel encroached only partially and only momentarily, Juan made it clear that a close eye would be kept on all foreign vessels near Argentine waters and within the restricted zone in particular.

There was little more to report, Juan insisted, with formal searching still due to begin later in the day. “The sphere will be found,” he promised, “and it will be opened.”

Some journalists applauded this closing remark, full of hope that their nation would indeed soon recover the world-famous Kerguelen sphere.

The more astute and experienced journalists in attendance, however, were more appreciative of the nuance of the entire announcement. By making such a statement via a Coast Guard rather than a high-ranking military or government official, the Argentine government were calling the Americans out without recklessly escalating the situation. But by announcing the American encroachment publicly at all, they were also showing their refusal to be pushed around and their willingness to conduct their business openly in front of a world that was highly suspicious of the American government’s motives, now more so than ever.

Out at the seafront a few miles east of the Municipal Hall, people were already gathering for another day of sea-watching. More had turned out on Saturday than Friday; rather than fading with time, local interest had increased further with Friday night’s double revelation. It was too early in the day to accurately predict Sunday’s final turnout, but Juan’s confirmation that the official search would begin shortly was almost certain to draw by far the largest crowd yet.

Even at this early hour Miramar looked like a postcard-perfect version of itself in its heyday, with the beach already filling up and even more opportunistic salesman hawking their goods. One had

particular success with his “Ahora Ahora Ahora” T-shirts, a direct and hugely popular twist on the “Now Now Now” version worn by so many passersby.

Like the persistent news crews who had barely left the Birchwood drive-in since the initial IDA leak, the people with their folding chairs lined up in the very front row along Miramar’s promenade wall had been present in their sought-after spots for a string of unbroken days and nights. Local café owners protected some of these spots during meal and bathroom breaks in exchange for their holders’ regular business. These front-row dwellers were the sea-watchers whose gut feelings had set in quickest.

The rapid series of revelations during the week had seen hope turn to expectation, and Thursday’s post-letter air of excitement had since been consumed by an almost triumphant breeze of inevitability.

Many of the children looking out to sea from atop their parents’ shoulders were too young to understand what was going on. Many of their parents held no pretence of knowing what might follow.

One young father stepped fortuitously into the front row with a daughter of 4 or 5 years on his shoulders, invited forward by an elderly man who shifted his chair along to create the space. “Thank you, sir,” the young man said.

The older man smiled warmly. “What is your name?” he asked the little girl.

“Julia,” she said confidently.

“Julia; a lovely name. I am Miguel.”

“Hello, Miguel,” Julia said.

“Fernando,” her father said, extending his hand.

Miguel shook it. “A good name,” he smiled.

“And a good day,” Fernando said, looking up at the sun.

The old man joined him in surveying the sky. “Most certainly it is. I have been here for four days now, and this is the best of them.”

“Why have you been here for four days?” Julia asked, in a similar tone to the one she had used to ask her father why they were

coming back to the coast again after eight boring hours spent watching waves on Saturday.

“Because there is a sphere in that ocean,” Miguel said gently, “and we are going to see it come out.”

D minus 23

FLIGHT AEL-122

DENVER TO FRANKFURT

Sunday morning and afternoon had been so hectic that Emma, typically a reluctant flier, felt relieved to finally settle in the comfort of her first-class seat for the flight to Europe.

Huge traffic problems on the way to Denver caused most of the stress, with it looking likely for some time that they wouldn't make it to the airport in time. They did — barely — only for relief to turn to frustration when their flight to Frankfurt was delayed for three hours.

The first-class lounge at least gave Dan some privacy from the well-meaning but tiring tourists and businesspeople who begged him for photos and sometimes autographs. Emma assured him there would be no such delay in Frankfurt, where Timo Fiore was ready to meet them with his private jet for the final leg of their journey to his lakeside residence near Milan.

Midway through the trying drive to Denver, Emma had endured an awkward twenty minutes in the car with Dan while Clark visited

their father's hospital to check in on him and give the staff new contact information since there would be no one at home for a week. Though Clark didn't ask Dan if he wanted to go inside and Dan showed no sign of wishing to, Emma didn't want to pry.

Dan, alone in the back seat, cut himself off from the world by listening to something through his headphones and reading every word of the Milan guidebook Clark had bought for him the day before. He kept his headphones on when Clark returned to the car.

Clark cracked his knuckles and grasped the wheel. "Okay," he said to himself, setting off for Denver.

"Does he know you're going to Italy?" Emma asked.

"My dad?"

"Yeah."

Clark shook his head.

"Does he know anything about the leak?"

"He doesn't know anything about anything," Clark said. "He's totally out of it."

"But Dan said he's not in a coma."

"He's not. He was, but he's not. According to the doctors he was officially in a coma for eighteen days. Then they called it a vegetative state, and now he's "minimally conscious". Obviously they know what they're talking about, but he doesn't seem much different to me from last time I was home."

"When was that?"

"Nine weeks ago. I've been doing three-month shifts in Iraq with three weeks at home in-between, but this is the second time in a row I've had to come back early."

"Why did you have to come home early last time?"

"My dad," Clark said, like he didn't understand how Emma couldn't work that out. "That time I was scared because we didn't know if he'd make it, but this time I was just angry. Seriously... if I'd been sitting next to Dan when Richard Walker named him as the guy who made up a fake leak, I would have beaten the shit out of him. But by the time I got home I was more worried than angry, and

then when he showed us that letter I realised that he actually had found something. Something real.”

“Yeah,” Emma said. She didn’t know what else to say; this was already the most she’d ever gotten out of Clark.

“But enough about me,” he said. As Emma prepared to answer whatever Clark was going to ask about her life, he instead reached out to turn the radio on. “Is that a banjo?” he asked, screwing up his face as the guy on the radio sang about old boots and stitches.

“I think it’s a mandolin,” Emma said.

Clark changed the station to live coverage of some sporting event Emma didn’t know or care about.

When the radio cut to commercials, Emma couldn’t keep her thoughts to herself any longer. “How come no one talks about what happened to your dad?” she asked.

Clark replied without blinking: “He doesn’t know how to process it.”

“You mean Dan?”

He nodded.

Emma hesitated again before her next question. She looked at Clark, who was checking on the unusually silent Dan via the rearview mirror. “So what did happen?” she asked, eventually getting it out.

“There was a crash,” Clark said. He inhaled sharply through his nose. “A bunch of asshole joyriders lost control of the car they’d stolen, mounted the pavement, and drove right into him. Massive injuries to his head and spine. There was a little kid on a bike who says my dad pushed her out of the car’s way and took the hit, but no one else saw it.”

“She wouldn’t make that up,” Emma said.

“I know, but it does kinda sound like one of those things people sometimes tell you to make you feel better. You know, the whole “he died a hero” type thing. Anyway, that was nine weeks ago. Nine weeks and two days.”

“So he’s been on life support for nine weeks?” Emma asked. She

didn't know much about comas or minimal consciousness but still knew that nine weeks was a long time.

Clark shook his head. "His heart and lungs work fine. The only physical help he really needs is a feeding tube. The doctors said he has a sleep cycle now. That was the main change since the last time I spoke to them."

"And what do they think about his chances of, you know..."

"Everyone's actually pretty positive now. At first I thought it might have been better if he hadn't made it through the crash, because they were telling me he probably wouldn't recover. I know that sounds bad, but I didn't want the hope to kill Dan, too."

Emma didn't say anything.

"But then they started noticing progress. They told me that people with traumatic brain injuries can sometimes recover function after being vegetative for a year, so he's already way ahead of that."

Emma didn't push for what the doctors or Clark meant by "recover function." He had told her enough for now.

"Go on," Clark suddenly said.

"Go on what?"

"Yes!" he yelled, knocking on the wheel four times with his knuckle and even taking Dan's attention from his book.

Emma heard the radio announcer say something about a touchdown. She looked at Clark smiling like he hadn't just been talking about what he'd just been talking about.

In a million years, she would never understand him.



Emma learned seconds before take-off that this was Dan's first ever flight. The fact that he was intrigued and awed rather than scared helped settle her own nerves.

Dan spoke confidently about how air travel had never been safer while Clark chimed in with his own observation that "the flying side

of things” had been worked out a hundred years ago and that the real progress was being able to use the internet at 30,000 feet.

As soon as the plane levelled out at its cruising altitude, Dan switched his earplugs for his headphones and told Emma and Clark that he was going to get some sleep. He had secured the window seat without argument, while Clark had insisted on the aisle for both the space to stretch his legs and the ability to make sure no “weirdos” could get too close to Emma or Dan.

“Have you seen one of these things?” he asked Emma a little while later.

Emma looked at the cover of the in-flight magazine in his hands and saw the main headline: “Say Hello To Funscreen!”

“Those things are creepy,” she said.

“Creepy? They’re great! I had one on my flight home and it got me a two-course meal and three beers, all free. At first I had to do the calibration thing to activate the movies and everything, but then it said that if I kept going and participated in a few tests I could get free stuff. It showed me trailers for new TV shows and movies so that the studios knew what worked and what didn’t. That’s what it said, anyway.”

“That stuff wasn’t free,” Emma said. “It was your payment for taking part.”

Clark shrugged. “Fine by me.”

Emma asked to see the magazine then quickly read the article. It explained that from now on the entertainment features in economy class would require passengers to activate the Funscreen mounted to the seat in front. A simple graphic showed that the Funscreen would scan each passenger’s passport to confirm their age and sex, with the small print below stating that the system would then scan its extensive database for existing information on their interests as provided by Funscreen’s associated partners. This enabled precisely targeted ads to play before and during in-flight entertainment content.

Emma knew about the ad targeting, which had been Funscreen’s

original function. She knew the company started out in the UK but suffered from a major backlash when William Godfrey's predecessor trialled a scheme which made it compulsory for welfare claimants in certain areas to install a Funscreen in their home and view ad placements to "earn" their welfare payments. The Funscreen's pinpoint eye-tracking cameras ensured that claimants couldn't look away from their screen until permitted to do so, which understandably bred intense resentment and eventually led to organised non-participation.

But from Clark's comments, which were backed up by the article, it seemed to Emma that Funscreen had found a better and less controversial way to monetise their technology by essentially turning it into the ultimate tool for online focus groups. Just like ads could be perfectly targeted to individual consumers, movie studios and network commissioners could now get concrete data on how different demographics reacted to different shows. Such reactions were as concrete as could be; measured by eye movement, which pixels a viewer focused on for how long, when they laughed, and so on. It was the same tech she had read about before, more sensibly and less invasively applied.

"Everything is free in first class anyway, though," Clark said, fiddling with his standard entertainment console. "Right?"

Emma nodded.

"Sweet."

With Dan sleeping soundly, Emma leaned over him to look out of the window. She saw vast fields and few signs of life, like a map without writing.

She began to think about how small the world really was, and how little basis in reality things like borders and politics and PR really had. Billy Kendrick had been right, she thought: it was all about power. Richard Walker, like Hans Kloster before him, had dedicated decades of his life to hiding a global truth for the sake of national power. Men like Kloster and Walker had shaped humanity's recent past, but they were no longer in control of its

future.

Now, the truth was out of their hands.

And soon, for better or for worse, the power would be, too.

Part 4

THE LAKE

*“Truth will ultimately prevail
where pains are taken to bring it to light.”*

George Washington

MONDAY

D minus 22

FRANKFURT AIRPORT
FRANKFURT, GERMANY

As a sizeable but orderly crowd of Germans greeted Dan's arrival with English chants of "Truth, Truth, Now Now Now!", Emma encouraged him to smile for as many photos as he could manage and to pose with some of the children.

She also encouraged him to say "danke" before continuing towards the pre-arranged meeting point with Timo. Dan said it, and those close enough to hear smiled in appreciation of his effort, however limited it had been.

Guided by written instructions on her phone, Emma then led the way to Timo. Dan spotted him first, walking towards them with a smile on his face.

"I'm so glad you could make it," Timo said to Dan, the excitement in his voice leaving no doubt that he meant it. He quickly greeted Clark and Emma, who he'd already spoken to several times, before returning to Dan. "You've done more to bring us within touching distance of the truth in two weeks than I've managed in

ten years.”

Dan shrugged modestly, slightly intimidated by Timo’s presence. “I was in the right place at the right time,” he said.

“You were the right person in the right place at the right time,” Timo corrected him, holding his hand in the direction of his private jet. “Very few people would have taken the steps you took.”

The group of four walked towards the jet and ascended the steps. “Mind your head,” Timo said, grinning. “The door wasn’t built for giants.”

It didn’t take long for Clark to like Timo; he had an easy way about him and had after all paid for their flights and gone out of his way to accommodate them. The aircraft’s stylish interior was much smaller than Clark had imagined, with space for just eight passengers.

Dan sat next to Timo, leaving Emma and Clark to choose their own seats.

Emma felt more at ease than she had on the first flight thanks to the lack of ocean between Frankfurt and Milan.

Clark enjoyed his legroom as he looked down on Germany, where he had long ago spent many happy days stationed in Stuttgart.

Dan and Timo, meanwhile, talked extensively about the bigger picture. Dan’s feelings of intimidation quickly faded as he came to appreciate just how deep Timo’s interest was.

Timo answered all of Dan’s questions about his investment in SETI observatories, promising to take Dan to the largest of them — only a few hundred miles from their lakeside base — at some point before the end of his stay.

Timo then asked some questions of his own, chiefly seeking Dan’s view on why no US government workers had yet come forward to claim his astronomical \$100,000,000 reward.

“There’s no one to come forward,” Dan said. “No one else knows.”

“No one?”

Dan shook his head.

“So there can be no more evidence?”

“We don’t need more evidence. What we need now is the proof.”

“The sphere?” Timo asked. “But how sure are you that it’s still there? Richard Walker could have found it, or Kloster. He lived another nineteen years after giving that letter to Walker.”

Dan had contended with this pessimistic scenario several times, but he’d always tried to push it out of his mind before it could settle. The previous night, though, with his mind still rattled by the mass suicide at Hemshaw, the thought had troubled him for hours. The upside of this was that his mind eventually came up with an answer that quelled his doubts.

“They couldn’t have found it by themselves,” Dan said. “They would have needed a boat, and a crew, and permission to be in Argentina’s waters, and all sorts of other things. But the crew by itself is enough to seal it, because one of them would have come forward by now; whatever Walker might have paid for their silence, it can’t have been anything like what you’re offering for the truth. And even if they weren’t strictly government employees, they would have still tried to claim the reward. Especially now that Walker is pretty much a pariah.”

“So you do think there’s a slight chance that the sphere isn’t still in the sea?” Timo asked, surprising Dan by taking that from his answer.

“No. I was just saying that even if you think there’s a chance Walker found it, it would still turn up.”

Timo paused. He looked out of the window, Italy now beneath them. “I have to say, Dan, I fear that it’s either in the sea or lost for good.”

“It’s in the sea,” Dan reassured him. “Argentina didn’t even start the real search until yesterday.”

Timo nodded, as though trying to convince himself. “My mother used to say I worried for no reason,” he said, massaging his chin with his thumb and index finger. “Let’s hope she was right.”

D minus 21

SEAFRONT

MIRAMAR, ARGENTINA

Slightly fewer citizens crowded the promenade at Miramar on Monday morning than had on Sunday, with many of the weekend sea-watchers now back at work.

Miguel Perez, an elderly man who had held a coveted front-row spot for five days, continued his patient vigil. Though the young father and daughter who kept him company on Sunday were unfortunately nowhere to be seen today, Miguel had a smile for the TV reporter who fought her way through the crowd to ask him for a few words.

Frequent news reports from the same point of the promenade had made Miguel a common sight to viewers throughout Argentina, and this modicum of celebrity was enough to earn him a gift from the reporter: a pair of binoculars, gaudily branded with her station's "ADLTV" logo but markedly more powerful than the plastic pair Miguel had purchased from a street vendor on Friday.

The brief interview with Miguel offered a change of pace in the

Argentine news coverage, which otherwise focused on the various techniques employed by the naval teams who spent much of Sunday searching for the sphere and would soon resume for another long shift.

Juan Silva, the regional Coast Guard now firmly established as the visible face of the search and something of a de facto spokesman for the entire Argentine government, had appeared on television minutes earlier to describe some of the more sophisticated underwater imaging techniques being used. He also revealed that experienced divers were operating in the restricted zone as part of the official search team.

But most excitingly for viewers and those at the seafront, Juan confirmed that powerful magnets would be used for the first time on Monday afternoon to aid in the search.

“These are exciting times for Argentina,” Juan said, “and exciting times for the world.”

Whether in Miramar, Birchwood, or Milan, few could disagree.

D minus 20

LAKE MAGGIORE
ISPRA, ITALY

Timo Fiore's regular Italian residence lay in the town of Varese, thirty miles northwest of Milan. The lakeside villa in Ispra where Dan's group would spend the next six nights was nestled on the southeast shore of Lake Maggiore, a further eleven miles or so west of Varese.

"Lakes are way better than mountains," Emma said as they walked through the elevated villa's back door and out to its crystal blue pool, the edge of which was a literal stone's throw from the lake and a long way from Colorado.

Dan looked around, trying to make sense of the luxurious surroundings. The best he could do was liken the scene to something from a TV commercial for exotic honeymoons.

The majesty continued inside, where an ultramodern metal and glass kitchen sat in stark contrast to a rustic main living area with polished wood panels on the ceiling, irregular tiling on the floor, and exposed grey brickwork on the walls.

There were five bedrooms, each with high ceilings and three with wall-length glass doors allowing near-infinite natural light. Clark joked that the larger of the two master bedrooms was bigger than their house in Birchwood. After a few seconds, he stopped laughing and realised that it actually was.

The time difference would take some serious getting used to, so Timo showed the group where everything was and prepared to leave them for the night.

“You’re not staying?” Dan asked.

The question caught Timo off guard. “I hadn’t planned on it,” he said. “But I suppose I could.”

“We’ll be fine,” Clark butted in. “But if your other place is better than this, I want to see it.”

“Tomorrow,” Timo smiled. “And Emma, we can iron out a plan in the morning for the media activities.”

“Yup,” she said.

Dan didn’t know or particularly care what specific media activities Timo was talking about — he trusted Emma completely and couldn’t see any room for ulterior motive’s on Timo’s part — but he was keen to nail down a day and time for his visit to the SETI observatory. He asked Timo about it.

“Maybe Wednesday?” Timo suggested unsurely, looking at Emma rather than Dan. She shrugged. “Hopefully Wednesday,” he said to Dan. “Thursday at the latest.”

“Sounds good,” Dan said, excited already.

Timo told them all that the kitchen had been stocked for their arrival, joking that he’d told his property manager to “prepare for three American-sized appetites.” Emma and Dan laughed, but Clark, whose daily caloric intake was usually greater than theirs combined, was glad to hear it.

After an outdoor dinner of burgers and fries timed to coincide with a sunset no one knew how to describe, Clark was the first to stand up and stretch. “Jaws 2?” he suggested, inspired by the vast expanse of Lake Maggiore.

Emma and Dan both agreed and walked into the welcoming living room.

"It's region-locked," Clark said a few minutes later, having tried and failed to get the entertainment system to accept his American disc.

Dan tried powering the system off and turning it back on with the disc already in, but this predictably made no difference. While he and Clark argued about what to try next, Emma picked up the remote and entered a button combination she found within seconds by searching online for the entertainment system's model number. A blue-screen menu appeared, in English, allowing Emma to select Region 1.

"Man of the house," she said, mockingly pumping her fist.

Halfway through the movie, during a lull in the action before the next big moment, Clark turned to Emma. "You know that the lake outside is salt water, right?" he said.

Emma kept her eyes on the screen. "Shut up, it is not."

"And you know that sharks can jump when they're hungry, right?"

"Clark," Dan said, "shut up."

"What? It's not my fault if you're both scared of sharks."

"If you're not scared of sharks, you're an idiot," Dan said with authority.

Clark screwed up his face and shrugged. "I'm not scared of anything."

Emma laughed out loud, then kept laughing. Still in charge of the remote, she paused the movie to avoid missing anything. "Hurr, I'm not scared of anything," she said, aping Clark's words and tone. "That's the kind of line most big brothers spit when they're 10, not 30. What's next, who can hold his breath the longest?"

"Easy there," Clark said. "There's only one person in this cabin on the wrong side of 30, and their last name ain't McCarthy."

"Do you want to wake up with the sharks?" Emma said, her expression somewhere between involuntary amusement and

offence. "Because that's how you wake up with the sharks." She pressed play to resume the movie.

"I know something he's scared of", Dan said after a few seconds.

"And what's that?"

"Aliens."

"Pfft," Clark dismissed.

"You always have been. That's why you always told me they weren't real; you didn't want them to be."

"Bullshit." Clark looked at Emma and tilted his head towards the TV, encouraging her to press play again.

"Really?" Dan said. "So was Dad lying when he told me about the time when you were 9, and you and Tom Nelson snuck into the movies to see *Alien: Resurrection* then ran home crying?"

"Do you want me to kick your ass?" Clark said, standing up.

Dan shrugged. "If you want. Your tough-guy card expires when the aliens arrive, so you might as well get some use out of it while you can."

Emma had never seen or heard Dan be anything like this cocky or caustic; it really was as though being together in an unfamiliar place had regressed his and Clark's relationship into something like a teenage pissing contest.

Clark couldn't help but grin at Dan's comeback. He cracked his knuckles and sat down.

"The real ones aren't hostile, anyway," Emma chimed in, trying to put the pointless discussion to bed.

"Well..." Dan said teasingly.

Emma sighed.

"Well what?" Clark asked.

Dan sat up and looked over at him. "Did you hear what I said on *Focus 20/20*? The thing about sharks and aliens?"

"What thing?"

"Drop it," Emma said to both of them, but mainly Dan.

Dan ignored her. "Basically that it makes sense to be scared of sharks, because you can stay out of the water. But with aliens,

there's nowhere to run. Because, you know, you can't hide from the sky."

"Seriously!" Emma snapped. "Shut up. You made your point."

"It's okay," Dan said. "He's not scared of anything."

Clark stood up and walked out to the pool, muttering as he went: "When did you turn into such an asshole?"

"They're definitely not hostile," Dan said to Emma. "I was just —"

"Shhh." Emma pressed play and watched the rest of Jaws 2 in silence.

Outside, under a perfect crescent moon, Clark looked out at Lake Maggiore and imagined how incredible it must have been to see the sphere levitate out of Lake Namtso in Tibet.

Dan messing with his head and talking about hostility had Clark wondering for the first time whether it might be better if the Kerguelen sphere didn't turn up in Argentina, where he knew the government was now using powerful magnets and sophisticated underwater imaging to aid their search.

But Clark quickly came to his senses. He knew, assuming Hans Kloster had interpreted it correctly, that one of the two surviving plaques would tell the world when the Messengers would return. Whether this ended up being advance notice or advance warning, Clark decided it was better to know when they were coming.

He stared up at the moon as it dangled on an invisible string, glistening on the lake like a disco ball.

Friendly or hostile... it was better to know.

D minus 19

WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON, D.C.

As the sun went down over the White House, President Slater and Jack Neal remained huddled around Slater's desk.

The sheet of A4 paper facing Jack, complete with the title "IDEAS" roughly underlined several times, looked like it would have been more at home in a high-school study group than an emergency meeting between the President of the United States and her most trusted and media-savvy advisor.

All diplomatic attempts to slow the Argentine search had proven fruitless, with the US encroachment into the restricted zone late on Saturday night having seemingly stiffened Argentina's resolve and closed the door on the already slim prospect of cooperation.

Prior to that incident, President Slater had been blindsided by the mass suicide at Hemshaw. The tragedy initially acted as a macabre distraction, tearing the media's attention away from Friday night's unwelcome double whammy of Blitz News revelations.

What had started with a worried whisper from Jack some ten days ago in Paris was now a 24-hour nightmare for President Slater, who found it nigh on impossible to conduct her regular daily duties with Dan McCarthy's media circus still going strong and Richard Walker's cloud of lies hanging over her.

The whole thing was Walker's fault, and Slater stewed over this thought every few minutes.

Friday night's dual development — absolute proof that Walker ordered Blitz Media to harass McCarthy and absolute proof that McCarthy had been telling the truth from the start — hastened Argentina's response. Zonal restrictions on Friday turned into a full-blown official search over the weekend, and Monday brought with it the introduction of the kind of powerful magnets that Hans Kloster himself had suggested using to recover the sphere.

Slater's chief hope now was that Richard Walker, whether before or after Kloster's death in 2007, had already found the Kerguelen sphere and destroyed it as Kloster urged in the letter. This hope was helping Slater through her days, but she knew that she couldn't afford to bank on it. With that in mind, she lifted her eyes from the depressingly blank paper and looked up at Jack.

"Forget ideas for reopening a dialogue with Buenos Aires," she said. "Let's focus on how we can find the sphere on our own without causing an international incident."

"We can't," Jack said definitively.

"Then let's focus on how we can stop them from finding it without causing an—"

"We can't," Jack repeated.

Slater knew he was right. "Then we have to assume they're going to find it," she said after a few painful seconds of thought. "And we have to assume they'll find a way to open it without damaging the plaques."

"That's the worst-case scenario," Jack said. "The likelihood is —"

"It doesn't matter how unlikely it is," Slater interrupted.

“There’s a chance. What we need to do now is find out exactly what’s written on the two plaques. Because even if the truth can’t be kept down, we need to know what it is before it comes out. Otherwise we’re chasing shadows.”

Jack pursed his lips. “I don’t know what you want me to do. We already know there’s a timescale and an alien solar system. The only parts we don’t know are the details.”

“We have to know exactly what the Argentines are looking for, Jack. Because if they actually find it...”

Jack raised his eyebrows, still searching for a tangible instruction.

“Find Walker,” Slater said. “Kloster might have told him more than he wrote in the letter.”

“I’ve been trying to find Walker for days! He didn’t show up for work today, again, and he hasn’t been home since the weekend. I don’t know where the hell he is.”

“What about Gold?”

“Ben Gold?” Jack said. “What about him?”

“When you went to Colorado on Wednesday — the last time Walker didn’t show up at the IDA — you said it seemed like Gold knew where he was. And he’s bound to be in the same place.”

“Gold won’t talk. He wouldn’t talk then, so he won’t talk now.”

“Jesus Christ, Jack,” Slater moaned, slamming the desk. “Make him talk! Do I really have to explain what’s at stake here?”

“Of course not, but—”

“No buts.”

“But—”

“No. Buts.”

“Valerie, I’ve tried...”

President Slater snatched Jack’s sheet of paper, crumpled it up, and threw it towards the door. “Get out,” she said, deliberately looking away. “And don’t come back until you’ve found him.”

TUESDAY

D minus 18

LAKE MAGGIORE
ISPRA, ITALY

As Dan walked through to the lakeside villa's rustic living room shortly after 7am, he was unsurprised to see Emma already there and to hear Clark still snoring from his chosen bed some three rooms away.

Emma and Dan spent a lazy morning watching Blitz News, the only American news station the TV had. Clark joined them midway through the 9am cycle.

To Emma's surprise, there was no sign of any hangover from the previous night's falling-out over who was scared of what and whether the aliens might be hostile. She didn't want to question the morning's tranquillity for fear of breaking it, but she couldn't square it with her own experience of family arguments that ran and ran and ran.

"So what's the plan?" Clark asked Emma after glancing at the TV long enough to know that nothing huge had happened overnight. "What kind of media stuff are we doing?"

"We're going to Timo's place in Varese first. He's invited some press."

"What's his angle, anyway?"

"He doesn't have one," Emma said. She opened her hands and looked around the room. "I mean, he has all the money in the world. He wants what he says he wants: Disclosure."

"Yeah," Dan said. "He's thrown tens of millions of dollars at observatories and scholarships and conferences, even before the bounty he put out after the leak. It's not just talk with Timo; he's legit."

Clark seemed satisfied with their answers. And though he didn't consider himself an especially good judge of character, Timo had looked him in the eye and spoke with confidence throughout their initial meeting the day before. "So what's our angle?" he asked. "Why do we need to do this stuff today?"

"Hearts and minds," Emma said. "Obviously the leak is already a huge global story, but over here Dan McCarthy is just the name of the guy who found the folder. No one really knows who Dan McCarthy is."

"That's pretty much what I want, though," Dan said. "I wish it was like that at home."

"No no no," Emma said. "We're way past that. We're at the point where you're the figurehead of a movement that is going to literally destroy the status quo, for better or worse."

"Better," Dan said.

"Right. But given where we are now, the more people who know and care about you, the safer you are." Emma hesitated, searching for a way to express in words the reasons that felt strong in her mind but weren't exactly clear-cut. After a few seconds, the lightning bolt hit her: "Remember a few years ago when that African lion got shot and everyone was angry about it for a week or two?"

"Cedric the lion?" Dan said.

"It was Cecil," Emma said, "but see! You knew which one I

meant. Because even though lions get shot all the time, Cecil had a name and a backstory.”

“Didn’t exactly do him much good,” Clark said, grinning at his own dark joke.

“Yeah,” Emma conceded, “but it would have if people thought he was in danger before it happened. I dunno... imagine if they’d announced there was going to be a big trophy hunt where he was, and that everyone already knew his name and his story. No hunter would have wanted any piece of that backlash.”

“It’s kind of different, though,” Dan said, understanding what Emma was driving at but not quite seeing the analogy.

She shrugged. “Basically, we want to make you untouchable. And the best way to do that is to turn your safety into an international issue.”

Clark looked at Dan. “Makes sense.”

Dan nodded. Untouchable... he liked the sound of that.

“So when do we have to leave?” Clark asked, now looking at Emma.

“Eleven,” Emma said, “which is later than we planned. Some wires got crossed and Timo thought it would be okay to send a car for us while he waited at home.”

“And it’s not?” Dan said.

“No. You’re not getting in any vehicle without Timo. Otherwise it could be a fake driver or some kind of security risk. You’re a high-value individual now. We have to think about kidnappings and all sorts of things. But I know that Timo wouldn’t get in a car that wasn’t safe, so that’s how we’re playing it.”

“Listen,” Clark said, a deep, serious tone in his voice. “I protect HVIs for a living. In Iraq. If I can put my life on the line doing bodyguard work for rich assholes I don’t even know, I think I can take care of my own brother.”

“Of course you can,” Emma said. “just as soon as we get out of Timo’s car. If you weren’t here then I would have had to hire a bodyguard, so this isn’t a slight on you.”

Clark accepted Emma's reasoning and made himself a Clark-sized breakfast, wary of the chance that there might be no time for lunch.

Dan and Emma had lighter meals before getting dressed and prepared for the day ahead.

Timo arrived ahead of schedule, apparently unperturbed by the change of plan. "I would have got here earlier," he said, "but I got kidnapped twice on the way."

Dan and Clark laughed at his joke; Emma was just glad there were no hard feelings.

During the luxurious drive to his home in Varese, Timo asked if the group had seen the violent protests overnight. They hadn't, having only watched the typically insular Blitz News.

Timo described the protests as the worst yet. He said that Thursday's initial fiery protests had sparked a huge police response which quelled the disorder on Friday and Saturday. Sunday was worse, but still not as bad as Thursday. Those Thursday protests, which had extended across much of southern Europe, were the ones featured on ACN. Dan didn't like the sound of scenes even worse than those.

"Yesterday morning," Timo said, "news came out that a protestor died on Sunday after being beaten by the police. You can imagine the reaction. The Italian government is less popular right now than I can ever remember, with these spending cuts and spending cuts and spending cuts, and now we have this cocktail of grievances. From the start we had the real demonstrators — your Now Movement — as well as some of the more "political" protestors with the masks and the bricks and the "actions speak louder than words" outlook. But last night we also had the angry youth turning against the police, as you see too often at home. We can at least be glad there were no more deaths."

Dan didn't know what to say.

"I think you should express solidarity with the protesters but call for an end to the violence," Timo said. "Not because it will change

anything, but because it shows that you care about our people.”

Emma shook her head firmly as she replied. “I don’t think we should touch it,” she said. “It’s not our fight.”

Timo turned to Dan. “Dan, I really think you should consider my local—”

“I’m going to do whatever Emma says,” Dan said, cutting Timo off before any kind of real argument could start. “No disrespect. I know she’s not from here, but she got me here.”

“Okay,” Timo said, his eyes locked on Dan’s as though surprised and impressed by his frankness. Timo then turned back to Emma with no hint of a bruised ego, and together they planned the smaller details of Dan’s two scheduled appearances.



The first of the day’s media events was refreshingly low-key, with Timo introducing Dan to a small crowd of invited journalists outside his stately residence on the outskirts of Varese.

Dan said what Emma told him to say: that he opted to come to Italy while things cooled down because he was getting too much invasive media coverage at home. “I didn’t mind most of the coverage,” he said, “but when it got to the stage that government employees were blackmailing media corporations into bugging my house, it was time for a break.”

After a few more questions, some of which had to go through Timo, the makeshift billionaire translator shared a joke with a journalist in Italian which sparked laughter throughout the group.

Emma butted in. “Dan will only answer questions directly addressed to him in English,” she said, not overly concerned that Timo might be making a fool of Dan but nevertheless unwilling to let Dan answer questions that might lose nuance in translation and enable him to be misrepresented in later coverage.

In the car after this short appearance, Timo explained to Emma that the joke he told was at Richard Walker’s expense. She made it

clear that the subject matter wasn't the point.

"Miss Ford, you have to appreciate that few Italians speak fluent English. Italy is not like Germany in this regard."

"I don't care where we are," Emma said. "And don't call me Miss Ford. When we get to the next place, you're going to tell the press that they ask their questions in English or they don't ask them at all. You can translate the answers back into Italian all you want, but the questions will be in English. Is that clear?"

"As you wish," Timo said.

Light tension circled in the car for the rest of the much longer journey to the next appearance.

Dan sometimes wondered whether Emma realised how firmly some of her words came across. He was no master of nuanced communication, but even he understood that saying "is that clear?" to someone had an obvious air of "I'm in charge". After a few moments of thought, he decided that "I'm in charge" was almost certainly what Emma was shooting for.

As the car slowed to park at its destination, Dan didn't know where he was or who he was about to meet. He looked out of the window and saw what looked like a factory, with a group of energetic-looking men and women in smart clothes waiting to greet him. "Who's that?" he asked, meaning all and none of them in particular.

Timo leaned over to point at a man in the middle, who looked to be the oldest of the group. "Angelo diMasso," he said. "MEP."

"MEP?"

"Member of the European Parliament. It's in Strasbourg. I've known Angelo for a long time. He was elected last year on an anti-austerity ticket."

"Is he famous?" Dan asked.

"Neither famous nor powerful," Timo said candidly. "Angelo is well-liked by those who know him, but those who know him are few. On the plus side: he is one of the only elected officials anywhere in the world to question the official narrative on extraterrestrials."

Dan looked at Emma, then back to Timo. "Is that why we're here?" he asked, meaning no disrespect.

"That and Cecil the lion," Emma said.

Timo couldn't hide his confusion but saw expressions of muted understanding on Dan and Clark's faces.

Emma handed Dan a small card with some bullet-point quotes he had to hit. Other than these statements, which Emma described as "crucial" and urged Dan to fit into his response however he had to, she told him to stick to the same basic lines as earlier. She would be by his side, anyway, and none of the handful of news crews in attendance were broadcasting live.

Dan looked over the bullet-points. "Why am I saying this stuff? And don't just say Cecil the lion."

"Remember when we watched the Coast Guard in Argentina talking about the encroachment and I told you it was brilliant? They made their point and called the US out, but they did it without escalating. That's all we're doing. Plus Cecil."

"So why does the speech say 'Godfrey and China'? What's the Chinese premier's name."

"Ding Ziyang," Emma said. "But that's the point: if you have to ask, so does everyone else. That's why we just say China. The news does it, too. Even Slater and Walker do it. They talk about each other by name all the time but only ever talk about China as a country."

"I don't want to suck up to Godfrey, though," Dan said, moving on to his other misgiving. "I hate him."

Emma shrugged. "Lay into his politics and his smugness if you want," she said, "this crowd will eat that up, anyway. Just make sure you mention him."

Timo stepped outside first and walked ahead with Dan. Clark stayed closely by their side while Emma kept her distance. Timo introduced Dan to his old friend Angelo diMasso who in turn introduced Dan to his political associates, whoever they were.

Dan answered soft-ball questions as Angelo showed him around the vast factory. Timo stayed outside alone, not wishing to take any

of the attention from Dan and fully aware that precious few left-wing Italians were as tolerant of his excessive wealth as Angelo was.

Midway through the tour Dan asked quietly whether Angelo owned the place. Angelo looked confused and surprised that Dan hadn't been briefed on where he was. He then explained, equally quietly, that Dan was inside the largest worker-owned factory in northern Italy.

At the end of the tour, during which many workers turned to greet either one or both of them, Angelo and Dan stood outside the building next to its large welcome sign. The cameras positioned themselves and Emma gave Dan the thumbs up to say his piece after Angelo spoke to the media in English, praising Dan's devotion to the truth and his internationalist outlook in the face of "oppressive American forces."

Some of Angelo's language made Clark slightly uneasy, but he knew his role. He stood quietly beside Dan as he began to speak.

"I know that my decision to publish the contents of the Kerguelen folder angered some people in the US government," Dan said, tackling the first of Emma's must-say bullet-points. "But I felt a duty that went beyond considerations of what was strictly legal or what aligned with whose security interests. This is bigger than all of that, which is why I'm so glad that so many people, both at home and abroad, have been so supportive of my actions. I'm particularly grateful that elected officials have reached out, be that Angelo diMasso or William Godfrey.

"I don't agree with any of Godfrey's policies," Dan qualified, making the most of the permission Emma granted him in this regard, "but there's quite clearly a bigger issue at stake here. Unfortunately I was unable to accept an invitation to meet Mr Godfrey. I was also unable to accept an official invitation from the University of Technology in Nanjing, but, again, it's heartening to know that people in China are as captivated by this leak as the rest of the world. I'm glad to have friends in so many places."

Dan looked at his next bullet-point.

“At first I was overwhelmed to become the figurehead of such a major international issue with such huge global implications,” he said, looking back up to the cameras after reading Emma’s notes. “But not now. Now that I have my brother Clark by my side, as well as good people like Angelo and Timo — not to mention powerful governments from London to Beijing — I feel safe. To be honest, it would be hard not to feel safe with so much of the world on my side. Thanks for coming out, and viva l'Italia.”

The journalists cheered Dan’s closing line, as obviously low-hanging as the fruit was. He waved as he walked down the factory’s wide steps.

Dan and Angelo then thanked each other for the mutually beneficial hour’s work before Dan returned to the car. It was already later in the day than Dan realised, so he was glad to hear Timo’s offer of a “real Italian dinner” at his palatial home in Varese.

Dan looked out of the window on the way back to Varese, taking in the unfamiliar Italian scenery. His own words echoed through his head: “it would be hard not to feel safe with so much of the world on my side.”

Emma was right; he felt untouchable.

D minus 17

WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON, D.C.

Jack Neal, having provided President Slater with the address his over-the-phone persuasion techniques managed to extract from Ben Gold, sat again at her desk.

When Slater saw the news footage of Dan McCarthy shaking hands and chatting with Angelo diMasso and his associates while Emma Ford stood behind them at the edge of the picture, she had just one question for Jack: "Why is she parading him around with Italian communists?"

"Because she knows he's untouchable," Jack said, speaking through a confusion of resentment and mentorly pride.

"And?"

"And she wants the rest of us to know it, too."

D minus 16

LAKE MAGGIORE
ISPRA, ITALY

All too full to move after the bona fide feast laid on by Timo in Varese, the trio spent their evening resting at his lakeside villa; Clark under the Italian sky's brilliant moon, Dan and Emma under the living room's polished wood-panel ceiling.

Dan was reading a novel about a manned mission to Europa while Emma listened to Blitz News and reviewed Dan's social media metrics on her phone. As she had been counting on, his Overall Approval Rating stat was so high that no major conservative-leaning outlets even questioned his meeting with Angelo diMasso.

The only type of people still attacking Dan in public were those whose business models depended on contrarianism and invoking outrage. The most-shared critical posts came from Joe Crabbe, the hardline shock-jock still ranting about the "globalist agenda" he first brought up during his clash with Dan on Focus 20/20 a full nine days earlier. Emma's metrics correctly identified that an overwhelming majority of those sharing Joe's posts were doing so

mockingly.

Emma mulled over this near total absence of anti-McCarthy rhetoric with a smile, glad to see that the weight of evidence had resulted in a seismic shift to the point that only a handful of public figures her system identified as “provocateurs” were still making the kind of derisive comments about Dan that had been commonplace in the immediate aftermath of Richard Walker naming him as the source of the leak.

She looked up from her phone and over to Dan, who was still lost in his reading. He hadn’t changed his own story once, she reflected; people had just started to believe it, one by one, as new evidence trickled out. And though he hadn’t so much come out of his shell as been forced out of it, he had dealt admirably with all the demands she had placed on him. He might never be as forceful as she was nor rival Clark’s dominant presence, but Emma was realising now that Dan was as strong as either of them in his own way.

“Phone,” Dan suddenly said, his eyes shooting up to meet Emma’s before the high-pitched sound even registered in her mind.

Emma looked at the screen. “It’s Maria.”

“Janzyck? From ACN?”

Emma nodded and called Dan over to listen in. “Maria?” she said, not pretending to have any idea why she was calling.

“Hi,” Maria said. “I know you’re busy over there, but I got the weirdest call a few minutes ago.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Someone called the network to say they had a big scoop but would only give it directly to me. The network gave them my number, and two minutes later I got the call.”

“What was the scoop?” Emma asked, interrupting before Maria could get to it.

“That’s the thing. There was no scoop. The guy just said what he had to say to get my number, and he only contacted me because he didn’t know how else to reach you. He claimed—”

“Who was it?” Emma pressed, doing the same thing again.

"He claimed to be Ben Gold."

Emma instinctively lowered the phone to her chest and turned to Dan. He stared back at her, speechless.

"I didn't give him your number," Maria said, the voice distant until Emma raised the phone to her ear again, "but I took his. Do you want it?"

"Definitely," Dan blurted out.

Maria laughed nervously. "No one else is listening in, right?"

"No," Emma said. "What's his number."

Maria passed on the number of the man who claimed to be Ben Gold. A minute or so later, Emma was calling it with her own number withheld.

"This is Emma Ford," she said when the man picked up.

"Are you with Dan?"

Dan whispered in Emma's ear: "That's his voice."

"I'll ask the questions," Emma asserted. "Where are you?"

"At work. I'm in my—"

"So you're at your computer?"

"Y-yes," Ben stammered.

"Give me your email address and I'll start a video call."

After a moment's hesitation, Ben did so. Emma ended the voice call and launched a video call using the address Ben provided.

"It was definitely him," Dan said.

Emma didn't say anything. A rotating circle filled her phone's screen as she waited for Ben to accept the call.

"Maybe you typed it in wrong?" Dan said after what felt like too many full rotations. "Try it again."

But as Dan finished speaking, the circle vanished. The screen then flashed white and the next thing Dan saw was a nervous man at a desk, sitting in front of a window which overlooked the familiar streets of Colorado Springs.

"Hello, Mr Gold," Emma said.

Ben Gold visibly gulped and looked into his laptop's embedded webcam. "Hello."



The angle of Emma's phone allowed Dan to see the screen without being picked up by its front-facing camera. Emma had turned the phone to this angle deliberately, so Dan didn't move.

"I think Richard might be lying to me," Ben said, responding directly to Emma's question as to why he was calling. "He didn't show up for work again today, and I can't even reach him at home."

Emma was genuinely lost for words. She didn't know whether to be more surprised that it had taken Ben this long to see through Richard's lies or that he had finally seen through them at all. Even though Ben qualified his suspicion with words like "think" and "might", the fact that he was voicing it in any terms was a sign that the penny had belatedly dropped.

Like most, Emma had never heard of Ben Gold before the leak; and like most, she had since known him only as Richard Walker's loyal number two. Dan had explained more than once that Ben had dedicated his career to the search for evidence of extraterrestrial life and had risen to prominence in related communities, so Emma understood why Walker kept him close. She tried to imagine how Ben must have been feeling now that he finally realised that his trusted boss had been hiding the evidence right under his nose.

"When did you last speak to him?" Emma asked.

"Friday afternoon," Ben said, "at the end of his press conference. So after he knew about the Kloster video, but before the Blitz audio and the folder video."

Emma paid close attention to Ben's face. More than shame or sorrow or regret, she saw fear.

"And now Jack Neal is all over me. Him and President Slater think I know something, just because I'm so close. But Slater signs Richard's cheques, and no one is blaming her."

"Is Jack in Colorado again?" Emma asked, shifting uncomfortably in her seat.

"I hope not. He kept calling me last night, demanding Richard's

real address. I gave him it, but now today he's just called again and told me Richard wasn't there. So now they think I deliberately sent them down the wrong path. Slater is angry at him and he's angry at me. He's threatening me with prison time and visits from "problem solvers" and..." Ben trailed off. He looked broken.

"You really don't know where Richard is?"

"No!" Ben said, more forcefully than he meant. "This search should be the high point of my career," he went on, mumbling and rushing his words to the point of near incoherence bubbling, "but I know it's going to be the end of it. Whatever I say, my reputation is gone. My name is dirt."

"Not necessarily," Emma said, exaggerating her empathy in an effort to loosen Ben's lips. "We just need to think about what's happening. Can you think of a motive Richard might have that no one has picked up on?"

Ben shook his head, evoking a resigned child. "It has to be what the letter says. The things he says about China aren't an act; we've argued about them enough times. You're going to think I'm stupid, but I honestly think he believes he's doing the right thing. It's not like there's any glory in this for him. And look at the things he said on Friday; those Kloster quotes about "legacy before ego" and "serve posterity, not power." I watched the press conference back today, and after what came out on Friday night it almost seems like that speech was Richard's own confession."

"And what about the robbery?" Emma said, delighted by how freely Ben was talking. "Does he really think the guy who dropped the folder had something to do with China?"

Ben hesitated, for much longer than before. "Well, I don't know if this was another part of his mind games to make me think the Kerguelen folder was a hoax, but all through the day of the robbery he kept talking about the other documents that had been stolen."

"What kind of other documents?"

"I don't know. He said he didn't want to worry me with it, but I've never seen him so worried about anything. You have to

remember: Richard has been consulting on top-secret projects for longer than you or McCarthy have been alive. There's no telling what kind of things were in there."

Already interested in these "other documents", Emma was now positively intrigued. "Do you have any ideas at all what kind of things might have been in there?" she pressed. "What else did he talk about? Tell me something. Anything."

"Well, he knew from the start that it was nothing to do with Slater."

"What was nothing to do with Slater?"

"The robbery. I suggested she might have been involved, half-seriously, because Richard always used to say she was looking for an excuse to get rid of him. He doesn't see eye-to-eye with many people these days but with Slater it's genuine hatred, both ways. But he said there was a folder about Slater and that if someone had found it on her behalf, he would already have been in custody. He told me not to ask any more questions about the Slater folder, so I didn't."

"And the other folders?"

"I don't know," Ben said, over-stressing the word "know" in a way that amplified his helplessness. "I just don't want to go down for this. I don't want to go down for something I didn't even do."

Emma, whose usual impatience with self-pity was curtailed by both Ben's vulnerable expression and Dan's fondness for him, tried to ease his mind. "You're not going down for anything. I don't know about Slater, but Jack Neal doesn't really think you know anything, and neither does Dan."

"He doesn't?" Ben said, relief almost oozing through his pores.

"No," Emma reiterated. "But for the next few days, you really shouldn't make any kind of comment to anyone about anything. Just let the search in Argentina play out and—"

"Holy shit," a deep voice called as Clark made his way across the room from the door to the pool. "Is that Ben Gold?"

"I should go," Ben said.

"Lie low," Emma replied, her last words before ending the call. Clark looked at her. "What's going on?"

"He doesn't know."

"Obviously," Clark said. "But why were you talking to him?"

"He went to Maria to get to us," Dan answered. "He finally saw through Walker on Friday night and now he's worried about going down for the cover-up because Slater and Jack Neal are on his case. He was almost crying."

"Yeah," Emma confirmed. "He was pretty pathetic. I don't understand how someone so weak can get so far in politics."

"He's not in politics," Dan said. "He's in science. That's why Walker keeps him around: he adds legitimacy to the IDA. I've always said that."

"Besides," Clark chimed in, unexpectedly defending Ben. "Trusting people isn't weakness. Okay, he bought Walker's bullshit all the way up to Friday. But there's a fine line between seeing the best in people and being blinded by loyalty."

No one said anything for a few seconds.

"Like Dan," Clark went on, turning to face him. "You see the best in everyone, but it doesn't block out everything else. You trusted Emma pretty quickly. But I bet your guard wasn't totally down, so if she was telling an obvious lie you probably would have spotted it, right?"

"Yeah," Dan said.

"Right. But maybe if I was lying to you, you wouldn't see through it because you trust me so much. It wouldn't even matter if the whole world told you I was lying; until you saw the lie for yourself, you wouldn't believe it." Clark turned back to Emma. "And that doesn't make him weak. That makes him human."

"Yeah," Emma said, "but there's a difference between trusting your brother and trusting a politician."

"You trust Jack," Clark retorted.

Emma chuckled defensively. She could have said "Jack's not a politician," but she knew he was the next closest thing.

“See,” Clark said. “You feel like you know him beyond his job title, just like Gold thought he knew Walker.”

Dan rejoined the conversation after listening for a while as a new question popped into his head: “Will Walker go to prison when this is over? When we get capital-D Disclosure, I mean.”

“No way a guy like that goes to prison,” Clark said. “He’ll kill himself first.”

Dan looked at Emma, waiting for her answer.

“I haven’t even thought about it,” she said.

“Think about it now.”

Emma took a few seconds.

“Well?” Dan pushed.

“Ben hasn’t seen him since Friday and he isn’t answering any calls,” Emma said.

“Which means...?”

She shrugged. “I think Clark might already be right.”

WEDNESDAY

D minus 15

SEAFRONT
MIRAMAR, ARGENTINA

As the sun began its lazy ascent and the sea fog began to lift, Miguel Perez raised his ADLTV-branded binoculars and looked out to the water.

Miguel, a retired printer by trade and a man with no prior interest in the sea, knew too little about optics and ships to know what kind of vessels he was looking at or how far away they were.

All he knew was that this conspicuous new formation was near enough to shore for his binoculars to make out the Argentine flag and the number on the side of the largest vessel. This ship — 0012 — dwarfed anything he had seen so far in his six days at the seafront.

Though it was very early in the morning, Miguel nudged the sleeping man next to him. He handed the binoculars to his fellow sea-watcher and pointed to the ship.

The man's mouth fell open when the formation came into view. He lowered the binoculars and had to pull his eyes away from the

sea to meet Miguel's.

"Well?" Miguel said.

Rather than reply, the man pushed his chair back, knelt beside Miguel, and hugged him.

"Hectór," Miguel laughed. "What did you see?"

Hectór whispered in Miguel's ear: "Today is the day, my friend. Today is the day."

D minus 14

CAVALIERI OBSERVATORY
TRENTO, ITALY

Dan wandered in awe around the Cavalieri Observatory on the outskirts of Trento, taking in every word uttered by his knowledgeable guide.

Timo Fiore walked proudly alongside Dan and Dr Louisa Conte, the observatory's director and acting tour guide. Like Timo, Louisa had been born in Switzerland. She told Dan that the team in the observatory today was mostly Italian, with one German research assistant "to make sure we stay efficient." Timo and Louisa both chuckled slightly, but Dan didn't really get it.

Emma and Clark followed behind, chatting amongst themselves. Neither had much interest in their current surroundings and both were glad of the peace provided by the total lack of cameras.

To Dan's equal delight, this visit was truly a visit; no photo-ops, no speeches, no agendas. Dan knew that the plan for Thursday involved a busy day of "media stuff" on the other side of the Swiss border, but that was the furthest thing from his mind as he gazed at

an endless array of equipment, each piece more impressive than the last.

When Louisa led Dan into a small control room, four researchers stood up to greet him. All four seemed utterly surprised to see Dan, and from the satisfied look on Louisa's face he drew the safe conclusion that she hadn't told them he was coming. The four researchers — two young women and a young man, along with a much older man in more formal attire — greeted Dan warmly.

The room, much larger than it looked from outside, felt like something from the spaceship in the book Dan was reading about Europa. Everything was made of metal and glass, with almost every surface appearing to be some kind of touchscreen interface. A row of printers filled one side wall. The other wall contained a whiteboard and a canvas display for the projector mounted on the central pillar which dominated the room. The whiteboard was full of equations and notations so far beyond Dan's level of comprehension that the numbers might as well have been spelled out in Italian.

As Dan walked around the central pillar to see everything that the room had to offer, Louisa, still conversing in perfect English, mentioned to the others that Dan was with Timo. The senior researcher stepped outside to see Timo and hugged him like an old friend.

"Who would like to show our guest the telescope?" Louisa asked. Everyone volunteered.

"Alessandro," Louisa decided, motioning to the young man. "Take him up."

"Up?" Dan said.

Alessandro pressed an unseen button on the central pillar. "This is the elevator," he said, surprising Dan with an accent much less pronounced than his flowing jet-black hair and bronzed skin had made Dan irrationally expect.

Sure enough, the lowest part of the pillar soon parted to reveal a capsule-like elevator. Dan couldn't understand how he had missed the door's outline on the pillar now that he'd been alerted to it, but

it did blend in remarkably well. He stepped inside.

"Wait for me," Clark said, moving now from the threshold of the control room where he had been standing with Emma and where Timo remained.

"It's fine," Dan said.

Clark shook his head. "You don't leave my sight."

"Fine."

After a short and smooth ascent, Dan stepped out into the observatory's ring-shaped lookout tower. Looking east, he saw a vast array of radio telescopes.

"Jesus," Clark said, more confused than impressed. "It looks like they're growing a crop of giant satellite dishes."

Alessandro briefly explained why these radio telescopes didn't look like "the regular kind of telescopes" that Clark and many others were exclusively familiar with.

"But why did your boss say 'the telescope' when there are loads of them?" Clark asked, thinking that Louisa's English had been too good for a pluralisation error like that to slip by.

Alessandro smiled broadly. "Check the other side," he said. "You might spot the big one."

Clark walked round the elevator pillar, not sure what to expect. When he got there, he stopped, not sure what he was looking at. "There is no way..." he said, not even sure how to finish the sentence.

"The largest in the world," Alessandro replied. He and Dan walked to join Clark. "For a few more months, at least."

Unlike Clark, Dan knew all about the observatory's colossal radio telescope. But knowing about it was different from seeing it, as the astounded look in his eyes could attest.

"How big is that thing," Clark asked.

"400 metres across," Alessandro said proudly. "The one they're building in China will be 500 metres. Arecibo is 305."

Arecibo was the word on Dan's lips as he looked out at the magnificent feat of engineering. The Cavalieri Observatory's huge

dish, fixed into the ground, was unmistakably inspired by its Puerto Rican counterpart which Dan had first seen in the movie adaption of Carl Sagan's *Contact*, still by an immeasurable distance his favourite work of fiction.

As Clark stared incredulously at "the big one", as Alessandro affectionately called it, Dan and Alessandro discussed Timo's long-term goal of constructing an orbital observatory unencumbered by atmospheric radiation and weather. Understandably, the primary obstacles were political rather than financial or technical.

"Did you hear that?" Clark suddenly said.

Dan and Alessandro rushed to his side, concerned by the urgency in his voice. Neither of them had heard anything.

All three stood silently.

"Dan!" Emma's voice called up, very faintly. Three more words followed.

"Did she just say what I think she said?" Dan asked.

Clark nodded. "I heard it."

Alessandro ran back to the eastern side of the lookout and pressed a button on the desk-level console. "Please repeat," he said in a slow, clear tone.

"I said I heard it, too," Clark replied.

"Shut up," Dan said, nudging him. "He's talking to Emma."

Emma's voice then rang loudly through a speaker above Alessandro: "I said they found it! They found the sphere!"

Dan sprinted to Alessandro's side. Clark stood stunned, staring out at the giant telescope. Alessandro, previously so energetic and animated, wore an expression that wouldn't have looked out of place on a ventriloquist's dummy.

"Who's they?" Dan spoke into the microphone, not sure whether he should be celebrating the sphere's discovery or worrying that it would never be seen again. Alessandro's face regained focus, keen for the answer to the same question that had momentarily paralysed him.

"Argentina," Emma said.

The relief hit Dan like a bucket of ice water.

“It’s happening right now,” Emma continued. “Get down here!”

Without any thought or pre-planned coordination, Dan and Alessandro both grabbed hold of each other’s upper arms and started jumping around. Alessandro initiated a quadrisyllabic sports-like chant of Ar-gen-ti-na; within seconds, Dan was chanting it too.

Clark hurried round from the other side of the lookout tower, took one look at the two of them jumping around like idiots, and immediately joined in.

D minus 13

SEAFRONT

MIRAMAR, ARGENTINA

Miguel Perez and his overworked arms fought fatigue to keep his binoculars positioned perfectly on the conspicuous formation.

The news had filtered through official channels almost an hour earlier that the search party had discovered the sphere less than a mile from shore, and Miramar's beach and promenade were already more crowded than they had been at any other point in Miguel's week-long vigil.

TV viewers on the other side of the world had a better view than the people on the coast, of course, given the zooming power of the cameras at the networks' disposal and the willingness of some newscopter pilots to flout the zonal restrictions for the sake of capturing the priceless footage.

But Miguel Perez and his fellow sea-watchers had something better than a view; they had an experience. And thanks to the powerful binoculars gifted to him by the reporter from ADLTV, Miguel had something of a view, too.

He watched patiently as a cordon of small dark boats surrounded the much larger ship, with one medium-sized white boat in-between. This cordon formed very suddenly and was like nothing that had come before. Miguel demanded strength from his tired arms as a feeling swelled within him that something was about to happen.

His binoculars couldn't discern acute details like the faces of any of the people in the open boats, but the upper bodies of two people wearing yellow wetsuits or fishing overalls were clearly visible against the dark blue of the large ship, just to the side of its identifying "0012" mark.

Miguel kept his nervous fingers as still as he could to steady his view as the people in yellow overalls moved quickly from one side of their boat to the other. One of them then raised both arms, signalling something to the larger ship, before both disappeared into the water.

Hectór, Miguel's neighbour since the start, leaned over to pass on the whispers from the back of the crowd. "They say the sphere is being pulled by the white boat," he said.

"Two divers just jumped out of it," Miguel replied, keeping his hands steady.

Hectór yelled this latest news into the air, bringing another increase in both noise and anticipation levels.

A few minutes passed, feeling like hours to the sea-watchers.

"Cage!" Miguel shouted, surprising even himself and almost losing his view as he shot to his feet. "The big ship is raising a shark-cage!"

"The divers must have hooked it," Hectór said, rising to his feet and wishing that he had Miguel's binoculars. "Talk to me, Miguel. What do you see?"

"Nothing yet," Miguel said. "The cage is rising. Very slowly. Slowly, slowly, slow—"

Hectór turned away from the sea at the abruptness of Miguel's gasp. He looked at his neighbour. "Miguel! What do you see?"

Miguel snapped out of his stunned silence and hurriedly lifted his binoculars' cord over his head and handed them to Hectór. "Be quick, Hectór! You have to see it!"

Hectór threw the binoculars towards his eyes like a man possessed.

Flushed with a serenity he had not felt for many years, Miguel looked away from the momentous event occurring in the sea and focused instead on his new friend, whose joyous expression made it all the sweeter.

Hectór's reaction mirrored Miguel's from moments earlier, for inside the shark-cage, silhouetted against the gargantuan blue ship, his eyes saw an unmistakably spherical object. The sphere reached only a quarter or so of the height of the cage, which was presumably designed to accommodate an adult human.

No details were visible, but for Hectór and Miguel, the details didn't matter. They had both seen it with their own eyes: the moment the Kerguelen sphere emerged from the sea into a world its discovery would change forever.

Hectór lowered the binoculars and turned to Miguel. Both men had tears in the corners of their eyes. "I can never thank you enough," Hectór said. He tried to return Miguel's binoculars, but Miguel shook his head and pointed to the man on the other side of Hectór, who Miguel hadn't really spoken to but who he knew had also been there for the duration. In a few moments, the man would surely join Miguel and Hectór in considering the last seven days as the most well-spent and worthwhile of his life.

The two then watched the third man go through the same stages of awe and speechlessness as they had. Hectór hugged Miguel like a long-lost brother, still unable to put into words his gratitude for the moment that Miguel's kindness had allowed him to share.

When they parted and looked back out to sea, Hectór, the taller of the two, put his arm around Miguel's shoulder. "My friend," he said, "today, we have truly seen something."

"We have seen the truth," Miguel replied. "Truly, Hectór; we

have seen the truth.”

D minus 12

CAVALIERI OBSERVATORY
TRENTO, ITALY

The observatory's senior researcher, Francesco Abaté, stood excitedly with Louisa and the two research assistants. All four crowded around the elevator in the control room, anticipating its descent.

As soon as the door opened, they swarmed Dan and Alessandro; the two younger researchers bouncing up and down and joining the contagious Ar-gen-ti-na chant while Louisa and Francesco laughed heartily and patted them all on the back.

Emma stood quietly beside Timo near the control room's entrance. When Clark noticed that she was recording the celebratory scenes on her phone, he attempted to squeeze his way out of the elevator to get out of the shot. Alessandro tried to pull him back into the pack, but Clark pointed to Emma's phone to explain. Alessandro said "ah" in understanding and let him go.

Clark walked over to Emma, stood beside her, and ruffled her hair with his hand. She elbowed him in response and fought to keep

her phone steady. "He couldn't have done it without you," Clark whispered in her ear. Any doubts or fears he might have had about the Kerguelen sphere and its contents were entirely absent now that it had been found. This was what Dan had wanted from the start; this was what they'd been fighting for.

Alessandro, merrily aware of the camera, called Timo over to join them. Timo shook his head and held a finger to his lips; this wasn't his moment, and he didn't want his sometimes controversial public image to detract from this great footage of a genuine and explosive outpouring of joy.

Timo had thrown huge amounts of money at the observatory, of course, but its staff had dedicated their entire lives and careers to the kind of work it enabled. The best that most of them had ever realistically hoped for was the discovery of an unambiguously non-random signal. The prospect of finding a deliberate message was their ultimate dream, and none of them had even dared imagine that such a message might turn up in the form of a physical alien artefact.

The staff were as glad to share the moment with Dan as he was to share it with them. Alessandro, who Dan had spent the most time with, then said something to the group in Italian. Before Dan knew it, he was in the air and being carried out of the elevator.

Francesco and Alessandro supported most of Dan's weight on their shoulders while Alessandro's fellow research assistants used their hands in a somewhat successful effort to add stability. Dan smiled and laughed as he sat atop his human throne, but wisely called Clark over to steady his wobbling body.

"Go," Emma said, nudging Clark forward. "People like seeing you with him, anyway."

Clark took Francesco's position and had to crouch slightly to reach Alessandro's level. Emboldened by Clark's presence and obvious strength, Alessandro unilaterally decided that they should carry Dan around the room, bumping him up and down to add to the fun. Clark didn't have much choice other than to follow

Alessandro's first tentative steps, and before long Dan was being paraded around the control room by Clark and the staff like a winning coach by his grateful team.

Alessandro kicked off a new chant to the familiar Ar-gen-ti-na tune: "Dan-Mc-Car-thy, Dan-Mc-Car-thy, Dan-Mc-Car-thy!"

Dan blushed a little at this development and leaned towards Alessandro to ask him to chant something else. "Like what?" Alessandro asked. The rest of the group kept chanting.

"I dunno," Dan said, still laughing at how surreal everything was. "Kerguelen?"

"Ker-gue-len," Alessandro shouted over everyone else, pumping his left fist while still supporting some of Dan's weight on his right shoulder. "Ker-gue-len, Ker-gue-len, Ker-gue-len!"

Everyone joined in by the third repetition, with no better reason than "why not?".

Emma recorded for a few more seconds then lowered her phone. She had already decided that she would cut the three or four minutes of footage down to sixty seconds and send it to Trey back in Birchwood. This would be the exclusive she had promised Trey a week earlier as thanks for bringing Dan the digital translator and keeping quiet about the letter, even before his extensive help with the big screen set-up and announcements at the drive-in.

Within minutes the footage would air the world over: Dan McCarthy, source of the leak, leaping around and being triumphantly carried by an international team of scientists who had dedicated their lives to finding an ounce of the kind of proof that had just been lifted out of the ocean by the proverbial ton.

Emma focused on the video on her phone's screen, cutting it down to the best parts.

"You should be celebrating with them," Timo said. He watched on like a proud father, eternally grateful that the sphere had been discovered while Dan was touring his observatory. "You did it. It's over."

"Dan did it," Emma said, clicking "confirm" to send the trimmed

footage to Trey. She put her phone in her pocket and looked back up at the still jubilant group. Behind her smile, another thought circled, though she chose not to say it:

Over? It hasn't even started...

D minus 11

10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON, ENGLAND

By the time people around the world saw the footage of Dan McCarthy celebrating with SETI researchers in Italy — complete with Trey’s small but unsubtle “Blue Dish Network” watermark — they had already heard from several national leaders.

Reports of the sphere’s discovery trickled through official channels in Argentina within seconds of the sphere emerging from the sea, with more details revealed once it was safely on deck and on its way to a secure docking point.

The sphere had a hairline seam, the officials said, with no sign of a hinge mechanism. Their “knee-high” size estimate fitted the description in Hans Kloster’s letter. Quite remarkably, the sphere was wrapped in well-worn netting, suggesting that it had been “caught” previously and thrown back into the sea by the crew of a fishing vessel understandably unaware of its worth.

After Argentina’s, the first national government to respond was Norway’s. This was less random than it seemed on the face of it

given that Norway administered both Bouvet Island and Queen Maud Land, the Antarctic region claimed by Germany as New Swabia in the late 1930s where the very first sphere was discovered.

A brief Norwegian statement congratulated Argentina on the find and offered as much or as little technical assistance as the Argentine government wanted. Norway offered to send a team to help analyse the sphere's material composition, scan it to determine the internal contents, and look for a way to open it without causing damage.

Argentina had yet to respond.

The identity of the next national leader to speak out came as no surprise to anyone who had been paying attention to the politics of the IDA leak.

William Godfrey, though sufficiently experienced and battle-hardened to know that there was no room for loyalty in politics, invited John Cole to stand by his side outside Number Ten; Cole had, after all, been the only member of Godfrey's cabinet to firmly take his side in the argument over whether to broach the topic of the leak in the first place. His presence at the Prime Minister's side now provided a measure of congruence, Godfrey thought; a reminder to the world that they and they alone had been on the side of the truth from the very beginning.

Cole had recently angered leaders in Oslo and Buenos Aires by reopening an ancient debate over the British claim to Bouvet Island and mentioning the Falklands, so Godfrey took care not to step on any toes. He had been deliberately quiet since declassifying the UK's own "UFO files" eight days earlier, preferring to let events play out and watch President Slater splash around in an effort to stay afloat.

A necessary statement in the wake of the tragic mass suicide at Hemshaw had broken Godfrey's streak of silence, but this happier moment — the discovery of the Kerguelen sphere — was the one Godfrey had been waiting for since the thought first crossed his mind that Dan McCarthy's leak might actually be real.

There was no pettiness in William Godfrey's words and no

humour in his tone as he addressed the media. This moment in history called for a statesman, and he was ready to play the part.

He praised Argentina's handling of the situation, saying that he had opted not to comment on the brief American intrusion into the restricted zone since the Argentine government didn't seem to want to turn it into a major issue. Now, however, his gloves were off.

"Slater, Walker and the rest of them are clinging to a world that no longer exists," he said. "The world they have lived in for so long — one where the rules don't apply to them — is gone. The sphere which we saw rising from the ocean just an hour ago is absolute proof that they have been lying to us for decades."

As he knew he was supposed to, John Cole nodded along with Godfrey's words.

"We can't attack Argentina for the sphere's presence in their waters," Godfrey continued, biting his tongue on the Nazi-harboursing rhetoric that was desperate to spill out, "just as we can't attack Germany or Austria for what happened at Lake Toplitz in the 1930s and '40s. We can't pretend that certain things didn't happen, of course, but we likewise can't use those things to score points against countries whose modern institutions of government had nothing to do with any of it. But then... well... then you look at Richard Walker. Then you look at the IDA."

The journalists and TV reporters facing Godfrey hung on his every word, even more so now that his attention had turned towards the role of the US government.

"And since we're talking about government institutions, let's focus on the fact that the IDA didn't even exist until the late 1980s. Richard Walker and Hans Kloster shaped that agency with one goal: hiding the truth. But who signs the IDA's cheques? Valerie Slater. She can claim that she was duped, just like the rest of us, but is that an acceptable response? Do the American people really deserve such incompetence? They're the biggest victims in all of this! Their hard-earned tax dollars have funded this lie since 1988. Think of the hospitals and libraries that could have been built with that money."

Godfrey paused to shake his head.

“Sickening, isn’t it?” he went on. “But that’s not why we’re all here. Obviously this is a crushing blow to Slater’s credibility and likely renders her position untenable, but that’s tomorrow’s argument. Right now I would like to respectfully offer some suggestions to our friends and allies in Argentina.”

John Cole somehow managed to keep a straight face as he nodded in agreement with Godfrey’s description of the Argentine government as their “friends and allies”, pretending he hadn’t personally lampooned their lack of trustworthiness less than a week earlier.

“The transparency we’ve seen coming out of Miramar today deserves great credit,” Godfrey stressed, “but there is a long way to go. My main concern is the integrity of the sphere; if anyone tries to force it open, they risk damaging the contents. And although we trust the Argentine government without reservation, they would do well to bear in mind that not everyone is so trusting. I therefore respectfully suggest that a wider team of international scientists and observers be invited to join the Norwegian contingent which has already invited itself to participate in non-invasive experimentation on the Kerguelen sphere.”

“Who?” someone shouted from near the front of the crowded media pack.

Godfrey was affronted by this interruption; it was the kind of thing the media did in Washington and Colorado, not London. But knowing that the world was watching and that this speech would go down in history, he chose to make a mental note of the interrupter’s identity and continue without drawing any further attention to the heckle.

“Now, I’m just here to start a dialogue, but I certainly feel that a British presence on the team would be justified given our unrelenting commitment to the truth from the moment that Dan McCarthy so bravely broke the story. I think China deserves a place, too,” he said, almost inflecting the sentence into a question as

though he hadn't planned this speech carefully and was thinking it up on the spot. "Beijing has been very dignified in its silence despite Lake Namtso falling within China's borders. And, of course, the developments in Miramar will likely impact their exciting plans for space exploration."

Several journalists noted this down and underlined it. With so much going on, the sphere's knock-on effect on China's lunar and Martian ambitions had slipped most of their minds.

"Russia, too," Godfrey said, still presenting his thoughts as spontaneous. "Russia's interest in this is as legitimate as anyone's since Walker's motives for maintaining the cover-up were rooted in his Cold War mentality of protecting that "well-earned national security advantage" he always talks about. Other than that, maybe France and somewhere in Africa? As I said, I'm just here to start a dialogue. But this global issue deserves a united front, and a truly international team drawn from Argentina, Norway, the United Kingdom, China and Russia is the best way to ensure that the scientific analysis of the sphere is beyond reproach and that this positive discovery does not become a source of division."

William Godfrey's statement ended with this call for a unified international response, which was noteworthy more for who it omitted than who it included.

As the day wore on, the only thing more conspicuous than Godfrey's failure to suggest an American presence on the team was the continued absence of a response from President Slater. Even as other regional powers weighed in — generally in support of Godfrey's suggestions — Slater was nowhere to be seen or heard.

Quote-hungry American reporters crowded the IDA building in Colorado Springs, but neither Richard Walker nor even Ben Gold were inside. ACN's Maria Janzyck, reporting from outside the building, described the IDA as "a rudderless sinking ship, and perhaps not the only one."

A less subtle reporter might have explicitly likened the IDA's plight to that of Valerie Slater's presidency, but Maria allowed her

viewers to draw their own conclusions.

D minus 10

*MUNICIPAL HALL
MIRAMAR, ARGENTINA*

Word had been going round for several hours.

A huge crowd had gathered, more in hope than expectation.

Miguel Perez sat among them, invited and transported inland from the seafront by ADLTV.

“There’s no way it’s here,” a doubtful man muttered to his friend. “We’ve been here for four hours.”

Miguel, seated at the front of the crowd, heard the man and turned to reassure him. “They would not have brought an old man like me here for nothing,” he said. “And four hours? I watched the sea for seven days. Good things come to those who wait.”

The doubter recognised Miguel from ADLTV’s news coverage and drew new patience from his words. The government must have told the media and they must have told the old man, he thought. It really is here!

Without warning or announcement, the door of the grand building then swung open. Juan Silva, the familiar Coast Guard

turned spokesman, emerged and walked to the top of the steps. The crowd was so much larger and more excited than on previous occasions that two large speakers and a microphone were necessary for Juan to be heard. Two men positioned the speakers and Juan raised the microphone to his mouth.

“I promised three days ago that the sphere would be found,” Juan said. The crowd cheered. “Now, would any of you like to see it?”

A smile spread across Miguel’s face. An ADLTV camera focused tightly on him.

As the crowd exploded into a cacophony of anticipation, several dozen heavily armed guards assembled in a line between the building and the local police who were already keeping the crowd back.

Miguel rose to his feet and shifted his chair to a position from which no guards obscured his view of Juan Silva and the building’s door.

And then, evoking pallbearers carrying a deceased head of state, four stern-looking men in full military regalia emerged from the building. Each held the corner of a large box-like object which was covered by several Argentine flags, draped rather than folded and entirely covering whatever was underneath. The four men slowly pushed the object on a wheeled board. The crowd hushed.

When the men neared the top of the steps, they left the object there and stepped back.

“With thanks to Dan McCarthy,” Juan Silva said, holding out a hand towards the object. He paused while the crowd rapturously cheered the mere mention of Dan’s name. Given that the public had been very fond of Dan even before seeing the footage of him chanting Ar-gen-ti-na with his brother and the staff at Timo Fiore’s radio observatory, Juan had expected such a reaction. “And without further ado...”

Juan walked round to the back of the object and placed his hands on the flags covering it. Like a magician with a tablecloth, he then

smoothly pulled the front-facing flag from the object, revealing what was underneath.

And there it was, still surrounded by the well-worn green netting and still inside the shark-cage. Juan briskly removed the three other flags and turned to face the crowd. "Ladies and gentlemen: the Kerguelen sphere."

There was neither silence nor commotion. No one, least of all Juan, knew quite what to say or do.

The men, women and children in the crowd looked up in awe at this sphere from another world; this gift from another race; this proof of an impossible truth.

After fifteen seconds or so of reality setting in, during which time no one tried to breach the security cordon, Juan Silva began to speak again. He made clear that he was now speaking in an official capacity before announcing that the Argentine government had accepted Norway's offer of scientific assistance.

"As well as these Norwegian scientists," Juan said, preparing to reveal what had been diplomatically agreed upon in frantic but relatively cordial negotiations over the past few hours, "we will also welcome observers from London, Paris, Beijing, Moscow and Brasilia. It has been agreed that preliminary analysis will begin tomorrow morning, when the international team assembles."

As had been the case with William Godfrey earlier in the day, a certain capital city that Juan left out raised more eyebrows than any of the ones he included.

"I promised three days ago that the sphere would be found," Juan said, tapping the side of the shark-cage as he repeated his opening line, "and I promised that it would be opened. We are halfway there, my friends. We are halfway there."

D minus 9

LAKE MAGGIORE
ISPRA, ITALY

The calmness that greeted Dan on his return to Timo's lakeside villa was a far cry from what he could have expected in Birchwood.

Even the long drive had been peaceful; the group left Trento before any news crews had time to gather in the wake of the celebratory footage, so no one knew exactly where Dan was.

Timo's neighbours at the lake were as tight-lipped about Dan's presence as the observatory's staff. These neighbours were all extremely wealthy, if not quite to Timo's level, and placed a high value on their privacy and seclusion. They knew by now that Dan was staying there, but none had any problem with it as long as he didn't bring unwanted media attention their way.

Timo joined the group inside until the early hours of the morning, quietly toasting the sphere's discovery and the formation of an inclusive international team to oversee the scientific experiments which would soon commence. Timo invited his driver — a full-time employee of many years — to join them inside, but

the man, old-fashioned and set in his role, politely declined.

Most of the night passed with Timo and the brothers lounging under the stars while Emma sat inside paying close attention to every little reaction and comment on Blitz News.

The whole group had seen clips of Godfrey's relatively restrained reaction, as well as the incredible footage of the Argentine Coast Guard proudly displaying the sphere outside a government building in Miramar. Emma was astounded by the nonchalance of that move and could only assume it was a calculated jab at the US government, intended to hammer home just how powerless President Slater and Richard Walker were to suppress the truth any longer.

That the sphere's surprising public appearance came in the middle of a weekday afternoon seemed to have no effect on the size of the crowd. The same was true in Birchwood, where outside reporters and local citizens flooded the area around the drive-in to shoot their segments and watch the latest developments on the big screen; for even though Dan McCarthy was halfway across the world, that derelict drive-in where he had first broken his silence remained the American epicentre of the biggest news story anyone could remember.

The recent crowds in Miramar and Birchwood, however, were still nothing compared to the biblical swarm that descended on Miramar's seafront immediately after Miguel Perez spotted the sphere being raised out of the water. So many people rushed to get their own look at the convoy protecting the huge ship as it carried its precious load to shore that local police were forced to erect roadblocks and temporary fencing to control the number of people accessing the already crowded seafront.

Eventually, well past midnight in Ispra, Emma took a break from the news, changed into one of the short and T-shirt combos she usually wore to bed, and stepped out into the Italian moonlight. She saw Timo looking out over the lake with a glass of champagne in his hand; Clark floating around the pool, fully clothed, on an inflatable bed with a can of beer in its cup-holder; and Dan fast asleep on a

sun-lounger with too many plastic shot-glasses scattered on the ground beside him.

“What did you give him?” she asked.

“Sambuca,” Clark said. “Timo said it’s the best stuff you can get.”

“It is,” Timo confirmed without turning away from the lake.

Emma counted the shot-glasses. She could only see six, and she knew that Clark wouldn’t let Dan drink himself into any real trouble. “We should probably get him inside. It’s pretty late.”

“How late?” Timo asked.

“Tomorrow.”

“Shit!” Timo quickly finished his champagne. “Christophe has been waiting in the car since seven. I’ll be back in the morning for Lugano, okay?”

“Right,” Emma said, pretending she hadn’t forgotten about their scheduled media appearances in Switzerland.

“Help me out before you go,” Clark said, trying to use his hands to inch his way towards the edge of the pool without getting wet.

Timo waved as he walked away from the terrace towards the house. “I would, but I’m already on my way.”

“Emma?” Clark begged. “Help me out?”

“Help yourself out. I don’t want to get wet,” she replied as Timo bode her farewell with his usual double cheek-kiss at the edge of the pool.

“Do it!” Clark said. “Timo, do it!”

Emma looked at Clark. “Do what?” Still confused, she turned back to Timo. She saw a boyish grin spread across his face. “No. Timo... no. Don’t even think about—”

“Yes!” Clark yelled. It was the last thing Emma heard before the splash.

She gasped in mid air at the initial shock of being thrown in, and then again when the freezing water hit her skin. “Timoooo!” she screamed. He was already gone.

“He’s gone,” Clark said.

Emma wiped the water from under her eyes and around her T-shirt's neckline. "I'm actually going to kill him. Forget the pool... when he comes back tomorrow, I'm going to throw him in that fucking lake."

Clark laughed at her uncharacteristically blue outburst.

"And you," Emma said, homing in on Clark's inflatable bed. "You look awfully relaxed for a dry man surrounded by water."

"I was joking when I told him to do it," Clark said, as though pleading for his life rather than trying to get out of a harmless soaking.

Emma gave an exaggerated shrug.

"My phone's in my pocket," Clark said, increasingly desperate.

"Your phone's beside the TV."

"My wallet is in my—"

"And since you lied..."

"Listen, Emma, seriously: I can't swim."

She looked down at herself, dismissively signalling to Clark that the water barely reached her chest. "Jaws 3," she said, inching towards him. "The Revenge."

Emma then disappeared under the water before pushing up under one side of Clark's inflatable bed and sending him tumbling in to join her.

"How?!" Clark howled at the moon. "How can it be so cold?"

Clark's reaction — forcing water from his face and arms with his hands while shaking his head like a wet dog — cheered Emma up to no end. He saw her laughing and fired a wave-like splash her way. She tried to get him back but had to move a lot closer to reach him with her own attempts.

A splash finally hit Clark in the face. Only four or five feet from Emma, he wiped his eyes and looked at her. His dumb grin faded. His eyes focused on hers.

"No way," Emma said, sensing the moment's direction of travel and waving her hand in front of her face to break Clark's gaze and change course. "Nothing personal."

“What’s nothing personal?” Clark asked. “Wait. You didn’t think I was...?”

“Exactly. No one thought anything. I’ll keep an eye on Dan while you get changed. Okay?”

Clark agreed and went inside without saying anything. He didn’t know what to think about the awkward moment that had just come and gone. He couldn’t blame Emma for being on-guard — someone who looked like her had to get drunken looks from idiots like him all the time — but he really hadn’t meant anything by it. He never would; not with someone who was so close to Dan, even if she was the complete package.

But one quality of Emma’s that Clark shared was her ability to put things in the past and leave them there, as evidenced by their huge bust-up on the night Clark came home having had no bearing on anything that had happened since. He therefore felt confident that the crossed wires from a few minutes ago would be forgotten by the time he went back to carry Dan inside.

Sure enough, they were.

Emma was still in the water, wisely deciding it was better to stay submerged than climb out and have the night air sting her wet skin. Clark put a towel on the ground beside her.

“Thanks,” she said, climbing out to get it.

“No problem, lover.”

Emma laughed. “Are you trying to get pulled back in?”

Clark kicked some of Dan’s empty shot-glasses towards her in reply then picked Dan up in a fireman’s carry and took him inside.

“Are you going to bed?” Emma asked.

“It’s like four in the afternoon,” Clark said on his way round the pool, refusing to bow to the tyranny of time zones. “I’ll probably just watch the news until I fall asleep.”

“Yeah.”

“Jesus,” Clark said to himself. “Carrying Dan to bed and watching the news until I fall asleep. I’m turning into my dad after she left.”

Emma wouldn't have had a clue what to say to that, so she was glad that Clark reached the house and disappeared inside before she had to think of something.

The first thing Clark saw on the news — other than the countless replays of the day's biggest moments from the discovery at Miramar, the ballsy display at the Municipal Hall, Godfrey's reaction in London, and Dan's own reaction at the Cavalieri Observatory — was a more muted reaction from Billy Kendrick. Speaking from outside the arena in Charlotte where he was about to start the final show of his tour before his ET Weekender in Myrtle Beach, Billy joked that for the first time in his life he was hoping that Disclosure could be postponed for a few more days.

It would be “cosmically right” for the sphere to be opened and the big announcement to come when he and over 20,000 other ET enthusiasts were already gathered for a party, Billy said. In his own half-serious words: “Dan got to be at the observatory when the sphere turned up, so it's only fair that I get to be at my party when they finally open it and tell us what's inside.”

After the most event- and announcement-packed day since the leak, very little fresh information was now being revealed on Blitz News. The repetitiveness of the cycle and lack of English-language alternatives sent Clark to sleep after only an hour or so. Before long, Emma caught herself drifting off, too. Not knowing what Thursday might bring, she decided to call it a night and catch up on any overnight developments in the morning.

Emma drifted quickly to sleep only to be awakened by her phone after what felt like no time at all. The time on her screen told her that over three hours had in fact passed, but that was nothing compared to the surprise of who was calling and what they wanted.

“Wait a minute,” Emma said after a brief argument with the caller. She hurried to the living room, but Clark wasn't there. She found him fast asleep in his room, on top of the bed rather than in it.

“Clark,” she called.

He didn't react.

"Clark!"

Still nothing.

Emma flicked the light-switch beside the door on and off to rouse him. It worked.

"Hmmm?" he said, startled by the strobe-like effect. "What's going on?"

"You need to get up," Emma said.

With the room's light now bright and steady, Clark could see the look on Emma's face. He jumped off the bed with sudden urgency. "Where's Dan? Did something happen?"

"Dan's fine," Emma reassured him. She held her phone out, inviting Clark to take it.

"Is it my dad?" Clark asked, too panicked to question why such a call would be received on Emma's phone rather than his.

Emma shook her head. "It's President Slater," she said. "She wants to talk to you."

WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON, D.C.

“She put me on hold?” President Slater asked Jack Neal incredulously, her eyes flicking between Jack’s and the phone on her desk.

“She put me on hold,” Jack said. This was more accurate, since Emma hadn’t actually spoken to the President.

With the address provided by Ben Gold having led to an empty house rather than Richard Walker, and with Ben now refusing to say anything beyond “I’ve told you everything I know,” President Slater demanded that Jack Neal call Emma Ford to arrange a one-on-one conversation with Dan McCarthy.

Jack tried to tell Slater that Dan didn’t know anything else, going so far as to reveal everything about his night in Colorado, right down to the part where he was locked in an office to ensure that he couldn’t interfere in the night’s event. Slater wouldn’t hear it. She considered Jack’s trust in Emma misplaced and believed he saw only what he wanted to see in her. He didn’t see the truth, she said: that

Emma Ford was a lying, manipulative snake.

President Slater had no interest in talking to Emma and Jack had little doubt that the feeling was mutual. But if Slater could only talk to McCarthy directly, she insisted, she could get to the truth. The hope she clung on to was that he had some other piece of evidence tucked away, just as he'd kept the Kloster letter quiet for so long. In Slater's punch-drunk mind, this unpublished evidence could be anything from a photograph of the plaques to a redacted passage from the letter. McCarthy might know exactly what the two surviving alien plaques said, or at least how to open the sphere to get into them.

This day from hell had left Valerie Slater as a political leper with only Richard Walker for company in the docks of the court of public opinion. She understood perfectly well that she couldn't keep the wolves at the door for much longer if the nation's reputation and position continued to diminish under her leadership. Getting something — anything — from McCarthy was the only hope she had left.

Emma Ford's excuses as to why she couldn't give the phone to Dan angered Slater greatly, but Jack had tried to reason with Emma. "I've held this call off for as long as I could," he'd told her, sounding like he meant it. "But this won't just go away."

"She can talk to Clark," Emma had said.

When Slater nodded, Jack passed the message on.

But now, on Emma's end of the line, Clark was point-blank refusing to talk to Slater.

"I really think you should," Emma told him. "Just to say we don't know anything else."

"Why? What's she going to do? Invade Italy and arrest us? Even if we were at home, she can't touch us. You said that yourself."

"I know what I said, but Jack is saying—"

"Fuck Jack," Clark said.

Emma tried to stay calm. "Clark, I'm asking you to do this. Please."

"And I'm telling you I won't," he replied. "No way. And don't even think about waking Dan."

"You mean Dan who's still passed out, shit-faced on sambuca?"

"Slater and Jack are in your head," Clark said. "Just hang up, turn your phone off, and we'll deal with this in the morning."

"This isn't something we can deal with tomorrow."

"Well we're not dealing with it now. If you want to tell them we don't know anything else, then by all means tell them. I don't know why it makes any difference who says it, anyway."

"Me neither," Emma said. She left Clark at his bedroom door, not wanting Slater's sudden tetchiness to drive any wedges between them.

Emma pressed a button on her phone to take Jack off hold and return to the call.

"Finally," he said. "Did you at least get Clark?"

"Whatever Slater wants to ask, she can ask me."

Clark heard Emma standing up for herself and walked into the living room to sit beside her. She saw him and didn't mind.

"Emma," Jack continued, "she won't let this go."

In the absolute silence of the night, Clark could easily hear both sides of the call.

"Give her the phone," Emma demanded. "We're eight hours ahead; if Slater wants to wake us up in the middle of the night then she can at least have the decency to do her own talking."

"She won't speak to you. If you could just get Clark to—"

"Jack, give her the fucking phone!"

"Here I am," President Slater's voice announced quietly but firmly into Emma's ear. "I can hear you."

For a moment, Emma was silent; she had spoken to presidents before, but never Slater and never in a confrontation. At this time of night, and after all that had happened, it was a lot to deal with. Eventually, she forced out a question: "What do you want?"

"What do you have?" Slater replied.

"At this time of night, very little patience," Emma said, casting

her nerves aside.

Slater affected a chuckle. "I knew we weren't so different. But really, what else was in the Kerguelen folder?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing."

President Slater paused. "You don't think I buy the narrative you've been spinning, do you? You don't really expect me to believe you weren't sitting on the Bonn video and everything else all along?"

"I can't control what you believe. I'm telling you the truth. Take it or leave it."

"Listen to me, you little shit," Slater snapped back. "If you and those two idiots won't offer your help, we very well fucking will take it. Do you understand the kind of consequen—"

"Valerie, enough!" Jack Neal yelled. He lifted his phone from the desk and walked outside the room with it.

"Jack?" Emma said.

"I'm here," he said, breathing heavily. "I don't know where her mind is. She's in survival mode. She's desperate, Emma, and desperate people do stupid things."

"What else has she said?"

"Well, I don't know how serious she is, but she's been talking about taking the—"

"Get back in here now!" Slater screamed at Jack from her doorway.

Her booming command physically startled Clark, 5,000 miles from the source and halfway across the room from the phone. He couldn't imagine how it must have hit Jack.

"I have to go," Jack whispered.

And just like that, the call was over.

"What's Slater going to do?" Clark asked.

"I don't know," Emma said, uttering those three helpless words she hated more than any others. "But I'm glad we're in Italy."

THURSDAY

D minus 7

DRIVE-IN
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

At 1am in Birchwood, Kyle Young was the only news reporter still awake. Most of the international reporters who had flooded in days after the initial leak stayed in hotels in the city, while others slept in their huge vehicles. The drive-in was much better lit than it had been at first thanks to Phil Norris's investment in floodlights — paid for by a small parking levy — but the hours between 11pm and 4am were still extremely quiet. Even Kyle's cameraman, who was being paid by the hour, had drifted off.

Maria Janzyck, Kyle's better-known and more experienced ACN colleague, had recently decided to uproot to the encampment at the IDA building in Colorado Springs. With Dan McCarthy still out of the country and Richard Walker's whereabouts still unknown, it seemed more likely that the next significant development would occur at the IDA building rather than in Birchwood. And so it was that second-string Kyle was on drive-in duty for the night.

Having spent several lonely hours hoping that something would

happen, Kyle Young was about to get his wish.

The first sign that something was wrong came when the dull glow of streetlights outside the drive-in faded for a few seconds before quickly returning. Though none of the streetlights were directly visible from the drive-in, the quick off-and-on flash registered in Kyle's peripheral vision.

Since Kyle was in Maria's usual spot next to Trey and the scaffold stage, he decided to quietly climb up the steps to the stage so he could look over the wall towards Birchwood's residential streets. He reached the high chain-link door at the bottom of the steps. It was locked.

Kyle walked to the edge of the drive-in to look along the road. As he neared the threshold, a black SUV drove past. The vehicle, slow and eerily silent, had no plates. Kyle stopped walking. Seconds later, another identical vehicle crept past in the same townward direction.

"What the shit?" Kyle said to himself.

He looked around the drive-in to check whether anyone else had seen the cars. There was no one in sight.

Kyle ran back to the ACN news van. His network-assigned cameraman was asleep in the passenger seat. Kyle turned on the engine, begging it to be quiet as he dreamt of the scoop that might be waiting for him wherever the mysterious SUVs were heading. He took a sip from one of the two coffee cups in the van's cup-holder. It wasn't hot, but it was better than nothing.

The refreshing hit of the coffee gave Kyle momentary pause. He looked out of his window at Trey's Blue Dish Network van, which looked like a travelling salesman's compared to some of the colossal satellite trucks and network vans parked at the other side of the drive-in lot. Trey had bought the two coffees for Kyle from the small stand in the corner of the lot to help him stay awake during his night shift, asking in exchange only for Kyle to wake him if anything happened.

Kyle didn't know what it was, but he knew that something had happened. Blacked-out SUVs with no plates didn't drive through

Nowhere, USA towns like Birchwood in the middle of the night for no reason. He wouldn't call Trey a friend, but they had spent a lot of time talking over the last few days, and Trey was one of the few people who knew of Kyle's role in unearthing the incriminating footage of Hans Kloster giving Richard Walker the letter which had ultimately led to the discovery of the sphere. Kyle knew that Trey's unbroken vigil at the drive-in was unmatched, even surpassing the old guy in Argentina who had been all over the news for spotting the sphere through his binoculars after staring at the sea for seven days straight. Kyle left his engine running but stepped out of his van.

He knocked on Trey's window, startling him awake, then quickly explained what had happened. As soon as Kyle mentioned the gate-like door at the bottom of the stage's steps being locked, Trey handed him the key that Emma had given him for safe keeping. He hurried over to the door with Kyle, listening to the rest of the story on the way.

"What way were the cars going?" he asked.

"Towards the town," Kyle said.

"And where did the lights go out?"

Kyle shrugged. "I just saw some lights dim then come back. I don't know how to describe it... sort of like a slow flash."

Trey reached the top of the steps first. He walked onto the stage and looked over the wall towards the rest of Birchwood. In the distance, a small line of streetlights were out. The lights on either side were working normally and the area affected look too small to be a result of any kind of power outage.

"Why would the lights go out in such a small area?" Kyle asked.

"They didn't go out. Someone put them out."

Kyle pulled his eyes away from the odd sight and looked at Trey, who was staring out at Birchwood with the troubled expression of a farmer surveying storm damage. "Why would someone put them out?"

"Because that dark spot is where the cars are going," Trey said.

“That dark spot is where Dan lives.”

D minus 6

*LAKE MAGGIORE
ISPRA, ITALY*

At 9am in Italy, Dan McCarthy couldn't believe what he was watching.

"Claaaark!" he shouted in the general direction of the bathroom. Emma and Timo stood beside him, watching the rustic living room's TV with similar if less frenzied trepidation.

Emma's anger at Timo over the previous night's pool incident had already been wholly superseded by her stress over the phone call from Jack Neal and President Slater that had come a few hours later.

Clark heard Dan over the sound of the shower. He knew it wasn't a "they opened the sphere" scream. No doubt about it: this was a "something bad just happened" scream. He grabbed his towel from the rail and sprinted through to the living room.

Timo turned to look at him. Emma and Dan remained focused on the TV.

"Who's driving that car?" Clark asked.

"The guy from ACN," Emma said. "Kyle. It's his news van."

Clark watched the first-person view as the van sped along his hometown streets. He then heard Kyle's voice repeating the situation: from his position at the drive-in, Kyle had just seen two blacked-out SUVs heading towards Dan McCarthy's house, and the street lights in the immediate area had just gone out.

"They're going to raid the house," Clark said. He briefly met Emma's eyes then started pacing around the room, hands on his head. "She sent the fucking Feds."

"Who did?" Timo asked.

"You didn't tell them?" Clark said to Emma.

This finally pulled Dan's attention from the TV. "Tell us what?"

"Jack called last night," Emma sighed. "I spoke to Slater."

"What? What did she say?"

"She thinks you have more evidence you haven't published yet. She said if we didn't offer our help, she would take it."

"Why didn't you wake me?" Dan protested.

Clark jumped in. "You were totally out of it. And I heard everything Emma said: she just told Slater we were telling the truth, then Slater snapped and started making threats."

Dan stood speechless. On the TV, the ACN van drew nearer to the house. Kyle continued to talk as he drove while Trey held his camera, footage from which he was simultaneously sending to ACN and Blitz News. Kyle's ACN-appointed cameraman remained at the drive-in having refused to break his "strict orders" to stay there until the end of his shift. Fortunately for Kyle, Trey was adept at handling a camera and had been able to quickly hook everything up for a live mobile broadcast.

When the van got near enough to see the two SUVs parked outside the house, Kyle stopped and dialled 911. He had turned off the van's headlights before the final turn into Dan's street, knowing that any moving light would alert the group of criminals they were about to catch red-handed.

Trey kept filming. He tried to zoom in, but there was so little

light that the picture suffered too much. He stepped outside, hoping that the camera would pick up more when the view was unobstructed by glass. He opened the door again quickly and quietly. "Put the lights on," he whispered. "They're loading up the cars with Dan's stuff. The police will be too late."

"No no no no no," Clark said. "That's Trey's voice."

Dan put his hands in front of his eyes and watched through his fingers. "He's going to get himself killed."

No one else said anything.

Back in the van, Kyle was reluctant to reveal himself to the robbers. "They'll be here any minute," he said, trying to mollify Trey's urgency.

"Put on the damn lights," Trey snapped at him. "They'll panic and flee. You can drive away if you want, just hit the lights and honk the horn!"

Kyle closed his eyes and hit the lights. The coward in him wanted to drive away as Trey had offered, but the newsman in him demanded to stay put; after all, Trey needed the van and its dish to broadcast the footage. As the lights bathed the street in a wash of yellow, he hammered on the horn to make as much noise as he could.

Everyone in Italy, but Dan in particular, watched through their fingers.

Trey zoomed in tighter on the SUVs. Only one man was in shot, busily loading a laptop into the back of one of the vehicles. He turned to the light, blinded, and shouted something about a federal operation; his voice was only intermittently audible amid Kyle's rhythmic honking.

"Oh, shit," Trey said when he realised what was going on, a whole lot more audible and a whole lot more anxious than before. He jumped into the car. "Reverse, reverse!"

Kyle didn't need to be told twice.

The late-night anchor on Blitz News apologised for Trey's language as they cut away from the live getaway and immediately

replayed the brief glimpse of a federal agent loading a laptop into a blacked-out SUV.

Dan didn't know what to say or do. For once he instinctively looked at Clark rather than Emma. Over the years, Dan had seen some looks in Clark's eyes. But never anything like this.

Nothing like this.

"That was Dad's computer," Clark said, barely louder than a whisper. He cracked his knuckles and sat down on the empty couch. He balled his fists on the glass table like he was about to smash them through it, then took a deep breath. He exhaled, just as deeply, and finally turned to Dan. "Dan..." his voice croaked. "They were in Dad's room."

"She'll pay for this," Emma said firmly. "I will fucking see to that."

After a few seconds of sharp, prickly silence, Timo had a question for whoever could answer it: "Where's the folder?"

"Across the street," Emma answered quickly. She then looked to Clark. "They won't raid Mr Byrd's house, too, right?"

"It's not there," Dan said before Clark could reply. "Mr Byrd gave it to Phil. He's said Phil has a real vault where he keeps all his prepper stuff."

Emma breathed a sigh of relief. "As long as it's more secure than Walker's was."

"If there is anything I can do..." Timo said, leaving the offer hanging.

Dan was the only one to acknowledge him, with a slight nod.

"I'm going to try to get a hold of Jack," Emma said, not anticipating much success. She walked into another room.

Dan dropped himself onto the couch and looked up at the wood-panel ceiling. "So much for Cecil the lion," he said.

D minus 5

*CATTEDRALE DI SAN LORENZO
LUGANO, SWITZERLAND*

Switzerland being another country for Clark to tick off his list was the only positive anyone voiced about their pre-arranged trip across the nearby border.

No one was in the mood for smiling into cameras and Dan didn't even have the energy to care enough to ask why they were visiting a cathedral.

Emma had tried to reach Jack Neal several times since the raid on Dan's house, but each time the same robotic voice greeted her with a message that the number she had dialled was no longer active. She said unusually little during the seventy-minute drive to Lugano.

Upon the group's arrival, the local media greeted them warmly. They fired questions to Dan, in English, about what he made of the sphere and the international team that had been assembled to assess it. No one said anything about the federal raid that understandably dominated Dan's thoughts.

This focus on the bigger issue — and the discovery of the Kerguelen sphere was just about as big as any issue could ever be — calmed Dan's anger slightly. The raid felt like, and was, a gross personal violation. But more pertinently, it was an act of desperation.

Dan had never subscribed to the asinine logic of people who said “if you've got nothing to hide, you've got nothing to fear”, but he took a measure of comfort from the fact that he genuinely did have nothing to hide. As soon as Slater and her snooping analysts went through their unjustly seized loot, they would realise that the whole exercise was a total bust and hang their heads in helplessness.

Dan answered the media's questions with a sprightlier tone than he would have thought possible just minutes earlier, telling them that he fully supported the unified international response and that it would be good practice for whatever kind of global decisions had to be made when the precise content of the sphere eventually came to light.

When Timo showed Dan the tiny village he was born in, during the second of three media stops, a Swiss reporter finally broached the topic of the raid. The questioner asked, very generally, how Dan had reacted to the images and whether he was at all concerned about what might have been taken.

Out of habit as much as anything, Dan looked to Emma for permission to speak about it. She nodded.

“We were appalled,” Dan said. “I'm being treated like a criminal for telling the truth and refusing to lie down. Slater is desperate. She's grasping at straws. She thought I had more evidence or another section of the Kloster letter. More info on what's on the plaques or how to open the sphere. She said that.”

“So there was a warning of this... ah... intrusion?”

Dan looked to Emma again. She shook her head and mouthed “not yet”.

“I'd rather focus on the sphere right now,” Dan said. “That's what's most important.”

“Okay,” the reporter said, nodding respectfully. Timo raised a hand to make sure that the message not to push for further comment on Slater’s warning had been received. “But in any case, it seems to me, very much, that this action is a tacit admission from your US government that the sphere is...”

“Alien,” Dan said, finishing the sentence exactly as the reporter had hoped he would.

“Indeed. Perhaps President Slater is now thinking it is inevitable that the world will find out. Perhaps she—”

“I don’t have any patience left for perhaps,” Dan deadpanned. “If Slater wants to come after me, fine. I’ll be home tomorrow and she knows where I live. But the time for lies has passed.”

After a brief glance to Clark, who was nodding slightly with the same intense look on his face as when he saw the federal agent holding their father’s laptop, Dan then delivered the ad-libbed soundbite that would air on stations from Switzerland to Colorado for the rest of the day:

“The world deserves a lot more than a tacit admission, and I won’t rest until we get it.”

D minus 4

WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON, D.C.

Daylight slowly made its way across President Slater's desk, reaching her computer's screen to mark the end of a sleepless night and the beginning of what was sure to be her most testing day in office yet.

Jack Neal sat next to her, rather than opposite as he usually did, so that both could watch the screen. They watched two news stations simultaneously, alternating which was muted every few minutes. One of the stations was Blitz News and the other a London-based network.

Aside from the typical difference in tone, the content of the news differed greatly. On Blitz News and every other US station, the "midnight raid" on Dan McCarthy's house utterly dominated the early morning news cycle. But in the UK — the country more obsessed with Dan's personal story than any other outside of North America — the raid was only getting around five minutes per hour. Jack assured Slater that the raid had received even less coverage

across continental Europe, where news outlets were focusing almost entirely on the sphere itself.

The speculation on Blitz News, which Slater and Jack were listening to, centred around what the federal agents might have found. “Probably nothing,” was the general consensus, highlighting the level of trust people now had in Dan. The combative but confident comments he had just made in Switzerland further entrenched the expectation that he would come out of the raid clean.

Camera-phone footage shot from the window of one of Dan’s neighbours showed agents searching the home directly across the street from his, where intelligence told them he had recently spent a night. The home’s owner cooperated fully with the agents, leading to no surprise when they emerged empty-handed.

Slater doubted that Dan had taken the folder to Europe — he would have been showing it off if he had, she imagined — but as far as her chances of finding it went, he might as well have.

When the call came through that preliminary searches on the two laptops had revealed nothing more relevant than Dan’s scans and translation of the Kloster letter — the creation and modification dates of which frustratingly corroborated his story — Jack Neal fought the urge to say “I told you so”.

Jack took no pleasure whatsoever in Slater’s predicament, fully aware that his own future depended on hers, but sometimes her pigheadedness was too much for him to handle. Slater had always held the view that it was better to do something than nothing, and Jack’s best efforts to convince her otherwise had always come up short.

There were two words Jack had used countless times in the twenty hours or so since the sphere was found: “damage” and “limitation”. But rather than try to mitigate against what was almost inevitably coming, Slater had done the opposite. With one foot already tied down by the sphere’s discovery, she had shot herself in the other.

The argument immediately before Slater ordered the raid had been their fiercest ever. Jack's position was best summed up by his concluding remark: "You can't keep walking into machine-gun fire."

Slater, with the phone already in her hand, had looked him in the eye and responded calmly: "I'm not just going to close my eyes and hope for the best."

Now, hours after the raid and minutes after the call about the non-findings, President Slater stood up and walked to the window.

"What now?" Jack asked half-heartedly.

She turned to meet his eyes, failed to think of a reply, and meekly turned back to the window. After a few silent moments she sat back down.

Jack didn't ask again. Like Slater, he knew deep down that there was no "what now". There was nothing left to do. Taking the sphere by force, which Jack knew must have crossed her mind in the same fleeting way it had crossed his own, was no real option. The kind of international incident that would have come from blatantly ignoring the restricted zone around Miramar would have been a minor tiff compared to the fallout of any kind of raid on mainland Argentina, let alone a raid on a site currently manned by government scientists from Beijing and Moscow.

Closing their eyes and hoping for the best, as even Slater now saw, was all they could do.

Even the unexpected late-night news that an American scientist had been belatedly invited to join the team of international observers failed to calm Slater's mind. If anything, she felt scorned; she hadn't even known of the diplomatic negotiations until they were over. As far as she understood, the Argentine government had been made aware of the political and economic costs of actively excluding the United States from the team. But the fact that Slater herself was excluded from this process confirmed in her mind that those around her were preparing for life without her.

Aside from this personal slight, Slater also failed to see how she

could derive any personal benefit from the American presence. The scientist who was sent, as per the initial rules agreed between Argentina, Norway and the UK, was chosen by an internal selection process within each country's foremost scientific association. These rules were thrown together in minutes and served only to ensure that the international team was composed of scientists rather than politicians.

The rapidity of the negotiation and selection processes gave Slater no opportunity to converse with NASA's chosen representative; no chance to deliver a direct order to somehow delay the opening of the sphere; no chance to do anything other than close her eyes and hope for the best.

It would have been futile, anyway, Slater conceded. Like all who saw the world in scientific absolutes rather than political subtleties, the scientist whose name Slater didn't even recognise would have no doubt wanted the sphere to be opened as soon as possible. The scientist was no doubt one of the hundreds of millions of Americans who cared more about a historic moment for their species than a career-ending embarrassment for their president.

Slater didn't fully grasp why William Godfrey hadn't raised a vocal objection to an American presence on "his" team, but right now she had too little emotional energy to waste any of it on someone like him.

Another firm rule regarding the ongoing analysis of the Kerguelen sphere was that no national representative could have any contact with their government during the testing. Slater didn't even know where the scientists and the sphere were.

"Some kind of cave or mountain" was all anyone had been able to tell her. She knew this had to be bullshit; with the number of satellites in orbit and agents on the ground the intelligence services had, there was no conceivable way that the sphere could have been transported to a secret location without someone seeing it. And that was before even considering how trivial it would have been to track the NASA scientist's movements.

Slater's paranoia only grew with such thoughts. She couldn't trust the intelligence agencies. Had she never been able to trust them, or had they just given up on her? Whichever it was, it led to the lamentable situation in which she now found herself: getting her updates from the news.

Worse still, she knew it would continue like this. The results from the first round of experiments on the Kerguelen sphere were due in around ten hours and would be released in the form of a written statement issued simultaneously in seven languages. No national governments — even Argentina's, if the official line was to be believed — would see the results before the public. The international team of scientists was “above politics” and would deliver only the facts, free from spin and free from agendas.

Slater took no comfort from knowing that the other seven represented governments would be as out of the loop as she was. That wasn't the point. The real point — the only point — was her personal helplessness.

Conventional wisdom had it that the President of the United States was the most powerful person in the world.

But as Valerie Slater sat silently next to Jack Neal, watching the same news coverage as billions of ordinary people from Albania to Zimbabwe, the last thing she felt was powerful.

LAKE MAGGIORE
ISPRA, ITALY

Dan's public proclamation that he would be home on Friday took everyone by surprise, not least Emma and Clark.

Clark immediately voiced his support for returning early in the wake of the raid and, more generally, the sphere's discovery.

Eventually, Emma agreed. Her attempts to convince Dan to stay until Sunday included revealing that a visit to Lake Toplitz in Austria was planned for Saturday. But when she saw that even this didn't excite Dan, she knew it was time to leave.

Emma looked for upcoming flights home. Frankfurt was still their only option since nowhere else would take them straight to Denver and everyone agreed that it was better to have the connection in Europe — where the media gave Dan some breathing room — than it would have been to fly from Milan and have an inevitably chaotic connection in New York.

"There's a flight from Frankfurt in eleven hours," she said, "then no more until the one we're already booked for in two days. How

long would it take to drive to Frankfurt?”

“Too long,” Timo said. “Europe’s not that small.”

“Surely we can fly?” Dan said.

Timo was already dialling his general assistant to sort it out. “Milan to Frankfurt,” he said, sticking to English. “When? As soon as they can.” He then called for Emma’s phone and read the details on the screen. “It has to be in time for the Frankfurt to Denver International at 11:30 CET.”

Dan couldn’t hear the other side of Timo’s call, but he got the gist of it from Timo’s response.

“No, just three,” Timo said. “I’m not going further than Frankfurt.”

The next pause was much longer.

After listening carefully, Timo looked at Emma. “There’s only two seats from Frankfurt,” he told her.

“No way,” Clark said. “It’s all of us or none of us.” This wasn’t negotiable; he wouldn’t let Dan out of his sight and he knew they would drown without Emma.

“Look for options and stay on the line,” Timo said. He then held the phone against his chest and flitted his eyes between Emma and Clark, no longer sure who was in charge.

“We’re booked on Sunday’s flight, anyway,” Emma said.

“No,” Dan said, bypassing Emma and talking directly to Timo. “I don’t want Sunday’s flight. I thought the whole point of having a private jet was that you could go where you want, when you want. Why can’t we go straight to Colorado Springs from Milan? Can your jet go that far without refuelling?”

“Is it less than 13,000 kilometres?”

They all looked at him blankly.

“8,000 miles?” Timo said, trying again.

“Definitely less than that,” Clark said. “But COS isn’t an international airport. Customs wouldn’t—”

“And we drove to Denver, anyway,” Emma interrupted. “We have to get the car.”

The room fell silent for a few seconds.

“So can we not just go Milan to Denver?” Dan asked whoever was listening.

Timo looked at Emma. She shrugged. He then spoke to his assistant: “Arrange for the jet to leave Milan for Denver tomorrow morning, as soon as possible.” He blew air from his lips as his assistant complained of the difficulties involved. “I know it’s a long flight, but I’m giving you a blank cheque. Make it happen.”



Timo opted to stay with the trio at the lake for their final night in Italy. He relieved his driver of his duties for the evening and insisted on showing them how pizza was supposed to taste. He smiled warmly when Clark told him, without irony, that the cheese wasn’t fatty enough. He would miss them when they were gone.

Dan thanked Timo profusely for everything. He could even begin to think about the cost of the flights or accommodation, but he tried to stress how grateful he was for the opportunity to meet all the people he’d met and to see all the sights he’d seen. He was particularly grateful for the visit to the Cavalieri Observatory, which would have been a once-in-a-lifetime treat even without the heaven-sent timing of the sphere’s discovery.

After dinner, Dan turned down a third glass of wine and went outside to the pool. He slowly dragged one of the heavy reclining sun-loungers away from the pool, faced it towards the lake and lay back in instant comfort. The view was surreal, and so was the silence.

When Dan looked up at the stars, bright as ever, only one thought filled his mind: they really are up there.

Whatever happened next, Dan doubted he would ever have this kind of peace again. Birchwood would be more of a circus than ever when he got home, and he would be in an even brighter spotlight than before. But still: if this was the price of truth, Dan McCarthy

was willing to pay it.

Dan turned in reaction to the door opening a short while later. Clark stepped out and effortlessly carried a recliner over to the space next to Dan's. They hadn't really spent much time alone together since Clark got home, so Dan didn't mind this break in the silence. Emma and Timo remained inside, trying to plan security arrangements on the ground in Denver so Dan could get to the car and get it home amid the unprecedented media storm that was sure to be waiting for him.

"What are you thinking about?" Clark asked.

"Nothing," Dan said instinctively. He then sighed, still looking at the stars. "Or everything, I guess."

"I was out here on the first night," Clark said, "just thinking how cool it must have looked at Lake Namtso when the sphere burst out of the water and floated through the air."

Dan stayed quiet.

"You don't think that would have been amazing? I mean, imagine what it must have been like to see that. I can't even picture it."

Dan finally moved his gaze down from the stars and looked sideways to Clark. "And that was just a sphere they'd already left," he said, an excited smile rising. "Imagine what it's going to be like when they come back."

D minus 2

UNDISCLOSED LOCATION
ARGENTINA

The Kerguelen sphere lay underground at an undisclosed location in northwest Argentina, safely away from the eyes of the world's media.

The international observers who watched through bulletproof glass as Argentine and Norwegian scientists conducted a series of agreed-upon experiments were themselves under careful observation, outnumbered three to one by heavily armed guards. The scientists conducting the experiments were not in favour of this standoffishness, but they had no say.

After a long day of experiments, the observers and hands-on scientists came together to discuss their findings. Once everyone was thoroughly searched for the third time and moved far from the sphere to another area of the base, the international observers were finally able to ask questions and talk amongst themselves in a room free from armed guards. The atmosphere in the discussion room was one of excitement and cooperation as NASA's representative

amiably compared notes with his Russian and Chinese counterparts.

With everyone on the same page and with all of the results pointing in the same direction, it didn't take long for the international team to pen their official statement. Discussions over the wording of the joint statement were conducted in English, with the short statement then translated into Spanish, French, Russian, Chinese, Portuguese and Norwegian.

The chief signatories were the heads of the Argentine and Norwegian research teams, with the international observers listed below. Millions of Americans who watched Blitz News as their sole source of information didn't even know that NASA was represented in Argentina until the statement came out, so narrow had been Blitz's focus on the raid on Dan McCarthy's home in Birchwood.

International news outlets were muted in their reaction to the news that an American had joined the team, and other governments were generally favourable. For despite Godfrey's explicit accusations and Argentina's implicit blame, most now accepted that Hans Kloster and Richard Walker alone — rather than the US government at large — had been responsible for the cover-up. And now that the sphere had been recovered, everyone knew that hostility between nations was not the smart way to proceed.

Even William Godfrey bit his tongue over the eleventh-hour agreement to invite a NASA representative, making no comment that many recently retired NASA staff had cut their teeth with Richard Walker himself in the Office of Science and Technology Policy in the late 1970s. Godfrey did allow himself to publicly state his hope that President Slater wouldn't try to pretend she had been involved in The Now Movement from the beginning, as he himself claimed to have been. The irony of this wasn't lost on Emma and Dan, who knew fine well that Godfrey had piggybacked on their efforts for his own selfish reasons.

Godfrey's one condition for agreeing not to protest an American presence on the international team was, extremely pettily, that the American's name would be at the bottom of the list of signatories.

No one else cared enough to argue otherwise, so Godfrey got his way.

The order of signatories had already been the subject of relatively cordial negotiations, conducted between government leaders rather than the scientists and observers themselves. Argentina came first, followed by Norway. Despite none of the spheres having been found in its territory, the United Kingdom came top of the list of observers thanks to William Godfrey's inarguable prominence in regard to the issue at large.

The stickiest point was whether Russia or China should come next; ultimately, China won out. Russia was then followed by France, Brazil, and, at the bottom of the list, the United States. Godfrey would have liked to see France below Brazil, but he knew it was better to pick his battles than to argue over every little thing.

In broader terms than this list of names, Godfrey knew that he, as the only English-speaking world leader of note with any credibility on the issue, was positioned to take the lead once the sphere was opened. Somewhat undeservedly, Godfrey was a popular figure outside of Britain for standing behind Dan McCarthy and standing up to Slater in the wake of the initial leak. And even at home, his initial intention of using the leak to divert attention away from his ill-fated health reforms had worked a treat. No one cared any longer about the huge march from the day after the initial leak and no one cared about the image of Godfrey covered in red blood-drone paint from a few hours before it.

In place of the embarrassing paint-splashed photo, the new iconic image of William Godfrey was now the image of him holding a symbolic folder outside Downing Street when he declassified Britain's UFO files to pile pressure on Slater. And in place of his foot-in-mouth comments about "hardworking, born and bred Britons" deserving lower health costs and shorter waiting times than unspecified "others", the new endlessly looped soundbites of Godfrey's voice were from the moments he called out Richard Walker and announced to the world that "this is all we have to

disclose.”

But crucially, Godfrey knew one thing above all others: when the sphere was opened and the governments and citizens of Earth needed a leader, they would look to London.



At 8pm local time, the international statement was issued in all seven languages as a single written press release, nominally originating from the desk of Juan Silva, the Coastguard in Miramar who had been the face of the Argentine government on issues relating to the Kerguelen sphere since the American encroachment into the restricted zone some four days earlier.

The statement was very short and very simple. It began by stating the sphere’s precise size and weight, neither of which raised any eyebrows, and by confirming that the sphere was hollow.

More interestingly, the international team confirmed that the sphere exhibited “extremely weak” magnetism, but that this magnetism was indeed multipolar. The material composition of the sphere was described in three words: “exceptionally pure magnesium.”

The team saves the best for last. X-rays and other imaging techniques, they said, had revealed “two distinct rectangular objects” inside the sphere.

Throughout the statement, the word Kerguelen was never used. The word alien was never used. But in the closing line, one word of great interest was used. It was a word that few had ever expected to hear or see an international team of scientists use approvingly in such a context.

After stating that several non-destructive methods of opening the sphere had been suggested and would be attempted on Saturday, the team ended their statement with its first and only subjective sentence:

“We believe our findings thus far to be consistent with the notion

that the sphere is extraterrestrial in origin.”



“So, Mr Kendrick... was that Disclosure?”

“I hope not,” Billy said, answering the ACN reporter’s question with a chuckle. He was at a rest stop on the highway, halfway through the drive to Myrtle Beach for his ET Weekender.

“You hope not?”

“I hope we get more than that,” he clarified. “I don’t want to be flippant, you know? Part of me never thought I’d live to see the day when scientific representatives of the governments of the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, China and the others would say they believed anything was “consistent with the notion” of alien visitation. But that’s just it. I don’t want a belief that something is consistent with the truth. I want the truth. All of it.”

“Full disclosure?”

“Capital-D,” Billy said. “I want to hear that aliens have visited Earth, and I want to hear it from President Slater. It’s hard to explain why given that I don’t trust a word the woman says, but I think Hollywood has taught me that this is how it’s supposed to go. I just think we deserve it. We’ve been lied to for so long and the secret has been right under her nose, even if she wasn’t in on it. When those scientists find out exactly what the truth is, I want to hear it from Slater.”

“Interesting,” the ACN anchor said. “And you’re fully confident that the truth, whatever it might be, will reach the public?”

“Oh, one million percent. There are way too many competing interests involved here for the truth not to come out. Russia, China, Argentina, even the UK... they’re not going to lie to protect Slater or anyone else. Trust me, this is one genie that doesn’t go back in the bottle. Once they see what’s inside the sphere, even if it’s bad news, we’ll find out.”

“By bad news, Mr Kendrick, do you mean...?”

“No, I don’t. They’re not hostile. I was just trying to make the point that we would find out even in the one in a trillion chance that they were,” Billy said, quickly wishing he hadn’t. “But let me say this one more time, so you can loop it all night in case anyone can’t sleep: hostile forces do not leave messages about themselves or warn you when they’re coming back. Okay? The message is a friendly message.”

“I see.” The ACN anchor, whose regular bulletin had been interrupted to accommodate Billy’s interview, didn’t push this “bad news” line of questioning any further. ACN’s higher-ups had been very clear that viewers didn’t want to hear about hostility because viewers didn’t want to think about it. Dan’s sharks vs aliens metaphor, however corny it sounded, was well-grounded in visceral fears and innate avoidance mechanisms. Earth was hopelessly exposed to whoever else was out there, so there really was no sense in worrying about them being hostile. And as Dan and Billy had grown hoarse repeating, the Messengers weren’t hostile, anyway.

“Yup,” Billy said. “We’ll all see. Maybe not tomorrow, maybe not the next day, but soon. We’ll all see.”

FRIDAY

D minus 1

PRIVATE JET
MILAN TO DENVER

The international announcement, coming as it did at 2am Italian time, didn't reach Dan until the morning. When he finally heard the news, a wave of excitement flooded over him.

Dan was certainly more excited by the announcement than Billy Kendrick, whose muted response surprised him. He wanted capital-D Disclosure at least as much as Billy did, but he knew that this development was a huge step in the right direction. The nature of the announcement showed that science was in charge, not politics, and the content all but confirmed that the whole truth was just around the corner.

Timo, equally pleased, soon passed on the less welcome news that Dan's flight home wouldn't leave Italy until much later in the day than they'd hoped. Timo's assistant tried patiently to explain to him that she couldn't change pre-existing schedules no matter how much money he threw at her, and that things Timo didn't have to think about still had to be taken care of; little things like pilots and

landing slots.

When the group eventually boarded Timo's luxury business jet, well into the afternoon, Clark asked if he could speak to the pilots. Timo couldn't see why not. Dan and Emma climbed aboard with handfuls of drinks and snacks having been encouraged to bring them by Timo since there would be no cabin crew for their flight and the jet hadn't been properly restocked.

"As long as it's been properly refuelled," Emma said.

Timo smiled from the tarmac. "Fingers crossed."

Clark reappeared a minute or so later, taking the same seat he had on the way from Frankfurt to Milan. "The pilots seem okay," he said.

Emma didn't say anything.

"What do you mean?" Dan asked.

"They're not going to drop us into the sea."

"Shut up," Emma snapped.

Clark leaned out and turned to face Emma. "What? I said they're not."

The look in Emma's eyes told Clark it would be wise to turn back round. He did.

"Why would you even think that?" Dan asked, frustrating Emma by not dropping the topic.

"You're a problem for the government," Clark said. "And you know how governments get rid of their problems."

"No," Emma interjected, breaking her silence. "Slater has bigger problems than Dan. And anyway, this would be pretty much the single messiest way to do it."

Dan nodded in agreement. "Exactly. They would just do it at home and use a patsy. That's what they did with Kennedy."

Emma heard Clark sigh. She suppressed a grin, not wanting to encourage Dan but glad that his tangent had ended the discussion.

"I looked up how much this model of jet costs," Clark said, still facing the front.

"Yeah?" Emma said.

“Yeah. Without any of the custom work, it’s a hundred mil.”

“Is that all?” Dan asked.

“You know that mil means million, right?”

Dan tutted like a schoolteacher. “Obviously. But a hundred is way less than I thought.”

“Why?” Emma asked him.

“Remember that article I showed you the day we got the cameras put in? Space vs War? It was about the cost of war compared to the cost of space exploration, and part of it was about how much warplanes cost. I definitely didn’t think this thing would be cheaper than an F-35.”

Clark’s head shot round to Dan as though his name had been called. “Did you really just compare the cost of a passenger jet to the cost of an F-35? That’s like... comparing an elephant and a champion racehorse.”

“How much is an elephant?” Dan asked.

Clark started laughing.

“No, seriously. How much is an elephant?”

“A lot less than a fucking racehorse!”

Dan shrugged defensively. “Elephants are sturdier.”

“And slower,” Clark said.

“Elephants live longer.”

“And are easier to hit.”

Emma rolled her eyes. They were back to arguing like 10-year-olds, but at least this time it wasn’t about hostile aliens or government murder plots.

As they neared the Atlantic ocean and Clark ran out of ways to tell Dan how stupid he was, everyone settled into their own rhythm. When Dan asked whether they would still have to press ahead with DNA testing on the folder and documents, which were safe for now with Phil Norris, Emma told him it was hardly necessary since the sphere had already been found and would surely be opened soon. He agreed.

Before long, Emma was asleep; she felt far more comfortable in

her plush seat than she ever had in business class, so much so that even the mild turbulence over France hadn't unsettled her.

Clark listened to music through his headphones; the volume was loud enough that Dan could hear the bass but nothing else.

Dan, for his part, stared down at the world and thought about the sphere. As it too often did, his mind turned to worst-case scenarios.

What if they opened the sphere and found that the real plaques had been replaced by two new ones, roughly engraved with the message: "Fuck you from Richard Walker"?

More serious than this baseless and puerile fear that Walker might have already found the sphere and for some reason re-sunk it, Dan had worries about the plaques' condition given that they'd been exposed to the Earth's atmosphere by Kloster's Nazi friends and then resealed inside one of the spheres for over seventy years. Dan didn't know what the plaques were made of or exactly how the messages were imprinted or engraved on them. He didn't know much about metal, either, but his mind still worried about the possibility of corrosion or rusting or whatever the right word was.

The only other possibility that came to Dan's problem-seeking mind was that even if the plaques were present, intact, and verifiably alien, Hans Kloster might have read too much into the data. The messages might look like gibberish, he thought, raising more questions than they answered.

This wouldn't be ideal, but the more Dan thought about it the more he recognised that it wasn't exactly a nightmare scenario. After all, the big question — which was and always had been "are we alone?" — would be answered, once and for all.

Dan already knew the answer to this question in his heart. He always had, even before the avalanche of evidence he had recently uncovered. But despite this, he still wanted to hear it confirmed. And, like Billy, he wanted it to come from President Slater.

Dan couldn't explain this any better than Billy had been able to. In general terms, there were very few people Dan considered less

worthy of trust than those capable of making it to the top in politics. Slater, who had recently ordered a midnight raid on Dan's house, deserved even less than the rest.

Dan stopped for a second and tried to observe his own thoughts. He smiled; the truth was now so close and so inevitable, his main concern was who was going to tell it. This moment of reflection allowed Dan to see the bigger picture and realise that the identity of whoever made the big announcement would be a footnote in history, right next to his own name as the catalyst for the whole thing.

It didn't matter who made the announcement; the truth was all that mattered. Everything else, as they said, was mere detail.



Several hours later, after a short sleep of his own, Dan lifted his backpack from under his seat and took out the tablet Emma had given him. He went to Billy Kendrick's official website and navigated to the live stream of the ET Weekender.

It was now late afternoon in Myrtle Beach and though many of those with weekend camping passes would be arriving later in the evening, there was already a great turnout. Stats on Billy's website boasted that 16,000 three-day passes and almost as many one-day tickets had been sold.

Dan couldn't help but be impressed. The tickets were cheap — that was an important point — but it had still been no mean feat for Billy to sell so many, particularly when no one really knew what to expect. The weather had certainly been kind, with the forecast showing mid-80s and partial cloud cover with no wind to speak of; warm enough to be pleasant while reducing the chances of sunstroke.

The schedule for the weekend was written to the right of the video window. Dan recognised so many names; music acts, football players, TV personalities, and two authors Dan had liked for years.

Billy mentioned very few of these names during the show Dan appeared at before publishing the Kloster letter, so Dan could only assume that they had been persuaded to attend by the seismic shift in public opinion and the explosion of Billy's celebrity that had occurred since then.

The only scheduled event underway so far was the opening tailgating party, which Dan could see taking place in a huge designated area of the massive site. The cars and trucks were parked on grass. It was going to get muddy as hell.

Everything looked so good; Dan would have loved to be there. But on reflection he didn't regret the Italy trip, which had seemed like a good idea at the time and might just have saved his life. No one had spoken about that, but Dan knew that Clark and Emma must have thought about it. Slater's decision to raid Dan's house was the desperate act of a desperate woman, and Dan had no confidence that his presence in the house would have stopped her from sending the agents in. And if she had, Dan knew exactly how Clark would have reacted to the intruders; however woefully outnumbered and outgunned he might have been.

Dan didn't often give much thought to any of the Big Questions other than the obvious one that the Kerguelen sphere would soon put to bed, but he readily accepted that his trip to Italy had been no accident. He didn't think that Timo was a guardian angel or anything like that, but the invitation had certainly come at the right time.

The live pictures from Myrtle Beach cut to a different camera. Now, rather than the mass of tailgaters, Dan could see the main entrance. Cars and buses were pouring in. Billy Kendrick, looking almost comically casual in a Hawaiian shirt, Bermuda shorts and cowboy hat combo, stood at the entrance and high-fived drivers as they slowed to enter.

Dan was listening through his headphones but couldn't hear Billy; the audio came from a band playing on a stage that hadn't yet been featured on the main stream.

Out of the corner of his eye, Dan saw Clark's legs move suddenly. "You been asleep?" Dan asked.

Mid-stretch, Clark lazily extended his arm into the aisle and raised his thumb. He then reached into his pocket and took out his phone. Seconds later, he turned round to Dan as though he'd just heard a gunshot.

"Are you watching TV?"

Dan lifted his headphones off one ear. "Hmm?"

"Are you watching TV?"

"I'm watching the stream from Billy's thing in Myrtle Beach," Dan said.

"Well kill the stream and go to your TV app."

"What station?"

Clark smiled. It was the kind of smile Dan didn't often see from him; not sarcastic or teasing... real.

"Shut up," Dan said, his expression mirroring Clark's. "All of them?"

"Every single one," Clark confirmed.

Dan shut down the Kendrick stream as quickly as his fingers would allow. While looking for the unfamiliar tablet's TV app, he heard Clark calling to wake Emma then telling her to look at her phone.

After seconds which felt like minutes, Dan finally found his tablet's stupid TV icon. It didn't look anything like any TV he had ever seen, but he was too excited to be annoyed for long. Once it loaded he chose ACN, even though Clark had told him it wouldn't matter.

Despite having selected Blitz News rather than ACN, Emma saw the same picture as Dan: the press room at the White House, bustling with activity but with no sign of President Slater. She read the Blitz headline to Dan and Clark, not sure what station they were watching: "President Slater, PM Godfrey and other world leaders to address their citizens at 20:00ET."

"What time is it?" Dan asked. He didn't know where they were

or even what time zone they were in. Looking outside to gauge the light offered no help, what with their westward flight making a mockery of Earth's rotation.

"Four minutes to," Emma said.

"To what? Eight?"

"Yeah." She looked at Dan again. "They must have got it open. What else could it be?"

"Maybe that they didn't get it open?" Clark thought out loud.

"No," Emma said. "That would just be a statement like yesterday's. This is world leaders. This is it. It has to be. Capital-D."

"Capital-D," Dan parroted, staring open-mouthed at the screen in his hands.

As well as the time and the headline, Emma saw one more thing on Blitz News. It was a small clickable option in the corner of the screen, which would have been accessible via the remote's red button were she watching on a TV. The words intrigued her — "Choose Feed" — so she clicked the link.

There were six tiles arranged in two rows of three. From the small thumbnails Emma could see that the first feed was the one from the White House and the second featured William Godfrey. She clicked on Godfrey without even looking at the others.

The clock now read 19:57, but William Godfrey was already seated at his desk in the middle of the British night, staring into the camera with an unreadable poker face as he waited for the clock to reach eight. Though it was after midnight in London, the upcoming announcement hadn't been timed to fit into prime time TV schedules on the US east coast, as was normally the case, but rather came as quickly as possible after the end of the day's analysis in Argentina.

Having seen with some surprise that Godfrey was respecting the agreed upon embargo, Emma returned to the choice of feeds. After Slater and Godfrey she saw the leaders of the other traditionally powerful nations who had been involved in the experiments on the sphere: Russia, China, and France.

Another new and smaller clickable option in the extreme top-left corner was marked “Nor/Arg”, which evidently would have taken her to the leaders of the two involved countries Blitz had deemed least relevant.

The sixth live feed of the main options — after those labelled London, Washington, Moscow, Beijing, and Paris — was Birchwood. More specifically, it was a huge crowd scene at the drive-in.

For Emma, looking at the makeshift screen she and Trey had arranged at the last minute was more than a little surreal, and Birchwood’s name being up in lights alongside iconic global cities hammered home just how entrenched Dan’s story was in the broader issue.

“The drive-in is on Blitz,” Emma announced as the clock hit 19:59.

Dan shook his head. His eyes then widened, as though regaining focus. “Both of you come over here,” he said. “We shouldn’t be watching this on three different screens.”

The jet had a large screen built into the wall facing all of their seats, of course, but their earlier efforts to turn it on had failed and none of them wanted to disturb the pilots.

Clark hurried over and stood behind Dan’s seat, leaning over the top. Emma squeezed in beside Dan, half on the wide seat and half on his leg. He barely noticed. His entire focus was on the empty podium.

Dan had expected Slater to be sitting at her desk, like presidents normally were for big announcements, but this seemed like one of those details that didn’t really matter.

“Don’t you want to see everyone at the drive-in?” Emma asked.

“They’ll still be there when Slater’s finished talking,” Dan said, “but she’s only going to say this once. I want to see it.”

When he put it like that, Emma couldn’t argue.

A headline popped up on ACN to tell the viewers it was now eight o’clock.

“Where the hell is she?” Clark asked.

“I don’t know,” Emma said. “Godfrey was sitting in his chair waiting for the time to—”

Dan raised a hand to silence Emma, not meaning to be rude but sure that he could hear something. He could: a growing commotion as President Slater entered the room.

Even before she reached the podium, Dan could see that Slater’s hair had been rushed and that her stars and stripes brooch was rotated at a 45-degree angle. He knew that these were trivial little things, but it was unusual for Slater to display even the slightest visual imperfection. His mind likened it to Emma’s insistence on always looking “un-nitpickable”, but amplified a thousand times since Slater saw herself as the leader of the free world.

Beyond these slight imperfections, the President looked incredibly pale; like she’d just been sick a thousand times, as Dan’s inner voice put it. Slater reached the podium and turned around. Her eyes were on the ground, her breathing shallow. Plenty of presidents had been sombre when making important addresses, including Slater, but they’d never looked like this.

President Slater eventually settled into her position behind the podium and looked directly into the camera. She looked broken. There was a long pause.

“Dan,” Clark whispered.

“Yeah?”

“I don’t like this.”

D minus O

WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON, D.C.

“My fellow Americans,” President Slater began, seconds after closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. “I stand before you this evening to humbly relay the content of a statement I have just been given.

“But before I read this statement, which is the same one that has been given to the respective leaders of nations around the world, I would like to say one thing: effective immediately, all IDA operations have been suspended. Richard Walker is being sought for questioning and two of his longest serving staff have already been detained.”

Cameras clicked in the press room. Feet shuffled. A phone rang loudly for several seconds but President Slater didn’t glare at its owner. She cleared her throat and glanced at the A4 sheet in her hand.

“As we all know,” she continued, “the metallic sphere discovered in Argentina has been thoroughly examined under the watchful

eyes of a broad team of international observers. A little over thirty minutes ago, I received some extraordinary news.”

The camera jerked suddenly as someone knocked into it. The wobbling picture revealed Jack Neal and other concerned staff standing against the side wall, none of them other than Jack knowing what Slater was about to say. Of all the government employees in the room, the only ones with their game faces on were the security personnel keeping a close eye on the reporters in preparation to silence the rowdy and eject the hysterical.

“What news?” one voice yelled out above the others, interrupting in a way that had almost become a tradition whenever Slater spoke in public.

President Slater didn’t acknowledge the question. She did, however, raise a palm to simultaneously call off the security guards and quieten the crowd as their collective murmurs grew in volume. Most of them obliged, keen to hear what she had to say in response. The few voices that continued came from too far back to come across clearly on TV.

“Earlier this afternoon,” Slater said, making certain that her voice was heard, “the sphere was successfully opened.”

Every voice fell silent.

“I want to make clear that I am still digesting this information even as I’m giving it to you, and that I will continue to do everything in my power to protect and serve the citizens of this country. At this stage, it is my duty to deliver the following news: we are not alone.”

It was, now, a different kind of silence.

It was, now, as though feet knew better than to shuffle and phones knew better than to ring.

The buzzing wings of a fly, who apparently did not know better, flew close enough to the President’s podium to be relayed at low volume through televisions across the world.

The assembled press pack stayed silent in rapt attention, like children who argued with their parents all day but clung tightly to their hands at night when darkness fell.

“As yesterday’s scans suggested,” the President continued, her voice holding up well, “the sphere contained two metallic objects. What we did not know yesterday but do know now is that the objects are marked in a deliberate and non-random fashion. The precise meaning of the markings on these two objects — on these two plaques — is as yet undetermined. The scientists involved, including our own representative, have agreed to release high-resolution images of the plaques within the next 48 hours, during which time the analysis will continue in Argentina.”

Between Slater’s sentences, viewers could hear cameras clicking.

“This is all I know right now,” Slater said, “and I knew none of it an hour ago. Whether people believe that is no longer the issue. We will, of course, launch a full investigation into the events surrounding this revelation, but the issue now is how we as a nation react. It is in times of shock and uncertainty that great nations pull together, and I appeal to you all to react in the measured and intelligent way I know we can. I also urge the good people of our media, in the strongest possible terms, to report responsibly.”

Still, those good people of the media were silent.

President Slater placed her hands on top of the bare-bones statement she had received from Argentina and the list of damage limitation lines that Jack Neal had rustled up, finished with both. When she spoke again, her expression was more relaxed and her voice half an octave higher:

“Ladies and gentleman... we may no longer be alone, but we will always be united. Always. May God bless America.”

impact

PRIVATE JET
MILAN TO DENVER

Dan McCarthy covered his eyes with both hands to hide the gathering tears. Something stronger than both joy and relief then pulsed through his body in tangible waves, quickening his breathing and elevating his heart rate. It didn't matter that he had always known it was true; he finally knew he was right to know it.

Clark walked round to the front of Dan's seat and lifted him up in a brotherly bear-hug.

Emma, still sitting, looked up at them. Her eyes flicked momentarily to the window next to her seat, focusing her mind on the fact that they would soon be landing in a very different world to the one they'd left in Milan; a world changed forever by an incredible truth. It was a truth Dan had been dying to hear since he was a child, but Emma didn't know how to feel about it on a visceral level. She was happy for Dan and glad to have won by forcing Slater into an admission. But the delay in revealing the content of the messages...

“Bring it in,” Clark said, interrupting her thought.

Emma joined them for the celebratory group hug. “I seriously can’t believe you actually did it,” she spoke into Dan’s ear.

“We did it,” he said. It was true. Emma’s media smarts had been as important as Dan’s initial discovery and her success in bringing it to mainstream audiences had made the victory possible. Deep down, Dan knew that he genuinely couldn’t have done it without her.

“Don’t forget me,” Clark said playfully as they parted. He was talking to Dan. “I’m the one who let her stay. Just saying.”

“We all did it,” Emma said with a broad smile, only half mockingly. “But listen, I might have to write something for when we land, so I better see what Godfrey and everyone has already said.” She motioned towards her seat.

“Do your thing,” Clark said.

The “Choose Feed” option on Blitz News was still there, and it let Emma watch Godfrey’s now finished speech from the beginning as she had hoped.

English was the only language to have had two announcements, but Godfrey didn’t care. If anything, he thought, it was a good thing that Slater had been asked to speak; after all, the difference in both tone and delivery between his statement and Slater’s could only further enhance Godfrey’s already strong position.

Both the President of the United States and the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom had just confirmed the existence of intelligent extraterrestrial life forms capable of reaching Earth, but they had been very different types of Disclosure: pants-down vs I told you so.

All eight national leaders were given the same translated statement with some wiggle room for a few touches relevant to their country. Slater brought up the IDA, for example, while Godfrey subtly reminded everyone that the UK had already taken the lead by disclosing its own UFO files a week earlier.

After a few minutes of saying nothing and letting everything sink in, Dan and Clark sat back in their own seats and watched their

own screens. Clark decided that he wanted to see Godfrey, too, but Dan was more interested in the drive-in.

Dan immediately recognised the angle of the shot: it was the view from Hawker's Hill. The Blue Dish Network watermark on the picture left him in no doubt who had been smart enough to put a camera up there to get such a great view of the crowd and the screen. There were dozens of reporters and cameras concentrated around the screen, and Dan saw Maria Janzyck front and centre. Trey and Kyle were sitting on the roof of Trey's van, parked in its usual spot, just taking everything in.

Even with these pictures of the reaction in Birchwood, the luxurious cabin of Timo's jet felt like an isolation chamber. In the wake of the historic announcement that would shake the planet to its foundations, Dan McCarthy was coasting through the air, somewhere between his world and its stars.

Dan wanted to be home. He wanted to feel the earth shake. He knew he couldn't, though, so the next best thing was watching other people feel it. With that thought Dan closed his tablet's TV app and returned to the live stream from Billy Kendrick's ET Weekender in Myrtle Beach. Emma and Clark were both listening to Godfrey's speech through their own headphones, so Dan didn't bother putting his in.

The timing of Slater's announcement, while not perfect for Dan, was an absolute jackpot for Billy Kendrick. Billy had spent the last decade of his life enduring unparalleled ridicule from all angles, but only he was laughing now.

Dan skipped back ten minutes on the stream then moved slowly forward until the moment of Slater's announcement. The announcement played on huge inflatable screens dotted around the site, like the kind Emma had considered for the drive-in before Trey talked her out of it. All of the people who had been tailgating and watching bands minutes earlier were now listening to the announcement with rapt attention.

The four words that changed the world — “we are not alone” —

brought an immediate and sustained roar that drowned out everything else Slater said.

The live stream had no audio commentary, but Billy employed a director to switch between the site's many cameras to highlight different areas when notable events were taking place. The feed now cut rapidly from place to place, showing the immediate human reaction to Slater's earth-shattering announcement; strangers hugged and danced in front of the main stage; Billy Kendrick, resplendent in his Hawaiian shirt, Bermuda shorts and cowboy hat, stood arms aloft with tears in his eyes at the main entrance; tailgaters high-fived and spilled beer with abandon. And from the other side of the clouds, Dan McCarthy smiled down on them all.



As joyous as the Kendrick scenes were, and as wonderful as the moment was for the 30,000 or so who were gathered in Myrtle Beach, Dan knew that the more important scenes were those on the news stations which would be viewed by most of the 300,000,000 Americans who weren't.

With that in mind, he returned to his tablet's TV app and flicked between various news stations.

During the few minutes Dan spent on ACN, he saw an unfamiliar reporter standing at the entrance of a Tasmart megastore in Dallas, looking on as shoppers piled water and batteries and other essential items into their cars. The reporter put on his best negative voice but the glint in his eye gave away his glee at getting the visual he was there for. He went on to use the familiar newsman's trick of talking about looting and rioting without directly saying that either had occurred.

Dan reflected with frustration that immediately following the greatest moment in human history — a species- and civilisation-redefining moment — the news networks were already fast at work selling fear. He knew that fear was their bread and butter, but for

some reason Dan had expected better from ACN. Probably because of how much he'd grown to like Maria and Kyle, he thought.

After ACN, Dan spent a few minutes on Blitz News where the tone was markedly more positive. Sarah Curtis, the Blitz anchor with more faces than a roomful of clocks, praised Dan with words like “tenacious”, “determined”, and “resolute in the face of a political class that quite simply didn’t want to have this discussion.” Dan couldn’t miss the irony of the unacknowledged reality that until a few days ago, the only thing he’d had to be resolute in the face of was Blitz Media’s character assassination and harassment campaign; the “political class” had caused no real problems for Dan until the very recent raid on his home.

Dan continued his tour of news stations from around the world. He knew that people had always predicted a moment like this would bring panic, but the more he thought about it the more he realised that no one had ever really foreseen a moment quite like this.

But still, context was everything. In the two weeks since the initial leak, almost the entire world had come to accept that they were being lied to, with countless citizens and governments demanding Disclosure throughout the second of those two weeks; so much so that the eventual announcement felt more like a victory than a surprise.

Even the fact that ACN’s fearmongering was focused on potential riots and empty shelves rather than the supposed cause of those riots told a story.

Out of pure curiosity, Dan then clicked onto an Italian news network. Despite having no idea what the voices were saying, he got all he needed from the graphic. It was a map, with a dotted line going from Italy to Colorado. A stronger red line lay on top of the dotted line, showing the progress of Dan’s flight. It was, at a rough estimate, 95% of the way there.

“We’re almost home,” he said, loudly enough to catch Emma and Clark’s attention through their headphones. “Italian TV has a map of the flight path and it says—”

*“Nineteen minutes,” Emma replied without losing focus.
Clark took his headphones off and leaned out of his seat to face Dan. “The mountains didn’t give it away?” he asked sarcastically.
Dan raised his window’s blind and looked outside. He smiled.
Home.*



As Dan and Emma walked towards the top of the jet’s stairs with Clark right behind them — all three already hearing the crowd that had gathered to greet them on the other side of the airport’s fence — Dan stopped before taking his first step down.

“What happens now?” he asked.

No one answered.

“I don’t just mean right now,” Dan said, suddenly sounding flustered. “Or here. Or to us. I mean everything. Seriously... what’s going to happen?”

Emma raised her eyebrows and turned her palms upwards, shrugging without shrugging. For once, she had no answer.

Clark patted Dan on the back, a harder slap than intended. “Now...” he said, leaving his hand there and giving Dan’s back another two gentler pats.

“Now what?” Dan said, turning impatiently to see Clark.

Clark held his eyes. “I guess we’re gonna find out what the hell we’ve just done.”

Part 5

DISCLOSURE

*“All human wisdom
is summed up in these two words:
wait and hope.”*

Alexandre Dumas

D plus 1

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

The scene that greeted Dan at the airport in Denver was one of absolute chaos. Fortunately, the police were well prepared for his arrival and did everything necessary to get him safely to his car. It was relatively plain sailing from there, with the car becoming anonymous as soon as Clark hit the highway.

In Birchwood, the roadblocks were back in full effect with each now manned by four local officers rather than two. The drive-in was predictably packed. But when it came into view, Emma less predictably ordered Clark to speed up. No one at the drive-in spotted the car.

Dan didn't complain.

Having decided against a public appearance, Emma showed Dan the statement she had written during the final stages of their flight home. With his full approval, she then posted it online.

The statement was short and uncontentious, with Dan, in Emma's words, expressing his "great joy and greater relief" that the

truth had finally come out. It called for haste in the plaques' public revealing and echoed President Slater's call for a calm and peaceful reaction. On that note, it added that Dan no longer had any desire to be held up as a figurehead in opposition to the nation's political establishment; Richard Walker was well and truly out of the picture — discredited, wherever he was — and the cover-up was no one else's doing. Without mentioning her by name, the statement made clear that Dan believed Slater's plea of ignorance.

Clark, surveying the damage from the raid Slater had ordered just two days earlier, took issue with letting her off so easily. Mr Byrd had done a good job of tidying the place up, but the missing laptop and the muddy footprints in Henry's room made it hard for Clark to wish anything but personal and professional ruin on Valerie Slater. The one consolation Clark found was that the fish were okay. Mr Byrd had fed them as promised and luckily the federal agents hadn't damaged the aquarium. Lucky for them, Clark thought to himself.

After wolfing through one of the freshly delivered Houghton's Home Fresh meals, received and packed away by Mr Byrd, Dan spent most of Friday night sitting out on the back decking. His mind was surprisingly and refreshingly clear, like eyes blinded by too much light. For the first time since he found the folder, and at the least likely of all moments, Dan found himself thinking about nothing.

Emma joined him outside after a while. She respected the silence for a few minutes, taking in the rickety toolshed and the small area of overgrown paving that looked more like grass with patches of concrete than concrete with patches of grass.

"All the news is pretty upbeat," she eventually told him. "People are more excited than scared."

Dan nodded, too many times. His mind was somewhere else. "I thought there would be helicopters above the house and news guys bursting through the roadblocks to harass us," he said, like Emma hadn't even spoken. He looked up from the nothing he had been

staring at and turned to her. "Do you think it's maybe a little too quiet?"

"Aliens are real," Emma said.

"I know, but—"

"That's the story. That is the story. Don't take this the wrong way, but you're not the story anymore. You're just the guy who got the ball rolling." She clicked her fingers then moved her hand horizontally in a quick "just like that" motion.

"You think?" Dan said, genuinely asking.

"Yeah. It's like... I know you don't believe the whole JFK thing is real or whatever, but—"

"It's obviously real," Dan interrupted. "I just don't accept the official—"

"That's not the point," Emma cut him off, returning the favour. "What I was going to say is: people used to talk about remembering where they were when JFK was killed. Okay? No one ever talked about remembering where they were when Oswald killed JFK. Because the story was the President being shot. Even though Oswald was the guy who actually took the action and made the big thing happen, the story was that the big thing happened. Do you know what I mean?"

Dan nodded, quietly hopeful that she was right. Attaining celebrity had never been part of his plan, whether people believed that or not.

"Your old life is over, though," Emma added, very abruptly. "You can't go back to working at the coffee—"

"It's a bookstore."

"At the bookstore," Emma grinned. "Because even though you're not going to be the focus of everything like you have been these last two weeks, the media are still going to treat your life like it's public property. That's just what they do. But it's not like you have to keep going to the drive-in every day or talking on TV. You won't have to do any active media work at all if you don't want to."

Dan took in everything Emma said. He hadn't been holding out

much hope that his life would go back to normal, but if that was the price of Disclosure then it was a price worth paying a thousand times over.

“Except for those ads you promised me,” Emma added in her chirpiest XPR-era tone. She stood up and ruffled Dan’s hair like an annoying big sister before walking back inside. “Don’t think I forgot about them, Dan McCarthy.”

“My fingers were crossed when I made that promise,” he jokingly called after her. He turned to see Emma’s middle fingers raised in reply.

“You should come inside and see what’s happening everywhere,” she said more seriously. “After all, you’re the guy who pushed the ball down the hill. Might as well see where it’s rolling...”

SATURDAY

D plus 2

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

As Friday night faded into Saturday morning, Dan quickly saw that Emma was right about the media focus shifting from him to the real story. He stayed awake all night with both Emma and Clark, drinking cup after cup of sugar-loaded instant coffee.

Clark abstained from the coffee and complained that he wouldn't sleep anyway since his body clock was still "all messed up" from the time difference; as always seemed to be the case, he had just finished adjusting to the new time zone in Italy when it came time to leave and he now had to do it all over again. He sat in his armchair, half-focused on the TV.

So much was happening that the news networks didn't know what to focus on. The most visually symbolic scenes came from Billy Kendrick's ET Weekender in Myrtle Beach, but by midnight they had been played to death.

Blitz News and ACN both devoted a lot of airtime to their foreign correspondents in cities around the world and the story was always

similar: there were small spontaneous gatherings of excited citizens honking horns and playing music, but most people were just getting on with their lives at home or at work. It would soon become clear that most of them were watching the news with the same rapt attention as Dan, breaking viewing records on news networks everywhere.

One thing missing from any city was the kind of mass panic that would have been prevalent in an invasion scenario and might have occurred had the Disclosure announcement come out of the blue. But by accident rather than design, Dan's initial leak and the subsequent drip-by-drip revelations had almost been akin to boiling a frog; no one had been suddenly dropped into a reality where aliens existed, so the eventual confirmation wasn't a fatal shock to the system. The plaques were yet to be publicly revealed, of course, and Dan quietly hoped that this one final revelation wouldn't raise the temperature any further.

The counterpoint to this welcome lack of panic was that, from where Dan was sitting, the global reaction lacked the sense of wonder and awe that might well have been equally widespread if the announcement had come out of the blue.

Dan reflected that the Kloster letter had perhaps spoiled the surprise, but he knew that without it the Argentine government wouldn't have started searching for the sphere; meaning that either the truth would have remained at the bottom of the ocean or, worse, that Richard Walker might have acted with urgency and launched his own covert recovery mission.

If this was a trade-off, Dan was happy to make it. But while mundane was far too strong a word, he still couldn't shake the feeling that the excitement levels were a few notches lower than they should have been.

Maybe everyone is catching their breath before the plaques come out, he thought. Yeah. That's it.

D plus 3

10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON, ENGLAND

When Big Ben chimed to signal noon in London, things changed.

For while President Slater's appeal for a calm and peaceful reaction had largely succeeded in maintaining order and quelling anger at home, there was one man on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean who refused to let her off so easily.

Prime Minister Godfrey stepped outside Number Ten at the turn of the hour with an unusually well-groomed John Cole by his side. Godfrey spoke for a few minutes about how proud he was that the international team he proposed had succeeded in opening the Kerguelen sphere and confirming its extraterrestrial origin.

He stressed that he and other national leaders genuinely hadn't yet seen the two plaques but told the world there was no danger of the truth being suppressed given that so many countries were represented on the team. Dan nodded at home, having said something very similar himself.

"But I can't insult your intelligence by ignoring the elephant in

the room,” Godfrey continued, focusing his sights. “Or perhaps I should say the two elephants in the room. I speak, of course, of Richard Walker and Valerie Slater.”

“I literally cannot believe he’s doing this,” Emma said. Dan shushed her. Clark sat up straight.

Back in London, John Cole didn’t even try to hide his snakelike grin.

“Walker is probably busy preparing his apology,” Godfrey said. “I imagine he’s getting ready to follow the age-old American pattern of “deny, deny, apologise, resume” — you know, the same pattern they adopt when they get caught torturing their own citizens or indiscriminately spying on whoever they feel like. But the American public will never believe another word Walker says, so he’s no longer relevant. Slater, though...”

Godfrey paused for effect, relishing the global spotlight.

“With Slater, it seems like the American press is already softening to her. Now, I’m a big enough man to stand here and tell you that I got it wrong when I accused her of being in on Richard Walker’s dirty little secret. Forgive me for expecting the elected leader of the most powerful country in the world to know what was going on under her nose. But surely this is even worse than if she had been in on it? I touched on this before — that her position would be untenable whether she was complicit or complacent — but part of me didn’t really think this level of incompetence was possible.”

John Cole’s face beamed with pride; he had written most of this. Cole was nothing if not adaptable and now understood the importance of differentiating an attack on the American President from an attack on the American people. The next few lines in Godfrey’s speech served that purpose.

“And I can’t imagine how I would feel if I was an American taxpayer,” Godfrey said, shaking his head. “After all, their hard-earned tax dollars pay Walker’s wages and have funded this cover-up for decades. I understand that some patriotic Americans took my

words the wrong way a few weeks ago, and I don't hold that against them; things were said in the heat of the moment that I won't be saying again. We move on. And this must be a particularly hard day for those patriots, forced to watch on as the world blames their country for the actions of one man and the incompetence of one woman. Those patriots must feel betrayed, like the mother who insisted her son was a good boy, deep down. Because when that boy is proven guilty beyond doubt, is the mother's disappointment not greater than the victim's anger?"

"What the fuck is he talking about?" Clark asked.

"He knows what he's doing," Emma said. "I don't, but he does."

Godfrey turned his notes over to the final side and continued: "Valerie Slater and the entire machinery of her government has been exposed as unfit for purpose. That much is clear. But I want to reassure the American public right now that they should feel no more foolish for having had the wool pulled over their eyes than I do; indeed, no more foolish than any of the world's governments who have endured the same thing. No. The only people who should feel foolish today are Slater and her cronies — the people who have signed Walker's cheques and shaken his hand with no idea what he was doing, right under their noses. No one else is at fault here. No one."

Godfrey raised his hand to the reporters in his unique but familiar half-thanks-half-dismissal. No one shouted out any questions or comments. As Godfrey turned back towards his door, John Cole surprised everyone by staying put.

"John," Godfrey said under his breath.

Cole held up a finger to Godfrey in a brave call for patience. "Slater and her cronies can't expect to take the lead on this," he announced into the microphone.

Godfrey walked towards him. "John," he muttered again, this time much more forcefully.

"Since 1945," Cole said, rushing to say his piece before Godfrey reached him, "the American government has behaved like a fat

child with the biggest stick in the playground. Well let me tell them this: those days are gone.”

Godfrey smiled like a mildly embarrassed dog-owner and tried to pull Cole away from the podium without causing a bigger scene. But Cole, a much heavier man, wouldn’t budge until he was finished.

Cole leaned down to the microphone. “This lie has done a lot of things,” he said, setting himself up for the punch line. “But more than anything else, it has snapped that stick in half.”

D plus 4

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

“If he wasn’t supposed to say it, he wouldn’t have said it,” Emma insisted. While Dan and Clark bought into the spontaneity of John Cole’s rank-breaking outburst, she had been in PR long enough to see through it. “Godfrey just wanted that to be said but didn’t want to say it. He’s like a ventriloquist who calls a woman in the front row fat then blames the dummy when she gets offended. That’s why Cole was there: he’s Godfrey’s dummy.”

“But why does Godfrey want rid of Slater, anyway?” Dan asked. “I get that he wants to take the lead post-Disclosure, but won’t that be easier for him if the President is someone with no credibility? If he keeps attacking Slater and she leaves office, he might end up with a new rival who is credible.”

Emma shook her head. “Slater is going nowhere. There’s too much uncertainty. People might think they want change but deep down they need stability. Wars and disasters are a struggling president’s best friends, and I guess aliens are, too.”

Later in the morning, Blitz News had a retail analyst in the studio to talk about the immediate economic effects of Disclosure. Computerised sales-tracking and stock-management systems meant that illuminating data was already available, with no need to wait several days as had once been the case.

The analyst started by saying that overnight sales of staple foods and batteries were up by hundreds of percent on what would normally be expected for a Friday night. Shelves did empty, she said, but they had since been restocked; with no measurable increase in highway traffic, there had been no major strain on just-in-time delivery networks.

Ammo sales had skyrocketed, she said, breaking yet more records. She described Friday evening's announcement as "a super tornado of truth" which had already dwarfed any natural disaster in terms of sales impact.

When the Blitz News anchor asked about the possibility of a bank run or freeze, the guest shook her head. "Cash withdrawals were not significantly higher than a typical Friday night, and I think it's pretty clear that a bank freeze would do more harm than good. If the government wanted to make people panic, the quickest way to do it would be to tell them they can't access their money."

"And what can we expect in terms of the stock market on Monday?" the anchor asked.

"Oh, down," the analyst replied.

"Down?"

She nodded and widened her eyes. "Whatever the plaques say... down. Because there's one thing that no market likes, and that's uncertainty."

As the segment ended, Dan couldn't help but think that Blitz were making quite a stretch in having a self-described "retail analyst" talk as the authority on broad economic issues.

The nature of sensationalised 24-hour news normally made it difficult for anyone who viewed for more than an hour to tell whether the topics being pored over from every possible angle were

worthy of such attention, since every little triviality was presented as a must-know story. But today, for once, it really was different.

Dan thought about the millions of families around the world, all huddled around their TVs in anticipation of the next development. He imagined what it would have been like if Disclosure had come even one year earlier, when his father was still there and still himself.

To Dan's delight, the next interviewee on Blitz News was none other than Billy Kendrick, live from Myrtle Beach. Billy stood onstage, bathed by the morning sun in front of thousands upon thousands of revellers. The big wheel in the distance highlighted just how much Billy had been inspired by the European music festivals he had run parallel events alongside during the previous summer. To Dan, the scene was surreal.

After some brief small talk and a few light-hearted remarks from Billy about being surprised that Blitz invited him back, his old sparring partner Sarah Curtis asked for his views on President's Slater's culpability in failing to uncover Richard Walker's lie.

"Walker can call himself a scientist all he wants," Billy shrugged, "but we all know he's a politician. And a politician who tells lies and keeps secrets is a politician doing his job. But is it not supposed to be the journalists' and the reporters' jobs to expose lying politicians? Obviously Slater has questions to answer, but it's not like monitoring Richard Walker was the main part of her job. Exposing giant lies and secrets is supposed to be your job at Blitz, so maybe you should be careful about pointing the finger."

"Uh, be that as it may," the anchor evaded, "and, uh, speaking of scientists... how do you think scientists will react to this news given that it challenges so many of our basic assumptions?"

Exasperated by the attempt to paint a picture using such broad strokes, Billy blew air from his lips until they vibrated. "Scientists aren't a single group," he said. "Even within disciplines, there are polar opposite views. It would be like saying that scientists would be suicidal if they learned that man-made global warming wasn't

real. Sure, a lot of them would, because their careers are so invested in the narrative. But others have built their whole careers on promoting the counter-narrative, so those scientists would feel as vindicated as I do right now.”

“You must feel pretty vindicated,” the now sycophantic anchor said.

“Well, I always knew the establishment’s monopoly on the truth would die. But even though I knew there was a chance it might not be on their preferred terms, I’d be lying if I said I ever truly saw this coming. I never really imagined that the establishment would be forced to bow before us with its tail between its legs, humbled by its own deceit.”

Sarah Curtis nodded and smiled, listening to the instructions coming through her earpiece to end the interview now that Blitz had enough soundbites and snippets to fill the cycle for the next few hours. “I’m afraid that’s all we’ve got time for, Mr Kendrick. A final word?”

“Yesterday’s discovery proved two things,” Billy said. “One: competing nations can cooperate when they have to. And two: interstellar travel is scientifically possible. I don’t know if these people agree with me,” he said, holding his arms out to play to his crowd, “but I think it’s high time we stop fighting and start exploring.”

Rapturous cheers followed Billy’s closing line. He grinned from ear to ear, even more gleefully than he had on the afternoon of the initial leak.

The roar of the crowd made Dan wish he was there. During the drive home from the airport he had raised the possibility of making an appearance on Sunday but Emma said no, firmly insisting that he should lie low for a few days.

After Billy, Blitz News returned to a replay of the retail analyst’s appearance. “Seen this,” Dan said. “Switch to ACN.”

The remote was on Clark’s knee. He switched to ACN and was as surprised as anyone to see a written statement from Diane Logan.

Clark and most other Americans had heard the name Diane Logan on precisely one previous occasion, when President Slater mentioned talking to her about the lack of support Godfrey enjoyed within his own party. Logan, for her part, hadn't spoken publicly since two days after the initial leak when she took exception to Godfrey's successful attempt to turn a memorial event into an opportunity to score political points. She had since been unceremoniously kicked out of Godfrey's cabinet, with the appointment of John Cole to her former position as Deputy Prime Minister only adding insult to injury.

Now, long after the horse had bolted, Logan's informal online post revealed that Godfrey didn't initially believe Dan's story and explicitly suggested commenting on the leak to deflect attention away from the protest march and embarrassing blood-drone pictures which threatened to undermine his leadership. She also revealed that she was the only cabinet member to openly question Godfrey's idea and that John Cole was the only one sycophantic enough to vocally support it. This, she claimed, was why Cole had since replaced her as Godfrey's Deputy PM.

"She must know how bitter that sounds," Emma said.

"Sour grapes for breakfast, lunch and dinner," Clark agreed.

"Yeah," Dan added, "but she probably just had to get it off her chest." Dan had never been under any illusions that Godfrey was on his side for anything but the most selfish of reasons, so it didn't surprise him to finally get some evidence. Emma and Clark's point about it sounding like sour grapes was definitely true, though, so Dan didn't think Logan's words would have any kind of effect on Godfrey's attempts to position himself as leader of Team Earth. "Godfrey is a snake," he thought out loud.

"I'd rather have him than Slater," Clark said.

Dan didn't say anything.



Back on Blitz News, Ben Gold stood on his doorstep at home, begging the cameras to leave him alone. Ben, almost crying, responded to accusations of complicity by blubbing that he knew less than the news networks and offering to take “any kind of test” on the spot. “Lie detectors, brain scans, hypnosis, anything you want.”

The Blitz footage then cut and resumed a few minutes later, by which time Ben had composed himself and offered to give further comment if they promised not to air the footage of him crying. They made the promise but included it anyway, along with his request for it to be cut.

The crux of Ben’s comments was that he couldn’t believe that Richard had been able to lie so convincingly to his face. Hiding the truth for whatever reasons he might have had was one thing, Ben said, but outright denying it after the leak was indefensible.

Ben said he was pleased that his long-held confidence in the probability of extraterrestrial life existing in a feasibly reachable location had been proven well founded but admitted that the “deep personal betrayal” more than cancelled this happiness out.

“I’ve spent my career searching for evidence,” he said, a broken kind of sorrow in his voice, “and the man I considered my best friend and closest colleague was hiding it from me the whole time, right there in the next room.”

After Ben, Richard’s trusted security guard Raúl was also hounded for comment by the media and eventually relented in an effort to get them to leave his family alone. Also speaking from his doorstep, Raúl said he had known both men for many years and that while Richard’s decision to hide the evidence surprised him, his success in doing so didn’t. “The man is a force of nature,” Raúl said. “No one comes close.”

When pushed for his views of Ben Gold, Raúl insisted that there was no way Ben was in on it. “Mr Gold couldn’t keep a secret like this,” he said matter-of-factly. “He couldn’t lie like this. He wouldn’t, but even if he would, he couldn’t.”

One of the reporters standing outside Raúl's family home then asked if he had noticed any unusual behaviour from either Richard or Ben over the last two weeks. Raúl mentioned Richard's head-butt on a Now Movement protestor and also part of a conversation he accidentally overheard between Richard and Ben. Explaining that Richard's words had stuck with him, Raúl quoted verbatim: "There are things you don't know, Benjamin; things you don't need to know."

Raúl's testimony — he effectively spoke as both an eyewitness and a character witness for Ben — satisfied those in the media who weren't already sure that Ben Gold truly had been as out of the loop as everyone else. Dan had known this all along, as had Jack Neal; because if there was one person hit even harder by the lie than Valerie Slater, it was without doubt Ben Gold.



Over dinner, which was eaten in front of the TV in case any news came out about the plaques, Dan asked Emma something she had been trying not to think about: "After we've laid low for a few days, what's the plan?"

"I don't have a plan," Emma said after a moment's pause. "We've met our goal. When that happens, I usually move on to the next client."

"So... when are you planning on going home?" Clark asked. He quickly continued: "I don't mean that like... hurry up and go. I just mean..."

"No," she said, "I know what you meant." She paused for a few seconds, much longer than last time. "I don't know."

"Do you own your place in New York?" Clark asked.

She shook her head.

"So you rent it?"

"The firm cover it. Well, covered it."

Dan interjected: "What about all your stuff?"

She shrugged, then sighed. "They won't throw it on the street. It's not like they hate me, they just had to be seen to act because they didn't want any kind of public association with you." Emma's frown suddenly turned into a smile. "How hard must they be kicking themselves now, right?"

"Yeah," Clark said, laughing. "You'd think executives at a PR firm, of all people, would have known which way the wind was blowing."

"They didn't know what we knew," Dan said. "They didn't know about the letter or anything."

"Neither did I," Emma replied. "Not when they fired me."

"Yeah, but you'd been around me enough by then to know that I wasn't lying."

"I told them that, though. I said on the Monday that I thought you believed yourself, at the very least, but they told me not to get sucked in. Not to get too close."

"I wouldn't say you got too close," Clark said. "I mean, it's not like you're living in his house two weeks later or anything."

Emma laughed. "It's weird. Jack used to always tell me I had to make a client feel like it was me and them against the world and that they needed me in their corner, but this time I was the one who felt like we were up against it and the client was the one who was sure it would work out. As soon as I came here it was so different. So... personal."

"You can stay as long as you want," Clark said.

"At least until Dad gets home," Dan qualified.

Emma's eyes flicked between them. "Is that a serious offer?"

"It's the least we can do," Clark said. "You've kept this idiot out of trouble for long enough, and you aren't even getting paid for it anymore."

"Thanks," she said. "Really."

"So now that you're sticking around, when are you going to release that phone call from Slater when she threatened us right before the raid?"

Of all the things Clark could have said, this was among those Emma expected least. "I haven't really thought about that."

"Don't," Dan said.

Clark looked at him. "What? Why?"

"I don't want to be in the news anymore," Dan said. "And it would strengthen Godfrey's position?"

"And?"

"And Godfrey gives me a bad feeling."

Clark rolled his eyes and groaned.

"What do you mean?" Emma asked. "What kind of feeling."

Dan shrugged. "I dunno, but it's not good."

SUNDAY

D plus 5

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

Sunday morning passed painfully slowly, as though the time zone on Dan's phone had been changed to Tortoise Time and the sand in his mental hourglass had been switched out for treacle.

His legs grew ever more restless on the edge of the couch as the day wore on; his eyes and ears grew tired of the news stations' grating graphics and jingles; his entire being grew frustrated at the passivity of it all.

Before Friday, Dan had been trying to make something happen: Disclosure. And though something equally important was supposed to happen on Sunday — the grand revealing of the alien plaques — Dan couldn't do anything to make it happen any faster. Like everyone else glued to their TV, all he could do was wait.

There had certainly been plenty of times over the last few weeks when Dan had found himself watching the news to see how leaders and citizens in different countries would react to the latest developments, but up until now he had always known that he

would be responding. He always knew Emma would be there to tell him what to do next to build upon those reactions, always with the ultimate goal in mind.

Emma was still there, of course, but as she said the previous night: the goal had been achieved. And so it was that Dan now found himself adjusting to his new role of spectator rather than participant. Though glad and more than a little proud to have done his part to bring things this far, Dan wasn't relishing this new feeling of impotence that came from sitting on his couch, waiting for news.

The 4pm announcement that the images would finally arrive at 6pm made these final two hours the longest yet, but the definitive ETA turned Dan's restless frustration into a more excited anticipation.

Minutes later, a single word flipped Dan's mood yet again.

"We've been told that we will receive three images," Sarah Curtis revealed, "at three-minute intervals. The first will show the international team holding the plaques, for scale and verification purposes, and the next two will be close-ups of the plaques. A statement from the team, complete with annotated images detailing their interpretations of the plaques, is expected at some point tomorrow. For the quickest and best analysis, stay tuned to Blitz News where an unrivalled panel of experts will discuss the images as soon as they come in."

"Complicated much?" Clark said.

"They probably want to give us a chance to digest it all," Emma said. "To see what we make of the plaques before they tell us what they think." She and Clark then turned to Dan, waiting for his input.

"Interpretation is a bad word," he said without looking away from the screen. "It means there's doubt. Ambiguity."

"Interpret just means explain the meaning," Emma said, surprised by Dan's take.

Dan shook his head. "It implies subjectivity."

"No it doesn't. Maybe if it said justifying their interpretations.

But not detailing their interpretations. How is that subjective?"

Dan slowly turned to Emma, who was right next to him on the couch. "There's a reason people say things are open to interpretation," he said, an unusual edge to his voice. "And there's a reason the international team aren't saying anything until tomorrow." He turned back to the screen.

Clark and Emma shared a look.

6pm could not come soon enough.

D plus 6

WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON, D.C.

“You must be able to find something out?” President Slater said, more pleading than forceful.

Jack Neal sighed; he had been doing this a lot lately. “Valerie, there’s nothing to find. No one at NASA has heard from him since he entered the compound. We now know where that is, but there’s nothing we can do about it. The team members haven’t been able to speak to anyone on the outside. They’re under legitimate military lockdown.”

“So you’re telling me that I’m going to find out what the plaques say at the same time as the public?” Slater asked, almost spitting out the last word in disgust.

“This is where we are,” Jack said, resorting to one of the first lines he taught Emma to use when dealing with dissatisfied clients. “The only thing we can control is where we go next.”

“We’ll go wherever these damn plaques take us,” Slater said, beyond frustrated to be as passive a viewer as Dan McCarthy, but

with a lot more to lose.

“This is where we are,” Jack repeated meekly.

Slater ignored him, put her head in her hands, and cursed the name of the man who had landed her in this steaming pile of political horseshit. “I swear to God, Jack,” she said after a few seconds. “If that bastard Walker’s not already dead...”

D plus 7

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

Dan's heart quickened as the Blitz News countdown timer ticked towards zero.

With four seconds to go, Sarah Curtis interrupted the countdown with the news everyone had been waiting for: "The first image has just come through."

Seconds later, it filled the screen.

"They look like tablets," Clark said.

Dan scanned for details. The entire international team was present, arranged like students in a makeshift school picture with the tallest at the back and the shortest at the front. The shortest were the lucky ones; the ones holding the plaques. Each plaque looked roughly the size of Dan's old laptop — fifteen inches.

"A plaque basically is a tablet," Emma replied, taking everything in almost as keenly as Dan.

Dan's eyes rested on the team members' faces, trying to read them. Most of the scientists wore natural-looking smiles, some

looked forced, and one or two appeared as though they had never smiled in their lives.

“I mean a computer tablet,” Clark said. “It looks like the back of one of those. One that’s been engraved. Can’t see what’s engraved, though.”

Clark’s was a good point: nothing on either plaque was clearly visible. Blitz News zoomed in close after showing the team photo for thirty seconds or so, but the lighting made it impossible to discern much. All attempts to reveal detail by adjusting the contrast and exposure were futile.

When a straight line on one of the horizontally held plaques finally presented itself after further attempts to manipulate the image, Sarah Curtis gleefully announced: “A line!”

This was as far as anyone got until a new countdown timer appeared after two minutes, counting down from one minute.

Dan clutched a printout of the Kloster letter in his hands. It was his own original attempt rather than one of the vastly superior translations that had been made since, but it was good enough to remind him of what to expect.

“An unfamiliar solar system” and “a timescale for the Messengers’ return,” Kloster had written.

Dan breathed in shallow gulps, genuinely struggling to comprehend the magnitude of what he and the rest of the world were about to see.

In forty seconds, he would see the close-up details of the first plaque. In four minutes, he would see the second.

Dan made an effort to control his heart-rate.

These were messages.

This was contact.

He was giddy.



At 6:03pm, Dan McCarthy laid eyes on a deliberate message from an

intelligent extraterrestrial race.

The first plaque, displayed without official comment, was divided in halves by a vertical line. The dividing lines and the other engraved details were perfectly clear, appearing in a strong grey which contrasted well with the much lighter silver of the plaque.

The leftmost panel contained one large hollow circle, distinctly underlined, with what looked like linear representation of a solar system below. A small circle in this row was also underlined.

Their solar system, Dan thought to himself. Their planet.

Dan's hunch was supported by the panel on the right, which also contained one large circle above a row of smaller ones. The relative size of these circles — these planets — as well as their relative distances from each other left Dan in no doubt that the planet highlighted and underlined on the rightmost panel was Earth.

"Look," he said, hurrying to the TV and pointing at the small representation of the solar system. "Mercury, Venus, us, Mars... I'd know that picture anywhere; it's exactly like my poster. And that's the alien solar system on the right. Just like Kloster said!"

"Why do the planets go right to left from the sun?" Clark asked. It was the first question in his mind.

Dan shrugged. "Why do we usually go left to right?"

Clark conceded the point. "Fair enough. But what does that plaque actually tell us? We still don't know where they are. There's no star, no distance, nothing."

"It gives us a scale," Dan said. "We can work with that. Besides, there's another plaque. Well, three more... but one more that we'll see."

Emma called Dan back to the couch with her hand, politely asking him to get out of the way and be quiet. She didn't doubt his analysis, but two scientific experts in the Blitz News studio had started talking and she wanted to hear them out.

One of the studio experts was Penny Holmes, a so-called "rockstar scientist" who hosted a primetime astronomy show every Thursday. Penny was as famous as scientists came but had

completely avoided commenting on the IDA leak until after President Slater's fateful Disclosure announcement, at which point she broke her silence and expressed Kendrick-like levels of unreserved optimism. Emma didn't recognise the other expert, a much older man whose name she missed and who had been introduced as an exobiologist.

Penny and the exobiologist, along with Blitz News anchor Sarah Curtis, talked through the same thought process that Dan had just detailed. Sarah even touched on Clark's question as to why the representation of the Earth's solar system had Venus to Earth's right and Mars to its left rather than the more typical left-to-right layout.

The one-minute countdown timer for the second and final plaque appeared after what seemed like no time at all. Talk in the studio inevitably turned to speculation as to what this plaque would reveal. The exobiologist reminded everyone that Kloster's letter said the plaque displayed a timescale for the Messengers' return. His words killed the conversation.

"Ten seconds," Sarah Curtis said. "But we may have to wait a few seconds longer, as we did earlier."

Sure enough, the image of the first plaque remained on the screen for several seconds after the countdown reached zero. But then, before Sarah could even introduce it, the second plaque appeared.

Now assuming that the aliens read right to left, Dan's eyes shot immediately to the right of the plaque. This time, there were three panels. At the bottom of the rightmost panel, he saw another linear representation of Earth's solar system. Again, it went right to left from the sun.

Above Earth's solar system, there was a more complicated series of graphics. Four large squares filled the rest of this rightmost panel, each containing an X symbol at its centre. From the available context, Dan took this to be the sun. Each of the four boxes also contained a small underlined circle: Earth.

Crucially, Earth's position varied between the boxes.

In the first box — the top right of the four — Earth was directly above the sun. In the top left box, Earth was directly below the sun. In the bottom right box, Earth was directly to the left of the sun. And in the final box — the bottom left — Earth was back above the sun.

“Orbit,” Dan said.

To confirm this suspicion and provide the information necessary to make sense of the next panel, the Messengers had included a small but helpful symbol to the immediate left of each box. The first symbol was a hollow circle. The second, beside the image of Earth halfway around the sun, was a circle with the right half filled in. Three quarters of the third circle was filled, in keeping with the image, and the final circle was entirely solid. The contrast between the silver plaque and harsh grey engraving made all of this easy to discern.

Dan moved to the central panel, which was slightly more straightforward. Most of the panel was taken up by twenty-eight small equilateral triangles, organised in seven perfect rows of four. Above these rows there was a narrow box containing a single triangle next to ten solid circles. The equation was missing an equals sign, but Dan figured it out.

280 orbits, he thought. 280 years.

Dan’s eyes finally moved left to take in the final panel. Immediately, he felt heat in his throat; goosebumps on his neck; strain in his heartbeat.

“Dan,” Emma whispered.

He heard the whisper clearly but didn’t acknowledge it.

“Dan,” Clark said, much more forcefully.

Dan flicked his eyes to Clark without moving his head.

Clark struggled to form the words. “Does it mean we’re fucked?” he eventually choked out.

Dan swallowed deeply, hesitated, then gave a dejected shrug.

Emma reached for Dan’s hand and squeezed it tightly. Her hand was so much warmer than his. She met his eyes with an expression even more distressed than Clark’s, like nothing Dan had seen from

her before.

“It might not,” he said, trying to convince her, as though they’d crossed over into some parallel universe where he was the strong one.

Emma shifted along the couch and rested her head on Dan’s shoulder. Clark stood up and turned away from the TV with his hands on his head. The exobiologist in the Blitz News studio was using phrases like “undeniably hostile” and “potentially imminent”.

“It might mean something else,” Dan said, now trying mainly to convince himself. “We might be okay.”

Clark shook his head briefly while maintaining firm eye contact with Dan, like one doctor passing bad news to another.

Unable to convince himself — much less Emma — that everything was going to be okay, Dan sighed and looked to the ceiling for a few seconds. He then peeked again at the TV through the fingers of his free hand.

As his eyes stared at the godforsaken alien plaque, Dan McCarthy struggled to imagine how anything could ever be okay again.

Part 6

DS-1

*“I occasionally think how quickly
our differences worldwide would vanish
if we were facing an alien threat
from outside this world.”*

Ronald Reagan

D plus 8

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

The final panel contained a representation of Earth's solar system identical to that on the right-side panel of the first plaque but for one thing.

Again, Earth was underlined in the small linear solar system at the bottom of the panel and also represented by a much larger underlined circle above.

Both of these representations of Earth contained the same alarming feature, most visible on the large Earth at the centre of the panel but still chillingly discernible in the linear solar system below.

In both representations, Earth was clinically dissected at its centre by two lines; one horizontal and one vertical.

One more line extended further from the circle at a 45-degree angle. This line was dashed in several parts rather than solid like the rest. It began at the edge of the circle and didn't touch either of the two main lines which created the ominous crosshairs-like image that already had everyone feeling so uneasy.

"The protruding line looks like an arrow without the point," Penny Holmes said on Blitz News.

"Hmm," the exobiologist said, sounding like he agreed.

"Right," Penny said. "But we can't just assume it means—"

"What else could it mean? We're quite literally in their crosshairs! And even if we all agree on the timescale of 280 years, 280 years from when? 2218 sounds far enough out that we'll probably have destroyed the planet or ourselves by then anyway, but we don't know that the craft landed in Lake Toplitz in 1938. It could have been lying there for a hundred years before the Nazis found it, maybe more."

Dan could hear Penny trying to get a word in over the insistent exobiologist. The second plaque still filled the screen, now joined by a headline which read: "Kerguelen plaques suggest hostility."

The next voice Dan heard belonged to Sarah Curtis. "Okay," she said, in that inimitable newsreader's way of shifting gears. "We've had Billy Kendrick on hand to give his reaction, so let's head down to Myrtle Beach now. Billy, I'm sure this comes as more of a surprise to you than anyone, bearing in mind your confident comments that these plaques were — and I quote — "an olive branch" from the Messengers. How do you respond?"

"Don't do that," Billy said, appearing again on a stage surrounded by thousands of revellers whose big weekend would be over in a few hours. There was no celebration now. It reminded Dan of the previous summer when people had gathered to watch the US compete in World Cup matches on huge outdoor screens. The news coverage of the first few matches showed jubilant scenes of late-night partying, but on the night the US team got eliminated it looked like a well-attended funeral.

"We're all on the same side here," Billy continued, "so don't do that. But as to your point: this doesn't change anything. Talking about "crosshairs" is especially ridiculous since that shape isn't even culturally universal among humans. And as Penny said: the dashed line is like an arrow without a point. But if it was an arrow,

which way would it be pointing? Which direction of travel are they trying to indicate? It could be an invitation for us to leave for all we know... after all, they did show us their planet. And why would they do that if they wanted to destroy us? Why would they tell us anything if they were going to destroy us? Why drop the spheres? Why scatter them? We don't know any of the answers, and that's the point. All of this is projection. Our cultural psychology is a psychology of war and conquest and scarcity and power, so we're projecting that onto them. Seriously: listening to the guy in your studio for the last few minutes has told me more about him than the Messengers."

Sarah Curtis didn't say anything for a few seconds. The exobiologist tried to reply combatively, but his mic was down. "So what's your reading of these messages, Mr Kendrick?" Sarah asked, as instructed by her producer.

"Well, the first plaque tells us one of two things. The easy assumption, which even I just made in passing, is that the planet on the left is their home planet. But it might not be. It might be a habitable planet for us. A refuge, if you will."

The exobiologist tried again to interrupt, shouting something about "such a leap!" before Sarah Curtis spoke over him and told Billy to continue his point.

"And the second plaque," Billy said, "certainly seems to suggest a 280-year timescale. For what, we don't know. At this stage it's guesswork. If you're asking for my guess, which is the best I can give you, I have two. One, they are coming back 280 years after they left the spheres. In this scenario, they gave us notice — not warning — so we could adjust to the idea of coming face to face with extraterrestrial beings. That's one."

"But why are there crosshairs—"

"That's one," Billy repeated, raising his voice over Sarah's interruption. "And my second guess... well first of all, everyone seems to be forgetting that there were four plaques, not two. What we don't have here is context. I don't want to rehash old movie

plots,” he smiled, breaking his otherwise serious demeanour for the briefest of moments, “but maybe one or both of the other plaques told us how to travel the stars? Maybe it would have taken us 280 years to reach the highlighted exoplanet? I don’t know, I’m just saying maybe. But however you frame it, my guess is as good as yours. My maybe is just as strong as anyone else’s.”

“Bear with me for a second, Mr Kendrick,” Sarah said. The cameras stayed on Billy. “I’m hearing now that the Russian President has been the first major leader to react, and that he has used a phrase which translates roughly to “eviction notice”. We’ll have more on these comments as news comes in. Your thoughts, Mr Kendrick?”

Billy paused. It was a different kind of hesitation now; instinctive rather than for effect. “My guess is as good as his, too” he said.

“But less important,” Sarah replied. “With respect, you’re not in charge of the largest country in the world. But in any event, we’ll have to leave it there for now, Mr Kendrick. Thanks for joining us.”

“Don’t buy what they’re selling,” Billy said directly to millions of Blitz News viewers. “The media, the politicians, the arms companies, they sell fear. Don’t buy—”

The feed cut out.

“Uh, we seem to be having some technical difficulties with the feed from Myrtle Beach. We’ll return if and when we can,” Sarah said, the look on her face filling in the blanks.

Clark was still standing behind the couch, alternating between hands-on-his-head despair and arms-folded confusion. “What do you think?” he asked.

Dan didn’t know; he didn’t know what to say, and he didn’t know what to think. Billy’s optimism wasn’t as infectious in this instance as it normally was, and Dan couldn’t see past the “eviction notice” idea now that it had been posited. It was like looking at a cloud: he hadn’t seen the shape a few minutes earlier, but now that someone had pointed it out, he couldn’t see anything else. It made sense in a generic sci-fi kind of way that the Messengers could be a

peaceful race who needed a planet for its resources but sought to minimise the suffering of its technologically inferior native population.

Emma was still holding Dan's hand and leaning on his shoulder, but he didn't see any point in sugarcoating his words. Still facing the TV, he answered Clark: "I think the Russian idea makes more sense than anything Billy said."

"Would 280 years really be enough, though?" Emma asked. "To build something that could take us to another star?"

"The Nazis found the craft in 1938," Dan said, "then a war pretty much shut the world down until 1945. But the Soviet Union still managed to put a man in space just sixteen years later, and we put a man on the moon eight years after that. Apollo 11 was in 1969. Look at everything that's new since then, with computers and the internet and everything else. It's a totally different world. But look at space: we've done pretty much nothing. We only did it in the '60s because it was a competition, and two different countries managed to break all kinds of barriers even with all the waste that comes with having two teams doing the same thing."

If Dan sounded angry, it was because he was. Emma knew the anger wasn't meant for her.

He went on: "If we had known back then that we had to get off this planet — and I mean literally had to — we would already have colonies on the moon and Mars. And if we had 280 years from 1938 to build a starship, we could do it. Seriously... remember that Space vs War thing I wrote? When I was researching it, I read that governments around the world spend six billion dollars per day defending themselves from each other. Imagine if that was pooled and spent on building lunar bases or habitable space stations or orbital launch platforms or whatever."

Clark nodded, equal parts rueful and powerless.

"And even if the plaque wasn't meant to be an eviction notice," Dan said, "the Messengers could have been trying to warn us about some big disaster or something. But thanks to Hans fucking Kloster

and Richard fucking Walker we've wasted decades doing nothing."

"Right on cue," Emma sighed as Dan's face suddenly appeared on Blitz News.

Dan recognised the setting: it was his Focus 20/20 appearance from what felt like a lifetime ago. Already fulfilling Billy Kendrick's prophecy of selling fear, Blitz News replayed the quote Dan regretted most, unedited beyond a sharp cut at the end:

"Think about it: sharks can rip you apart, but you can avoid them by staying out of the ocean. But with hostile aliens there would be nowhere to hide. You can't outrun the sky."

No one said anything.

Dan had teased Clark with a variation of this quote at Timo's lakeside villa when they were watching Jaws. Somehow, it didn't seem quite so funny now.

MONDAY

D plus 9

10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON, ENGLAND

Monday's newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic reacted predictably to the newly apparent alien threat.

Britain's leading tabloid ran with "45 Seconds To Wipeout?", an article which postulated that the hostile Messengers could strike Earth with an AWMD at just 45 seconds warning. This headline, as well as the "Alien Weapon of Mass Destruction" acronym, unironically called back to the buildup to the 2003 Iraq war, when Coalition cheerleaders claimed that Iraq's supposedly extensive arsenal of WMDs could be deployed within 45 minutes. This new article had even less factual basis than had the infamously sexed up Dodgy Dossier more than a decade earlier, but fear sold newspapers just as successfully now as it had then. The front-page picture was a satellite image of Earth with red crosshairs superimposed over it and an alien-looking hand holding some kind of ray gun.

Jan Gellar, putting the final touches on The Daily Chat, decided to keep things more simple with a text-only front page containing

just two words: “ALIEN QAEDA”.

Details of the exoplanet revealed on the first plaque filled the inside of the newspapers and featured heavily in overnight news broadcasts. While the absence of any indication of its location relative to Earth made quick and decisive identification impossible, the alien planet’s relative size and distance to its star gave experts and enthusiasts something to go on, at least. The number of planets shown in the alien solar system was of little help given that exoplanets weren’t typically detected in neat batches.

One viewpoint which gained great traction overnight was that the planet shown on the plaque could well be Gliese 667 Cc, an exoplanet located almost 24 light years away near the tail of the constellation Scorpius. This exoplanet, confirmed as recently as 2011 and scoring a remarkably high 0.85 on the Earth Similarity Index, uncannily corresponded to the measurements on the plaque.

Some voices urged against jumping to conclusions, with a group of Italian scientists stating that at least two other exoplanets were even better matches than Gliese 667 Cc. But neither of those were as famous as Gliese 667 Cc and neither had been the first suggested as the alien’s home, so media outlets around the world paid little attention.

To the disappointment of everyone who enjoyed irony, Kolpin-6b — the candidate planet whose existence had been confirmed by Ben Gold at the IDA — did not correspond with the data on the plaque.

Since the name “Gliese 667 Cc” was such an awkward mouthful, optimistic social media users quickly christened the planet “New Kerguelen”. The new name caught on immediately. Experts invited to talk on news networks discussed potential problems with flares from New Kerguelen’s sun — which was one of three in a triple-star system — but the planet lay within its system’s Goldilocks Zone where temperatures allowed for liquid water on its surface. Even among those who argued against the likelihood of the planet on the plaque being Gliese 667 Cc, New Kerguelen became the generally

used term when referring to whichever planet it was.

The day's real news developments were still to come, though, beginning with Prime Minister William Godfrey's address to a vast crowd of reporters.

"I want to begin by making a point that might sound counterintuitive," Godfrey said, solemn but not quite grave. "And that is this: we are safer today than we were yesterday."

He allowed a few seconds for the words to sink in.

"What you don't know will hurt you," he continued. "But what you do know might not. Despite what the media are telling you, this is not the end of the world. This is a challenge; a challenge to which we will rise."

Some of the reporters eyed each other uneasily. A few mumbled, unconvinced by his confidence.

"But before I discuss that any further, I want to make clear that I understand as well as anyone that this is no longer about William Godfrey and Valerie Slater. Personal differences cannot and will not get in the way of the kind of concerted response our respective electorates not only need but deserve. I hope to be able to sit down with President Slater soon, along with everyone else, to work out exactly where we go from here. But as for Richard Walker..."

The room fell completely silent.

Godfrey's expression stiffened. "Richard Walker's sustained effort to conceal this truth from the world constitutes nothing less than a crime against humanity. Entirely knowingly, he may have left us with insufficient time to properly defend ourselves... and all for the sake of his Jurassic notions of power and glory. You all know that I have two daughters, and their futures were not Richard Walker's to cast aside. He'll pay for this. One way or another, he will pay."

Though the veins in Godfrey's neck bulged and his gaze looked like something from the poster for a revenge movie, every single word and gesture in his speech had been thoroughly vetted by his own invisible team of Jack Neals and Emma Fords; of spin doctors

and social media gurus. As Emma knew and often explained, nothing William Godfrey said or did was ever an accident.

Godfrey was as careful with his words as anyone, and his next point involved what he considered a crucial lexical distinction. “But in the meantime, we must be proactive in our response to this potential threat. This is no longer an international issue. This is a global issue. This is not between China and the United States, or Argentina and the United Kingdom, or Russia and whoever else. This affects everyone: rich and poor, young and old, left and right. Whether you live in a penthouse or an igloo, this affects you. We share the same planet and we share the same sky.”

He scanned the room, making eye contact with reporters in every area. Every one of them paid rapt, near religious attention.

“Whatever differences we may have as individuals and as nations, those differences are dwarfed by our commonalities. We may have fought in the past for control of this portion or that of this planet we all share, but that is the core point in all of this: we share this planet, so a threat to this planet is a threat to us all. I won’t be so bold as to speak for other governments, but I’m confident that our collective response to this potential threat will be concerted, swift, and effective.”

Some of the reporters were nodding now.

“But let me remind everyone of one crucial point: we don’t know that they’re hostile. It might appear that way, but we don’t know. There’s an old saying: “trust in God, but tie up your camels.” Right now, that saying is apt.”

Some of the nods turned into looks of mild confusion.

“We’re going to be resolute and proactive in dealing with this,” Godfrey assured the crowd, “but that doesn’t mean our reaction will prove necessary. It may well not, and we must continue to live our lives on the assumption that it won’t.”

Godfrey focused for a few seconds on one reporter in particular, a heavyweight correspondent he’d sparred with many times in the past, before scanning the room again.

“At the risk of sounding clichéd, the only thing worth fearing right now is fear itself. Panic of any kind is as dangerous as it is contagious. But last night — here, at least — was encouragingly peaceful. Long may that continue. Parliament will convene today to discuss the implementation of extraordinary measures to impose tough sentences on anyone who participates in looting or predatory disorder of any kind. Every possible step will also be taken to mitigate the economic impact of recent events on hardworking families, especially as relates to things like price-gouging and the hoarding of essential goods.”

He turned his notes over to the last few points, more for effect than anything else.

“I urge everyone hearing these words to go to work and school this morning safe in the knowledge that our world and our universe is the same as it was last week. Today, we’re just better prepared to live in it. Keep calm and carry on, everyone. We’ll take care of the rest.”

Godfrey headed for the door with a troop of security guards as the army of reporters fought to be heard over each other. A few words rose above the rest — words like “timeframe” and “shield” and “China” and “international consensus” — but Godfrey stopped at the door to answer the only question he’d heard in full.

“With or without consensus,” he said firmly. “We will fortify.”

D plus 10

STEVENSON FARM
EASTVIEW, COLORADO

At 3am in Colorado — around an hour after William Godfrey ended his commanding speech with a vow to fortify — Richard Walker adjusted his tie in the mirror and began his usual routine of wrinkle-busting facial exercises.

He walked into the kitchen, waking Rooster with the sudden brightness of the light, and picked up his phone.

“Crabbe?” he said, responding to the half-awake groan on the other end of the line. “It’s me. I want to do an interview.”

“You lousy son of a bitch,” Joe snapped.

“If you don’t want the exclusive...”

Joe hesitated. “Video chat, or just audio?”

“Video,” Richard said. “Right now. Oh, and Joe?”

“What?”

“We’re old friends, so I’m sure you know better than to trace my location or otherwise cooperate with this ridiculous witch-hunt. How are the grandkids, by the way? Still with your daughter in

Denver?”

“Five minutes,” Joe said gruffly. He hung up.



“Welcome to this very special video edition of Crabbe Shoot Radio,” Joe crooned into his webcam in his well-practised presenter’s voice. He wore large headphones and a hastily thrown-on blue jumper.

Richard, meanwhile, looked ready for an important meeting.

“You will not believe who I’ve secured as a guest for today’s show,” Joe continued, “so I’ll go ahead and let him introduce himself.”

“They all know who I am,” Richard said dryly. “Start again.”

Richard’s recalcitrance caught Joe off-guard, exactly as intended. “Uh, okay.”

The recording wasn’t going out live, but Richard didn’t expect Joe to be foolish enough to present any of his comments out of context. That was part of the reason Richard chose Crabbe Shoot as the outlet for his first public comment since the Kloster letter came out eleven days earlier. More importantly, though, Joe’s regular audience of several hundred thousand listeners were the demographic Richard deemed most likely to give him a fair hearing; after all, Joe’s whole shtick revolved around his ability to sensationalise perceived threats to American sovereignty.

Joe Crabbe’s personal position was complicated. He had been a vocal critic of Dan McCarthy, but he was also the kind of unwavering patriot that William Godfrey predicted would be more affronted by the cover-up than anyone. Richard knew this but felt sure he could win Joe round by explaining his reasons for hiding the truth.

After a successful second introduction, the impromptu interview began.

“I know we live in the age of apologies,” Joe said, “where old men like us are expected to say sorry for every little thing we ever

did as soon as the thought police decide to retroactively forbid it. But right now there is an overwhelming call for you to apologise. People are—”

“People are idiots,” Richard interrupted. “And the more of them there are, the stupider they get. I did the right thing and I will never, ever, apologise for that.”

There was a brief quiet. Joe didn’t have any notes to draw on, and he wanted to stay out of the way and let Richard talk rather than adopt his usual in-your-face interviewing style.

“Actually...” Richard said.

Joe held out his hand. “Go on.”

Richard cleared his throat. He looked directly into the small webcam built into the bezel above his laptop’s screen. “Two of my staff have been dragged into this, and they deserve an apology. Raúl, Ben... I’m sorry. For those who don’t know, Raúl put his body on the line for me and Ben has been a model employee and true friend for a decade. I heard Ben’s comments yesterday and I can appreciate why he feels betrayed. But I hope he’s listening to this, because I want him to understand that keeping this from him was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. The only shred of guilt I feel about any of this is that Ben Gold spent his life searching for something I was hiding the whole time. But Ben was and is a man of science. He wouldn’t have understood the apocalyptic politics at play here.”

Joe stayed quiet.

“I’m sorry that two good men were dragged into this and that is the only apology I’ll make. The right thing to do is rarely the popular thing to do, but that’s only true because the people don’t always know what’s good for them. They can’t see everything from their positions. The higher up you get, the clearer the view becomes.”

“William Godfrey holds a high office,” Joe said, leading the conversation in that direction having skimmed through Godfrey’s latest comments upon opening his computer’s browser and seeing the slew of headlines.

“And I can understand his anger,” Richard said. “I also know that Godfrey is making a deliberate effort to fill the huge international leadership vacuum caused by having someone like Slater represent our nation on the world stage. I actually have a great deal of respect for the Prime Minister; if we had a leader who looked out for our national interests like he looks out for theirs, we’d be doing okay.”

“But I’m not asking you about his character,” Joe said, being more insistent than he had been so far. “I’m asking you about his comments. What do you make of his statement that your cover-up amounts to a crime against humanity?”

“Hyperbole,” Richard shrugged. “And fairly brazen hyperbole at that, given the imperial source of Godfrey’s inherited wealth. But the suggestion of any criminality on my part doesn’t hold up. No crime has been committed other than the theft of the folder and Dan McCarthy’s subsequent decision to publish stolen documents and indeed profit from their publication. I didn’t conceal any information intended for my staff or any other government employees, and I didn’t abuse my position. I made no personal gain from any of this. I acted in full accordance with my oaths. I did nothing wrong, Joe. What this boils down to is an honest man keeping a personal secret shared by a personal friend. To Godfrey’s point on taxpayer’s money I simply say that not once in almost thirty years did I misappropriate a single cent of the agency’s funds; I even paid for the desk and the safe myself. What I chose to do with the Kerguelen folder and its contents was none of the government’s business, and that is the simple fact of the matter.”

“Hmm,” Joe said, again opting to let Richard continue his monologue with as little prompting as possible.

Richard continued as though the “hmm” had been an accusation. “I was protecting the interests of this nation against those with the power to destroy it,” he boomed. “And by that I don’t mean the Chinese; I mean the spineless career politicians who would happily cede our national sovereignty for the sake of their

own careers.”

Joe rubbed his chin. “So you feel no remorse or regret?”

“Remorse? No. Regret? Well, I certainly regret that Dan McCarthy found and published the letter; I certainly regret that the media enabled him so freely; and I certainly regret that our president was too weak and hormonal to grab the bull by the horns and seize the sphere either before or after the Argentines paraded it for the world’s cameras.”

“After?” Joe asked, shocked that even Richard would suggest that Slater should have ordered a raid on mainland Argentina when the whole world was watching.

“Give it a year and she’ll wish she had,” Richard said. His face then contorted, like a sudden thought had just reminded him of something. “But tell me something, Joe: in what world is it just that a traitor like Dan McCarthy can spend a week wining and dining in Italian mansions while a committed public servant like me is forced into hiding?”

Joe said nothing.

“Only in a world that needs clean-cut heroes and villains,” Richard answered. “Only in a world of 24-hour news and black-and-white politics. But the media’s narrative isn’t the real story here. I’m not the bad guy in Dan McCarthy’s story. Dan McCarthy is the unwitting instigator of a national tragedy, he just doesn’t know it yet.”

“The media narrative has certainly painted you as the villain,” Joe prodded, goading Richard like a matador would a bull.

“Exactly, but how can I be the villain here? What am I supposed to have gained from this? I didn’t ask Hans to tell me. I didn’t ask to bear this albatross. If anything, I’m a victim of the media’s mindless absolutism and the public’s readiness to jump on Dan McCarthy’s bandwagon.”

“I understand that,” Joe said, “but what might stick in the throat of those who haven’t joined the McCarthy bandwagon, like many of my listeners, is that you repeatedly addressed the nation on this

issue and lied through your teeth every single time.”

“It’s easy to lie when you know you’re right,” Richard said coldly.

“What?”

“Right is more important than true, Joe. That’s the only thing my father ever taught me, and I thank him for it.”

Joe didn’t know how to respond to that.

“And that’s why, for the last few weeks, I haven’t been kept awake by guilt or shame,” Richard continued. “I’ve been kept awake only by the fear that Dan McCarthy and his martyr complex were going to lead us here, to the brink of desolation. And really, the sequence of events is painfully symptomatic of everything that’s wrong with this country today. It all started with a thief taking what wasn’t his, and our vapid media culture of celebrity-worship took it from there. Throw in the anti-authority feeling the media encourages and the anti-American sentiment of our so-called allies and it was a perfect storm. I kept this secret for almost thirty years but a lowlife thief stole the ball from my hands and the corporate media were only too happy to run with it. Welcome to modern America.”

“Food for thought,” Joe chimed in. “And we’ll be back with more from Richard Walker after a short word from our sponsors.”

Richard, though frustrated by the interruption, kept quiet. It was going well.



“And we’re back with Richard Walker,” Joe said only seconds later. He would add the commercial placements shortly before posting the show online.

Richard gave a curt nod.

“Now, we’ve already covered a lot of ground regarding you personally,” Joe said, “but I’d like to move on to the national and international implications of recent events. First of all, why did you

do nothing to protect against the apparent alien threat?”

“Don’t confuse doing nothing in public with doing nothing at all,” Richard said. “I continued to warn against active SETI in—”

“Why?” Joe interrupted in an exaggeratedly high pitch. “They already know we’re here!”

Richard stared into his webcam and counted down from three in his head. “Never cut me off again,” he said quietly. “Is that clear?”

Joe tried to hold Richard’s gaze; this was easier than it would have been in person, but still no mean feat.

“Is that a yes?” Richard asked.

Joe looked away from his own webcam and nodded.

“Good. Cut all of this nonsense out before you upload the interview. Now, where was I...”

“SETI,” Joe said feebly.

“Right. I continued to warn against active SETI in case the aliens took our ability to communicate as a threat; as a sign of technological advancement beyond what they deemed a safe level. I considered that basic common sense.”

“Okay, but that doesn’t really address why you didn’t make any attempt to actively protect us against a hostile enemy.”

“We don’t actually know that they’re hostile,” Richard said. “Godfrey was right about that. Hell, Kendrick was right about that. The plaques aren’t exactly decisive.”

“Did you know exactly what was on the plaques before we saw the images? And do you know any more about the others?”

Richard shook his head. “Hans told me everything he could remember, which wasn’t everything. Remember: he only saw these plaques for a few minutes. He told me what he could remember about the Messengers’ planet — New Kerguelen, as everyone is calling it. And again, though I don’t want to sound like I’m on the same side as Bigshot Billy, Kendrick was right that New Kerguelen might not be the Messengers’ home; it could be somewhere for us to colonise, perhaps in advance of Earth being struck by an extinction-level asteroid or something of that nature.”

“Did Hans know when the craft arrived here?” Joe asked.

“No. And as far as he knew, the craft’s material made it impossible for anyone to even guess how long it had been in the water. The longest we have is 220 years or so, but that’s assuming the craft landed in 1938, which is a big assumption to make. We might only have a few years, maybe even a few months or weeks.” Richard paused to shrug, almost nonchalantly. “Days, even.”

“So why the hell didn’t you do something?” Joe demanded, suddenly riled up. “Whether it’s aliens or asteroids, why didn’t you say something?”

Richard’s gaze intensified. He began to slowly rub his scar with his thumb, as he had when dismissing Dan’s initial leak.

“I just meant...” Joe stumbled, intimidated by Richard’s intensity.

“I know what you meant and I know what you said. You want to know why I didn’t talk?” Richard said.

“Well...”

“I didn’t talk about this for the same damn reason I didn’t talk in 1971. Two Vietcong and six inches of cheese wire,” Richard snapped, uttering those still-famous words for the first time in decades. “I kept quiet in Hanoi to protect my brothers from the freedom-hating savages in that godforsaken jungle and I kept quiet in Colorado Springs to protect my country from the freedom-hating globalists who would love nothing more than to see it fall. Is that good enough for you, Joe?”

“What’s good enough for me might not resonate so clearly with people unfamiliar with the kind of globalist agenda you’re talking about,” Joe said, oddly soothed by Richard’s passionate reply. “Could you expand on that?”

“It’s self-evident,” Richard scoffed. “They’re already queuing up to castrate our military. And mark my words: the liberals and the Europeans will call for a “unified response to this global crisis” as their pretext for the one-world government they’ve always wanted. That’s the endgame.”

“Don’t you think it could be a positive thing that the world might unite to deal with this?” Joe asked, making a laudable effort to play devil’s advocate and sound like he didn’t already know that the answer — both Richard’s and the only correct one — was a categorical no.

Richard shook his head solemnly with an expression to match. “The world’s people will be united in the worst way,” he said. “United like prisoners chained together and frogmarched along a sweltering highway. That’s our future if the globalists win and the Eurocrats succeed in using Disclosure to expand their toxic agenda of unification.”

Joe nodded, abandoning the pretence of neutrality. “My regular viewers and listeners are familiar with these concerns, but would you care to explain to the masses who will be tuning in for the first time just why the notion of a one-world government poses such a grave threat?”

“First of all, no one has to subscribe to any notion of a full-blown new world order to understand what’s dangerous about this,” Richard said, keen to dissociate himself from Joe’s usual conspiratorial lean. “A one-world government or any other kind of supranational institution with binding authority would be a terrible thing for everyone, but no one more so than us. Just look at the UN — we’re on the losing side of more votes than any other country but one. Luckily the UN doesn’t have any real power, but if we were to cede everything to a central power then it would only go one of two ways: either the global dictator would be from somewhere like Switzerland or Luxembourg and European socialist ideals would dominate, or China would buy support from enough smaller countries to install whoever they wanted. There is, quite literally, no way we can win. I know that you personally oppose the globalists, Joe, and I salute you for that. You were on the right track when you accused McCarthy of faking the leak to forward the globalist agenda, you just had it back to front; I covered up the truth to curtail that agenda. Like Hans, that was my sole motive.”

Joe stayed quiet for a few seconds, and Richard didn't fill the silence. "But why keep it in your office?" Joe asked suddenly. "I understand why you might not want to tell everyone, but surely something like this would have been safer in the hands of the CIA?"

"What, in the hands of a hundred infiltrators and a dozen whistleblowers?" Richard jibed, laughing freely. "It would have been safer tied to a streetlight!"

"It could have been in a vault," Joe said. "Or underground. Anywhere but your office. Hell, let's forget about where you kept the folder. Why did you keep it at all? Why not just burn the letter and everything else? If you had done that instead, no one would be talking about any of this."

Richard didn't reply immediately. It pleased him greatly that Joe was now angry at him for hiding the truth poorly rather than hiding it at all. "I know," Richard said, almost sorrowfully. "But it's the same reason Hans intended to pass the burden to Wilhelm and ended up passing it to me: this wasn't the kind of secret that could safely die with its last keeper. I had to keep everything. And you can attack my distrust of digital security all you want, but I couldn't risk the chance of system administrators and the like seeing it. Just look at the NSA. My safe worked for longer than their computers."

"So what do you suggest now?" Joe asked after a reflective pause. "Since you don't want a global response and you don't trust the government..."

"I don't know," Richard said, going out of his way to sound humble. "If anyone can be bothered to look, public records will show them that I've been trying to convince career politicians of the need for real investment in asteroid-killing technologies for almost three decades. Fine men like Ben Gold and most of the good people at NASA have been pushing for investment in distant exploration, lunar colonies and manned missions to Mars, but no one listened. And do you know why?"

"Tell us," Joe said sycophantically.

"Because our politics is broken. We are where we are because

generations of politicians have been more concerned with image than policy. I've said this before, but it's all because our elected leaders can only see four years ahead. If they have to mortgage our nation's future to see them through those four years, so what? That's the next idiot's problem, not theirs. And this is the world they've made." Richard stopped to shake his head. "People like Slater..." he sighed, neglecting to finish the thought. "And they wonder why I didn't tell them? Because really, what does it say about how far our country has slipped that successive governments could be kept in the dark by a bitter old fool like me? I didn't tell them because I couldn't tell them; not without them letting slip. And that's before even thinking about the infiltrators and whistleblowers round every corner."

Joe remained diplomatically silent.

"I've been in a horrible position for too long, Joe, and I wouldn't have wished it on my worst enemy. Never knowing when the sphere might be found, or whether it already had been... it was no way to live. Presidents have it easy in comparison, and I'm sure the public's fear and their need for some kind of comforting familiarity will buy Slater another term. But sadly the office of President will mean nothing by then."

"What do you mean by that?" Joe asked.

"The aliens are the least of our worries," Richard said grimly. "The globalist cat is out of the bag, and it won't go back in. Plato said it best: 'This and no other is the root from which a tyrant springs: when he first appears he is a protector.'" And that's where we're going."

"Where?"

"Tyranny. Globalist hell. First they'll call for nuclear disarmament and a pooling of resources. I've already heard media whispers about evacuation projects and defensive space stations. I pushed for these things when we could pay for them; when we were strong. But now the globalists want to divert our military spending towards their dystopian agenda and our self-serving politicians are

ready to jump onboard. The propaganda machine is already in action.”

“Interesting points,” Joe said, partly out of further sycophancy and partly because he detested globalism almost as much as Richard did.

“They are,” Richard agreed. “We absolutely must not co-fund any global evacuation projects and we must not even entertain the notion of assisting in building any kind of defensive station. We do it ourselves or we don’t do it at all, simple as that. The globalists’ ideal first step would be a new security force funded by national contributions, based on each state’s average military spending over the last five years. Pro rata, they’ll call it. They’ve been talking about this kind of thing at their secret meetings in Strasbourg for years, even without knowing about the aliens. They want to do this because pooling military might would suit everyone apart from us, for reasons so obvious I don’t even have to mention them. You see, it’s not enough for the globalists to remove our well-earned national security advantage; they want to leverage it. They want to turn it against us.”

“Hmm,” Joe said, this time through confusion. “I haven’t come across any proposals that pro rata funding should—”

“And I want to respond to John Cole’s comments on how the United States has behaved in recent decades,” Richard said, as though Joe hadn’t spoken. “Cole’s little analogy of our “stick” being snapped in half couldn’t illustrate the European glee any greater, but there’s an underlying issue of hypocrisy here. Western Europe has been living in luxury for decades purely because they haven’t had to defend themselves; not with the US standing by. We all know Godfrey has been struggling with cuts to their free healthcare, but everything’s free when you don’t have to protect yourself! The nerve of Cole to use our military spending against us when it’s the foundation of global order...” Richard faded off and shook his head. “Well I’ll tell you this, John: you’re going to miss Pax Americana when it’s gone.”

After a few seconds of silence from Joe, Richard decided it was time to call it a day.

“That’ll do,” he said, keen to keep his interview short enough for people to listen in full. “End on Pax Americana.”

“Okay,” Joe said quietly. He then reverted to his radio voice: “That’s all for this special video edition of Crabbe Shoot Radio. Thanks to our guest, the unrepentant and unapologetic Richard Walker.”

“I will never repent,” Richard said defiantly, projecting his voice to make clear that he wanted this to air. “They can drag me into any kind of kangaroo court they want, but I will never repent. I had two choices, Joe: accept the possibility that our planet might be destroyed by hostile extraterrestrials or an extinction-level asteroid, or accept the inevitability that our nation’s sovereignty definitely would be destroyed by power-hungry globalists. I made the only decision I could.”

“Richard Walker,” Joe repeated.

“They know my name,” Richard said. He closed his laptop and went to bed.

TUESDAY

D plus 11

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

Throughout the rest of Monday and into Tuesday, tensions grew.

Emma's Social Media Meta Analysis app informed her that an overwhelming percentage of Americans wanted a "strong and swift response" from President Slater. The figure rose steadily as time passed and she was nowhere to be seen.

In President Slater's conspicuous absence, William Godfrey was all over the news both in the US and across western Europe. While the Chinese and Russian publics listened attentively to their own leaders' appeals for calm and promises of action, Godfrey had already come to be seen as the de facto torchbearer almost everywhere else.

A Blitz News presenter asserted that "William Godfrey is acting like the leader we need", and on Monday evening the Prime Minister made a less bombastic second statement expressing his view that the world coming together in pursuit of a common goal was as important in an abstract morale-boosting sense as it was in

a practical defensive one. Godfrey's openness about the need to boost morale resonated particularly strongly with an American public sick of being treated like children and kept in the dark by their own government.

Godfrey took the opportunity to clarify his "with or without consensus" comment, explaining that he had already spoken to the leaders of three of the other four permanent members of the UN Security Council about the prospect of developing a "defensive orbital platform of some sort" and that all three shared his view on the urgency of a tangible response. "All I meant about consensus," he said, as though it was the smallest detail in the world, "was that one nation's Security Council veto won't stop the rest of us."

The second he said it, Emma shared her interpretation of his motive with Dan and Clark. "He knows we can't say no," she told them, using "we" in the loosest national sense. "Whatever they're going to suggest, we can't say no. If Slater doesn't say anything today, people are going to be on the streets tomorrow demanding action. And if she calls for a veto, those marches will turn into riots."

"Maybe," Dan said.

"There's no maybe," Emma replied. "Remember on Focus 20/20 when you said people don't riot when they're scared, people riot when they're angry? That's true. And right now, people are scared. But if the government for some reason decided to block the other countries' idea to build some kind of defensive thing, that fear would turn to anger in an instant. Godfrey knows that, he's just trying to extract every ounce of political capital he can. He wants to look like a hero, and he does."

Godfrey also stressed the "more than semantic" distinction between a military space station and a defensive one. The only other major point of note in Godfrey's second statement was that planetary evacuation was off the agenda. Such an option was "utterly impractical and utterly divisive," he said, knowing full well that even the largest possible ark couldn't take everyone and that the unchosen would likely sabotage the mission rather than politely

wave to the departing few as they invariably did in utopian science fiction.

Joe Crabbe had posted Richard Walker's interview online in the early afternoon and received millions of hits within minutes. Richard's attempts to justify his secrecy only entrenched the hatred felt for him, but Dan had expected nothing more or less than the stubbornly unapologetic rant he provided.

What Dan and every other American did expect was a comment from President Slater, but none came.

Late on Monday evening, the world's attention turned back to Argentina where the international team released their interpretation of the plaques. After a curt confirmation that Hans Kloster's DNA profile had indeed been detected on each of the plaques, the diplomatically worded statement expressed the whole team's "regret and disappointment" that certain unnamed leaders — clearly meaning those in London and Moscow — had made hasty proclamations.

Though the team stopped short of speculating on the Messengers' reason for including a representation of New Kerguelen or of issuing any recommendations on how government should react to the plaques, they stated their "unanimous belief" that the second plaque's troubling final panel warned of an asteroid impact rather than a hostile return.

Three weeks prior, the threat of a planet-killing asteroid would have been a dream come true for the news networks. But now that aliens were real and hostility was possible, an asteroid warning just wouldn't cut it. As such, the international team's statement did little to change the media narrative; the asteroid impact was posited as the best-case scenario and given little discussion time.

By Tuesday morning in Colorado, Emma's prediction that people would take to the streets in large numbers had come true.

No major marches had taken place on Monday, with social media indicating that a bitter chasm had developed within the loosely defined Now Movement between those categorically

opposed to putting any kind of weapons in space and those who demanded protection. Tuesday, though, showed beyond doubt how the general public felt as hundreds of thousands of marchers brought cities across Europe and even China to a standstill under a new banner: Action Now.

A huge mid-afternoon demonstration in London indicated that Prime Minister Godfrey's appeal for people to keep calm and carry on had fallen on deaf ears. But this gathering, even larger than the anti-Godfrey protest march a few weeks earlier, brought a smile to his face. Though there were no giant pictures of Godfrey or chants of his name as he might have liked, the peaceful but firm nature of the mass call for action gave him hope.

American cities soon followed, with citizens driven by fear and encouraged by the scenes in Europe to make their own voices heard from coast to coast.

A Blitz News reporter in New York walked alongside one of the largest demonstrations and asked one member of the crowd what exactly he wanted the government to do.

"Anything!" the young man said. "That's their whole job: to protect us."

Emma's social media meta analysis app vividly displayed that such views were common among the overwhelming majority of internet users. "Globalist agenda" was still a trending term some 36 hours after Richard Walker brought it up with Joe Crabbe during an interview in which he used the word "globalist" no fewer than eleven times. But unfortunately for Richard, Emma's software showed that an unprecedented 98.3% of mentions fell into the "Disapproving/Critical/Satirical" category. If there had ever been a battle for hearts and minds over this issue, Richard had decisively lost it.

On the back of this, Emma told Dan that she still expected President Slater to make a strong comment at any moment. "If I was Jack," she said, "Slater would already be calling for Walker to be prosecuted and thanking you for exposing his lies."

Aside from coverage of the global demonstrations, the TV airwaves continued to brim with individuals and organisations trying to pretend that they had seen everything coming. Countless media outlets who had until a few weeks ago mercilessly ridiculed the mere suggestion of extraterrestrial life now positioned themselves as authorities on the subject.

TV evangelists, politicians and scientists in various fields were at it, too, shamelessly whitewashing their histories and proclaiming themselves long-term believers. This process also extended to everyday citizens, many of whose “I always knew there were aliens” claims were quickly shot down by their “no you didn’t” friends and families.

As Tuesday evening arrived, Blitz News welcomed a prominent SETI researcher whose name Dan vaguely recognised. After talking in general terms about recent events for a few minutes, the researcher pointed out that the previous Blitz segment which speculated about a solar-scale disaster was baseless. “The plaque shows us that Earth will be affected,” he said, “whatever affected really means. But Mars and Venus are untouched, so this can’t be anything to do with the sun or a neutron star or anything like that. From where I’m sitting, that leaves us with two real possibilities; and while I understand the “eviction notice” reading, I personally believe that the dashed line indicates a catastrophic asteroid impact.”

The graphics on the screen changed, now showing an artist’s interpretation of screaming citizens watching on as an asteroid approached.

“To me,” the man continued, “it makes more sense that the aliens would warn us about an asteroid than that they would give us hundreds of years to prepare for their own hostile return. But as others have said, we don’t have any sense of their psychology. We still don’t know why they scattered the spheres in the first place. I’ve heard some people suggest they did it because it was unlikely that one nation could covertly recover them all and so we would have to

cooperate, but then why scatter them so remotely? Why not just drop one in New York, one in Moscow, one in Beijing, and one in London or Paris? We really can't pretend to know what they're thinking. Their entire psychology is, for want of a better word, alien."

Dan listened attentively. He wanted to believe the asteroid theory — it was far easier to deal with an asteroid than a hostile alien force — but he couldn't understand why the aliens wouldn't just divert or destroy the asteroid themselves if they cared enough to warn us about it. They obviously had the capacity to do so, he reasoned.

The SETI researcher then touched on the post-detection protocols which had been laid out by SETI groups long before the IDA leak, but he recognised that none were particularly relevant to the unforeseen manner in which the truth had come to light. At the end of his interview, he encouraged the world's governments to act as though a large asteroid had already been detected and that a hostile return was a remote but valid possibility. "I'm not against a defensive station," he said, "but our approach has to be two-pronged. As well as a colossal asteroid, we must prepare for the slim prospect of hostile visitation. In short, we have to do what we can to protect our species and our planet. Orbital platform, defensive station, whatever you want to call it... we need a shield."

Just minutes later, Billy Kendrick appeared on Blitz News having called in to join the discussion. The presenter promised to get the SETI researcher back in the studio as soon as possible, and sure enough he was back in his seat when Blitz returned from a short commercial break.

Billy, now back at home following his commercially successful but emotionally exhausting ET Weekender, took issue with almost everything that had been discussed. "Knowing where to look for signals has always been half of SETI's battle," Billy said as his face belatedly appeared on screen direct from his home office in Charleston. "And whether New Kerguelen is the Messengers' home

world or one that they've earmarked for us, we can send an agreed upon message of peace so that—"

"Come on, Billy," the researcher interrupted. "Gliese 667 Cc, the closest of the candidate planet's we've detected, is almost 24 light years away. You know we don't have 48 years to wait for a reply."

From there, the interview segment descended into an argument, with Billy expressing his disappointment at the prevailing narrative of hostility. The researcher tried to stress that he considered the asteroid scenario more likely, but Billy wouldn't hear it. "We can't start putting weapons in space," he said. "It's madness." The weapon vs shield distinction was reiterated, but Billy wouldn't hear that, either.

"Everyone else recognises the need for a reaction, Mr Kendrick," the Blitz News presenter interjected. "And a defensive station or platform is the—"

"Who's everyone?" Billy asked. "I'm not part of your everyone. The people I've spoken to aren't part of your everyone. We can invest in anti-asteroid measures without knee-jerking a weapon into orbit. Not everyone wants warmongering governments to start sending military hardware into space."

The presenter tried to reply: "Everyone with any credibility on this issue has—"

"What about Dan McCarthy?" Billy interrupted again, too worked up by the whole situation to take direct issue with the slight on his own credibility. "Who's more credible on this than Dan? He won't go for a space weapon. No way."

Emma and Clark both focused intently on Dan, waiting for him to say something.

"I'm staying out of it," he said.

Emma's eyes narrowed. "But if you weren't?"

"There's not even a question," Dan said. "We have to build a shield."

WEDNESDAY

D plus 12

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

Finally, on Wednesday morning, the news came through that President Slater would break her silence later in the day in a sit-down interview with Marian de Clerk, the longtime host of Focus 20/20.

Until then, news discussions focused on the myriad of options for a defensive station. Arms manufacturers, futurists, and astrophysicists alike came forward with proposals that had been rejected by the IDA during Richard Walker's lengthy tenure. Some such proposals involved destructive space-based weapons that Richard couldn't have run with even had he wanted to, but some were for the type of asteroid mitigation he claimed to have supported. Richard was variously described as "obstructive" and "disinterested" in anti-asteroid proposals dating back to the early 1990s.

While these contradictions interested some viewers in a political sense, Blitz News devoted most of their airtime to the more exciting

weaponry. When countless modern proposals had been analysed to death, Blitz News turned to older and grander blueprints for “Nazi sun-guns” and “Soviet mega-lasers”. This held Dan’s attention and passed an hour or so, but it was of little relevance.

At 1:30pm, a special report titled “Nukes in Space” recounted the history of high-altitude nuclear explosions. Penny Holmes, the popular scientist, hosted the segment.

A helpful graphic told viewers that the International Space Station orbited Earth at a maximum distance of 270 miles and that the highest known man-made nuclear detonation occurred at an altitude of 335 miles. Penny excitedly recounted the story of this 1.7 kiloton detonation in September 1958, highlighting the incredible progress that had been made in a rapid time; a mere five months earlier, the highest detonation had been at an altitude of just 16 miles. This sudden progress was not by chance, Penny explained, but rather because a tacit moratorium on nuclear tests would come into effect in November 1958. She held this up as an example of what could be achieved when it had to be.

When the moratorium collapsed in September 1961, American tests soon resumed. Penny turned her attention to what she described as the most spectacular such test: Starfish Prime. Detonated successfully in July 1962 at an altitude of 250 miles, Starfish Prime’s 1.4 megaton yield — almost 100 times more powerful than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima — made it the single largest man-made nuclear explosion in space.

Starfish Prime’s blast was so powerful, Penny said, that it damaged electrical systems in Hawaii, 900 miles from the launch site, and also caused critical radiation damage to several satellites. When Penny played a declassified video of the test, viewers quickly saw why contemporary reports had described an “atomic rainbow over Honolulu”.

Between frequent replays of the Starfish Prime video, Various Blitz News pundits used their own terms to discuss the hypothetical but apparently inevitable structure that social media users had

already come to know simply as *The Shield*; such names ranged from “defensive space platform” and “anti-asteroid cascade” to “military space station” and “orbital warship”.

The names seemed to get increasingly aggressive as the day went on, but “space nuke” troubled Dan most of all.



President Slater’s sit-down interview with Marian de Clerk aired at 7pm, subtly but heavily edited. The broadcast began with a brief *mea culpa* in which Slater spoke of the “personal and professional embarrassment” she felt for failing to spot Richard Walker’s lie.

Once this was out of the way, de Clerk began as she would continue, performing her role in a perfunctory and detached manner. Her first question was clear cut: “What do you make of the political response to these revelations?”

Slater acknowledged and praised the “restrained and measured response” from her political opponents and insisted that all decisions going forward would be made in a nonpartisan environment. What she didn’t say but knew perfectly well was that the opposing party — once Richard’s party — had no room to crow.

“And what do you make of claims that the cost of developing a so-called “Shield” would be prohibitive?” de Clerk asked, soft-balling another agreed upon question.

Dan was disappointed that de Clerk conducted the interview in this way, but Emma told him that Slater’s team pre-approving the questions and having final say on what aired would have been an iron-clad condition of the interview. Anything the President said would be a calculated step in moving towards enacting whatever plans had already been decided, Emma said; Slater wouldn’t suggest anything that hadn’t already been discussed with Godfrey and the other main players.

“Cost is no great concern,” Slater answered. “The International Space Station cost a total of 150 billion dollars. There or

thereabouts, anyway. That might sound a lot, but our current level of national military expenditure could pay for four such stations each year. That station's first module, Zarya, cost only 220 million dollars. We have nuclear submarines in service that cost ten times that amount, each."

The camera cut to de Clerk nodding slightly and rubbing her chin, as though deep in thought.

"But more to the point," Slater continued, "if we can find 700 billion dollars to bail out the banks, we can find whatever it takes to protect our citizens."

"And as for timescales..." de Clerk began.

"Fortunately we already have extensive research findings on asteroid interception, and a highly sophisticated orbital laboratory — our successor to the ISS — is well into its advanced planning stages. Further afield, we all know that the Chinese are preparing to launch their own space station in a matter of months, and the Russians are looking to do the same in a few years. Together, with our backs against the same wall, we can act quickly."

"How quickly?" de Clerk asked. "Is it too optimistic to think in years rather than decades?"

Dan sighed audibly. "She literally just said China are launching their thing in a few months," he moaned. "Where the hell did decades come from?"

"Shut up," Clark said.

President Slater appeared to consider the question. "Months rather than years," she said after a few seconds. "For tangible action, that is. An international summit will take place next week in New York, within existing United Nations framework. All being well, a decision will be made following formal discussions on Tuesday. So when you look at it like that, it's not just weeks rather than months but actually days rather than weeks."

"A decision will be made?" de Clerk echoed, curious. "By who, exactly?"

"The Security Council," Slater said. "And I want to make clear

that the United States will not obstruct the discussion and will not merely participate; we will lead. Because as true as it is that an American government official hid this lie for so long, it is equally true that an American citizen brought this truth to light. These revelations did not begin in Austria or Argentina, they began in Birchwood, Colorado. This began with Dan McCarthy.”

Leave me the hell out of it, Dan thought to himself.

“And Dan showed great spirit,” Slater continued, “sticking to his guns in the face of strong opposition from all angles. I regret taking the word of Richard Walker over Dan McCarthy, but in my position I think everyone would have done the same. Like everyone else, I always considered Mr Walker an upstanding public servant.”

“I was sceptical myself,” de Clerk said. “But once I’d spoken to Mr McCarthy for a few minutes, I saw something in his eyes. I heard something in his voice.”

“Great strength,” Slater said, coming across to Dan as nothing but patronising. “And now that his single-minded pursuit of the truth has been vindicated, we all owe him a debt of gratitude.”

“She’s got some fucking nerve,” Clark said, standing up and pacing the room. “She sends the Feds to look for evidence and smash the place up — well after she knew it was all true — and now she’s thanking you? Nah.” He walked in front of the couch and looked at Emma. “You still have the audio of her threatening us, right?”

“Forget it,” Dan said, saving Emma from answering. “We’ve got bigger things to worry about now. It’s just like with countries: old grudges are yesterday’s problem.”

“She’s a liar,” Clark said.

“They’re all liars,” Emma said. “That’s what makes it so sweet when the truth catches up with them.”

The trio had missed Slater’s last few sentences during their own discussion, so Dan skipped back thirty seconds with the remote. “Everyone shut up,” he said, “I want to hear the end.”

As it went, the interview lasted only another minute or so. Slater

thanked her political opponents again for their restraint in refusing to use the revelations as a points-scoring opportunity, then reiterated that she looked forward to discussing the issues with other heads of government and ushering in “a new and essential era of global cooperation”. These words sent chills down the spines of Joe Crabbe and his listeners but appeased the vast majority who heard them.

After thanking the President for granting the interview, Marian de Clerk asked if she had “a final message for the nation and indeed the world”.

“To quote Prime Minister Godfrey,” Slater said, forcing a cringeworthy unnatural chuckle, “keep calm and carry on, everyone. Your governments are working, together, to protect our planet. And as I said: we should be able to make a firm commitment to action on Tuesday.”

As the TV cut to commercials, Clark was lost amidst a lack of work or any other kind of meaningful schedule. “What day is it now?” he asked.

“Wednesday,” Emma said. “So not long.”

Dan stayed quiet. If recent weeks had taught him anything, it was that a lot could happen in six days.

THURSDAY

*McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO*

While the rest of the country spent Thursday digesting President Slater's comments and anticipating the imminent formal discussions over how the world's most powerful nations would react to the common threat they faced, Dan and Clark were busy reacting to another piece of news: Emma was moving to Birchwood, permanently.

The topic came up in the early afternoon when Clark mentioned in passing that Mrs Naylor, a recent widow who had lived next door since before Dan was born, would be moving in with her daughter in Denver in a matter of weeks.

"Is the house up for sale?" Emma asked.

"Why?" Dan butted in. "Do you think some media weirdos might try to move in and spy on us?"

"Uh, maybe," Emma said, "but I was asking more because I need a place."

"Oh," Dan said. He smiled slightly.

"Hold up," Clark said. "You could live anywhere in the world, and you're picking Birchwood?"

"What's wrong with Birchwood?" Dan asked, defending his home town.

"Yeah," Emma said. "The people are nice and the air is clean, for one thing. Or two, I guess."

Clark started laughing heartily. "When one of the only two pros on your pros and cons list is that the air is clean, you know you're talking about Birchwood."

"I just want somewhere quiet," she said.

"So you're choosing the house next door to Dan McCarthy, the world's most famous idiot?"

"It's still quiet," Emma insisted. "People respect your boundaries here, and life moves slow."

"No arguments on that one," Clark grinned.

Emma looked at him sternly.

"Listen," Clark said, "I'm not trying to put you off. It would be kind of cool having you there. I just think you should think about it. What could you do for work if you were based out of Birchwood?"

"I've been working seventy-hour weeks for fifty weeks a year since I was 23, Emma replied, "and it wasn't the kind of work I could leave in the office, either. When I look back to when I first met Jack and started at XPR, it's like everything since then has just flashed by; I don't know where my life went. I feel like I need to check out."

"I know I always joke about you being older than me," Clark smiled, "but I don't think it's quite time for you to retire yet..."

Now it was Emma's turn to laugh. "It's not like I'm going to buy ten cats and yell at kids for going by too fast on their skateboards," she said. "I just like it here, okay? I like the mountains, I like the pace, I like the people. Well, half of them, anyway."

"You got enough cash to buy the place?" Clark asked. "Because you won't get a mortgage with no job."

Emma looked over at Dan. "Money won't be a problem," she

told Clark. "Someone owes me a favour."



Emma received an interesting phone call on Thursday afternoon, from the manager of the RMXT studio complex in Amarillo where Dan's Focus 20/20 appearance had been filmed.

Sunday's upcoming episode of Focus 20/20 was going to discuss everything surrounding The Shield, the woman said, and Dan was invited.

When Emma held the phone to her chest and passed the message to Dan, he shook his head immediately. Emma relayed his response.

"What about you?" the studio head asked her.

"What about me?"

"Will you sit on the panel?"

Emma looked at Dan and called him over with her hand. "They want me to do it," she whispered. "What do you think?"

Dan didn't like this kind of role reversal. "Who else is doing it?" he asked.

Emma passed on the question and Dan was now close enough to hear the answer directly through her phone. The list of names was a veritable who's who of public figures who had been embroiled in the IDA leak in one way or another, each name more impressive than the last.

"Timor Fiore via satellite," the woman said. "In the studio we'll have Billy Kendrick and Joe Crabbe, together in the same room for the first time in a long time."

Dan's eyes widened.

"Plus Jan Gellar and Jack Neal."

"Jesus," Emma muttered under her breath. She knew that Kendrick and Crabbe had their own history of antagonism, but the genuine hatred between Jack Neal and Jan Gellar that stemmed from Jack's days at XPR was on another level. "That is some panel."

"There's one more in-studio panellist, aside from Dan or

yourself. We invited Ben Gold, but he declined. Naturally we would love to invite Richard Walker if only we could get hold of him."

"So who's the last panellist?" Emma asked.

"William Godfrey."

"No way."

"He's going to be in New York for Monday's summit, anyway," the woman explained. "His people reached out to us. He's very much looking forward to speaking with Dan."

Emma and Dan shared an uneasy look. "I'll call you back," Emma said, hanging up.

"Who are the panellists, then?" Clark called from the couch, having heard only what Emma relayed to Dan before he joined her by the phone.

Dan listed the names.

"You can't do it," Clark said. "With people like that who talk for a living, they could rip you apart. Especially when it's live."

Dan didn't argue; he didn't want to do it, anyway.

"I'm only worried about Jan," Emma said. "She might be sitting on something I don't know about. But then I have to weigh that against how much money I'd get for forty minutes work. With the ratings they'll get, the money will be ridiculous."

"Would you do it for free?" Dan asked.

"Why would I do it for free?"

"Then don't do it," he said. "I can do the ads. Will we still get good money for them even now that the aliens aren't a feel-good fluff story?"

"What ads?" Clark interjected. No one seemed to hear him.

"People still see you as a hero," Emma said, "so yeah. You can literally name a price."

"A million dollars?" Dan said, expecting to be shot down.

"Easily."

Clark stood up. "Are you serious? This idiot is worth a million dollars?" Had Clark been a cartoon character, the dollar signs would have already been spinning in his eyes.

Emma nodded. "If this was still a business deal, I would have Dan's face everywhere by now."

"But she knows I don't want that," Dan said.

"Right," Clark said. "But you'll do some ads, right?"

"I promised I would. We made a deal, way back before you even got home. Emma's firm were trying to get her to give up and go back to New York because I wouldn't do any promotional stuff to make them money, but I promised to do three ads once Slater admitted that aliens were real."

"I might have overstated how hard the firm were pushing," Emma admitted. "But that was when we were strictly business."

"I can't believe no one told me about this," Clark said. "With money like that we could fix up Dad's room and bring him home as soon as the hospital okays it."

An awkward silence circled the room for a few seconds.

Dan broke it first. "Uh," he stammered, "I promised Emma that she could keep—"

"We'll work something out," she interrupted, giving Dan a look that oddly struck him as warm and stern at the same time. "I better tell the studio that I'm not doing the show."

As Emma walked into the kitchen to make the call, Clark was still smiling like his lottery numbers had just come up. "What are the ads, anyway?"

"Lexington Cola and Beanstox Coffee," Dan said. "Plus some big and tall clothes place."

Clark couldn't help but laugh at Dan's evident discomfort. "At least it's not erection pills," he grinned.

"They'd probably taste better than Lexington," Dan quipped.

"Probably," Clark said, glad to finally see a smile on Dan's face.

FRIDAY

D plus 14

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

Friday progressed in a similar vein to Thursday, with Dan waiting impatiently and passively for the next week to arrive so that the international summit could begin. The passivity was his choice now, but that didn't make it any easier. He at least had Sunday's potentially explosive Focus 20/20 panel to look forward to, which shortened the wait slightly.

Blitz News, which the trio now watched almost exclusively, discussed the irony of Argentina currently holding the Security Council's revolving presidency. Blitz also put out a special report on key moments in the Security Council's history, surprising many viewers with a graphic which showed that the US had vetoed more resolutions over the last three decades than everyone else combined.

There were no mass demonstrations in major cities; if not placated by the promise of action, citizens were at least willing to wait and see what their governments came up with. It remained to be seen whether this peace was a sign of things to come or merely

the calm before the storm.

Again, the day's main event within the house was a phone call. Emma was the initiator this time, having noticed an intriguing message while bored enough to pore through a mass of transcribed voice messages from low-priority and unapproved callers. The message that caught her eye came from an unrecognised number and contained just two words: "It's Jack."

Emma walked outside and tentatively pressed the button to return the call. She was somewhat surprised to hear the familiar voice on the other end of the line.

"Finally," he said.

This was the first time Emma had heard Jack Neal's voice in almost nine days, when Emma had been at the lake in Italy and President Slater made her thinly veiled threat. "Don't finally me," she said. "What the hell happened to your phone?"

"They took it," Jack said.

"Who?"

"I'm not exactly sure. The Feds questioned me for three days, but I don't know who's actually in charge."

"Of what?"

"The investigation."

"What investigation?" Emma pressed, quickly getting frustrated at having to extract everything out of Jack with question after question.

"The investigation into the cover-up," he said. "A lot of people don't believe that only Kloster and Walker knew."

"And what do you think?"

"Nah," Jack said, almost casually dismissive of the notion. "If anyone else knew, it would have come out."

Emma agreed. "So did they believe you?"

"Well, they let us go."

"Us?"

"They questioned Valerie, too. Why do you think we didn't say anything for so long? Straight after the Disclosure announcement

came through from Argentina and Valerie read it out, they took us in.”

Emma didn’t know what to say.

“Everyone is being questioned,” Jack went on. “Not all as extensively as each other, obviously, but still. The atmosphere here is toxic. Everyone knows that they didn’t know, and I think deep down everyone realises that no one else did, either... but there’s this primal distrust in the air. My eyes and ears at NASA say it’s the same over there. Hopefully it all clears after the summit when we know what’s happening.”

“You already know,” Emma said. “Slater wouldn’t be on TV talking about funding and timescales if you didn’t already know.”

“Emma, things have changed. We’re not exactly in a position of strength here; we pretty much have to go along with what Britain and Russia are saying to make sure China doesn’t back out and do their own thing. I’m not telling Valerie what to say anymore so we have to just trust that the diplomats and strategists know what they’re doing. But none of that’s in my sphere of influence. I was calling to tell you something else.”

“What?” Emma asked, dreading a grim follow up.

“Okay... you know how they took my phone? There was nothing on it that I wouldn’t want anyone to see — I’m not stupid — but now that they have it they can track everywhere I’ve been over the last few weeks. They know I spoke to Ben Gold at the IDA and they know I was at that stupid drive-in when you released the letter.”

“So?”

“Exactly. There’s nothing to worry about, I just wanted you to know that they know we’ve been in touch since all of this started. I didn’t tell them that you held me against my will or anything like that,” Jack said, forcing a laugh.

“I don’t think you should do the show on Sunday,” Emma said. “If Godfrey turns on you, he’ll eat you alive. And Jan Gellar? You’re seriously going to sit on a panel with Jan Gellar?”

“I know it sounds risky, but the three of us are on the same side.

It's all about *The Shield*, so Kendrick and Crabbe are the people I'll be up against. It's pretty much going to be Godfrey versus those two for forty minutes. Tell that to Dan. He's friends with Billy, anyway, and we all saw how well he handled Crabbe last time."

"He doesn't want to do it," Emma said. "They asked me, but I said—"

"You have to do it!" Jack said, evidently learning of Emma's invitation for the first time. "Please. It will be so much better if you're there."

"I wouldn't have been doing it from the New York studio even if I'd said yes, but I said no. They'd already invited everyone else, anyway. It was almost like Dan was an afterthought."

"Don't be ridiculous," Jack said. "They just wanted to confirm who else was doing it so they could tell you. Face it, Dan is box office. The only bigger name they could have had was Walker, but no one knows where he is."

"The woman who called made it sound like they wanted Dan mainly because Godfrey wanted to speak to him."

"That does kind of make sense," Jack said. "It explains why Godfrey's flying out to Colorado."

"He's doing what?"

"Oh, shit. Have they not announced it yet? Godfrey's going to Birchwood for a photo op at the drive-in."

"When?"

"Sunday morning, before he goes to New York for the show and the summit. Do you think Dan will at least walk to the drive-in to meet him?"

Emma covered the phone with her hand and walked inside. Dan and Clark were both at the TV. "Do you want to meet Godfrey at the drive-in on Sunday?" she asked.

"Definitely!" Clark said, immediately sitting up straight.

Emma ignored him and kept looking at Dan.

"Is that him?" Dan asked, motioning towards the phone.

Emma shook her head. "It's just going to be a photo op. I think it

could be a good way for you to show your face when someone else is there to take the bulk of the media's attention."

"If you think it's a good idea," Dan said. He nodded carefully.

"We'll be there," Emma spoke into her phone.

"Good," Jack said. "I'll pass it on."

SATURDAY

D plus 15

*DRIVE-IN
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO*

The drive-in buzzed with excitement ahead of Prime Minister Godfrey's imminent visit.

Phil Norris, the lot's owner, redoubled his efforts to maximise his returns by allowing a second food truck to serve the hundreds of camped-out media personnel in return for a share of its takings.

The big screen still showed various news networks on rotation throughout the day, and both Maria from ACN and Trey from Blue Dish Network still occupied their prime parking spots right beside it.

On Saturday afternoon, and for the first time since the morning after the initial leak, a Blitz News van pulled into the lot. Phil had called Clark an hour before the van's arrival to say that Blitz had offered him a "decent wad of cash" to lift the ban and allow the van inside, but that he would only do so if it was okay with Clark and Dan.

Clark said yes without checking with Dan; as far as he was concerned, the hostility with Blitz was water under the bridge. Phil

had always been good to them, anyway.

A cold, clear night brought with it an increase in the anticipation levels. Kyle Young, Maria's junior at ACN and Trey's partner in exposing the previous week's federal raid on Dan's house as it happened, arrived shortly before midnight. He fetched some coffees for Trey and Maria and spent the rest of the night with them inside Trey's van, huddling around a fan heater and planning their first questions for Godfrey. Like children before Christmas, all three found themselves too excited to sleep.

Because just as they had for so long in the immediate aftermath of the leak, the eyes of the world were about to fall on Birchwood once more.

SUNDAY

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

“Where the hell is Emma?” Dan asked, searching the house in a panic. It was almost 8am and he couldn’t find her anywhere. He momentarily cursed his alarm for not going at 7:15, then remembered waking up in the middle of the night and switching it off.

“Drive-in,” Clark said. He stood in front of the mirror opposite the TV, paying more attention to his hair than Dan had ever seen.

“Without me?”

“Relax. Godfrey isn’t due there until ten. She’s just making sure everything is set up.”

“Of course everything is set up. There’s been a broadcast from the drive-in to somewhere in the world every few minutes for weeks.”

“This is different,” Clark said. “She took the car, but she’s coming back for us. It won’t be long. You should probably get dressed.”

Dan walked through to the kitchen in search of his shoes. When he found them near the door, he heard a loud noise coming from outside. He opened the door. Flying disconcertingly low, three black helicopters immediately caught his eye. "Clark!" he yelled. "Quick, come and see if these are military."

Clark ran through without knowing what Dan was talking about. He made it in time to see all three of the helicopters clearly enough to know the answer. "No," he said.

"So what are they?"

"You mean apart from way too low?" Clark said. "Maybe Godfrey's security."

"But why would they be in a line like that?"

"They could be just arriving. If they are, they'll split up and circle."

The helicopters faded behind trees and houses. The too-close whirring filled the air until Dan closed the door.

"You really better hurry up," Clark said.

Dan picked up the pace and ran towards his bedroom. "I know. Heat up one of those meals for me while I get dressed."

Clark looked in the refrigerator and called after him: "Lasagne or lasagne?"

"Chef's choice," Dan called back.

D plus 17

DRIVE-IN
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

Clark drove excitedly to the drive-in, passing the only two remaining roadblocks. Emma, having just returned from her organisational trip, explained as they went that there was heavy security and a large police presence around the drive-in. She confirmed Clark's suspicion about the three helicopters, telling him that they had been circling overhead for around fifteen minutes.

Even though Dan hadn't left his house since returning from Italy nine days earlier, the drive-in had remained a hive of activity with media outlets from around the world as keen as ever to attach "live from Birchwood" to their ongoing reports.

William Godfrey's visit was set to ramp things up another notch, though, and Dan McCarthy for once found himself on the undercard rather than in the main event. Not that Dan minded one bit; as Emma had suggested, this opportunity enabled him to give the media something without being swept up in the kind of manic hero-worship he wanted to leave in the past.

Emma pointed Clark to the spot where he was supposed to park the car, just outside the drive-in's perimeter. As soon as Dan opened his door to get out, he heard a level of commotion even louder than the rabble on the night when he and Emma first revealed the smoking-gun Kloster letter to the public. Even over the whir of the slowly circling helicopters, the din was cacophonous.

Dan walked into the lot with a spring in his step, enlivened by the atmosphere. He immediately noticed the huge letters on the wall, just far enough to the left of the big screen to have never been picked up in any of the countless recent news broadcasts. The sign read: "BIRCHWOOD PLAZA". The lot wasn't really a plaza, but Dan could tell that Phil had some major development plans to cash in on its renown.

Dan also spotted the two food trucks doing a roaring trade in opposite corners of the lot. Within seconds, though, every head turned towards him and everyone abandoned their positions in line to grab their cameras and get a closer look.

Phil Norris himself, carefully monitoring camera feeds from his small office, rushed out when he spotted Dan and Clark. Dan saw Trey standing on top of his own van and waving with both hands before crouching down to give Kyle Young from ACN a hand up. The familiar faces helped settle Dan's nerves.

Because other than those faces, very little was the same. Dan hadn't set foot at the drive-in since before he left for Italy, when the world had been a very different place. Dan thought back to the sequence of events. There had been no concerns about hostile returns or asteroid impacts during his last appearance because the sphere hadn't been found, let alone opened. The mass suicide at Hemshaw hadn't even happened, and Blitz hadn't even released the tide-turning footage of Dan finding the folder and Richard Walker ordering the bugging at Dan's house.

Dan headed straight towards Trey and Kyle and thanked them for trying to stop the raid. There was a wide aisle-like gap between Trey's side of the lot and the central area; this was a security

measure designed to allow Godfrey to stand in front of the screen for his photo op without battling through a crowd of excited reporters. Emma hung back near the entrance while Dan caught up with his media friends. Clark, never keen to leave either Dan or Emma alone in a public setting, opted to go with Dan; if push came to shove, he reckoned Emma could look after herself more capably than Dan.

Clark was soon glad of his decision as he had to warn off a photographer from coming too close to Dan. All it took was a stern look; Clark's sheer mass in real life surprised and often intimidated people who had only seen him on TV. He looked like a wrestler, as Trey put it on their first meeting. Or, in Kyle's words, "an absolute beast."

"So are you literally just going to shake his hand and that's it?" Trey asked Dan, curious as to exactly how the photo op would go down. "Emma said he's going to be in and out, but are you sticking around for a while?"

"I don't know," Dan said, quite honestly. Emma had told him during the short drive that Godfrey was indeed going to be gone almost as soon as he arrived, but Dan didn't actually know whether he was expected to say something afterwards. "Maybe, I guess."

Emma caught Dan's attention and held up two fingers.

Two minutes.

More so than before any of his countless public interviews and appearances — all of which would have seemed impossible just a month earlier — Dan felt genuinely nervous. This was partly down to the fact that he hadn't met Godfrey before; aside from the natural intimidation factor that went with someone in such a powerful position, Dan had bad memories of the only previous occasion that his first face-to-face meeting with someone had come in front of a live TV audience. He knew that William Godfrey wasn't Marco Magnifico, but no one ever said anxiety was rational.

The real source of Dan's unease was the lack of control he felt over the situation. More accurately, he didn't like the fact that Emma, for once, was not in control, either.

“Everyone back!” boomed a security guard with a North London accent. He stood near the entrance and issued the pre-emptive order to everyone in his vicinity. The suddenness of his shout told Dan that Godfrey’s car was approaching. To confirm this, Emma called him over with her hand.

Dan and Clark walked towards her, knowing that the order didn’t apply to them. The security guard acknowledged Clark with a fraternal half-nod as he passed.

A large number of regular citizens were gathered across the street from the drive-in behind a heavily guarded barrier. Many of them cheered when the long black car pulled up and its back door opened. As the Prime Minister stepped out, the volume skyrocketed. William Godfrey, who only a few weeks earlier had been unable to show his face at home without having red paint dropped on his head, was the toast of Birchwood.

Emma nudged Dan in the back, encouraging him to step forward and shake Godfrey’s hand as had been agreed.

Dan rubbed his sweaty palm on his leg then shook the Prime Minister’s hand as firmly as he thought reasonable.

“Mr McCarthy,” Godfrey said, holding Dan’s eyes.

And then he walked away.

“Is that it?” Clark whispered in Dan’s ear. “Are you not going to the screen?”

“In a few minutes,” Dan said. “I think he’s doing some quick interviews first.

Dan watched as Godfrey walked towards the Blitz News van, flanked by two new guards. He didn’t know since when Blitz had been allowed in the drive-in, but it didn’t really matter now.

A few seconds later, Emma stepped towards Dan. “They want you to crouch down a few inches when you’re at the screen,” she said, fresh from a hurried conversation with someone from Godfrey’s PR team.

“Why?”

“Because he’s five foot eight and they don’t want him to look

five foot two. If we were in a studio or on a closed set, he'd be standing on a box. Do this," she said, trying to demonstrate. "Bend one knee and put all your weight on the other leg. Don't bend your neck."

"What if Dan stands really far back?" Clark suggested, trying not to laugh.

The drive-in's other news outlets were slightly irked that Godfrey gave a brief exclusive message to Blitz News before heading towards the screen. Dan hadn't heard a word of it over the general noise.

Emma turned round to confirm with someone that it was time, then nudged Dan again. "You good?" she said.

"I don't want to do the leg thing," he said.

Emma grinned; if that was Dan's biggest concern, he would be fine. "Just try your best."

"Are you not coming?"

"Just you."

"And me," Clark butted in. He was on his way before Emma could stop him.

In front of the big screen, on which Trey had put a still image of the Kerguelen sphere being lifted from the sea off Miramar, Godfrey shook Dan's hand again. He looked momentarily surprised by Clark's presence but took it in his stride.

"Thanks to the McCarthys and all of you," Godfrey told the assembled reporters, "the town of Birchwood will be forever synonymous with two truly American qualities: honesty and courage."

The crowd of citizens across the street cheered on cue, hearing Godfrey's voice through the impressive speaker setup.

"My schedule is extremely tight ahead of tonight's show and the important discussions at the UN, but I couldn't turn down the opportunity to visit the place where it all began. And I certainly couldn't miss my chance to meet the man who set the truth in motion."

“Most people would have done the same thing,” Dan said.

“Richard Walker didn’t,” Godfrey replied, drawing pantomime-like boos from the crowd as intended. The boos were no surprise to anyone; Walker had the lowest Overall Approval Rating of any public figure tracked by Emma’s SMMA app. Dan had the highest of all with Godfrey not far behind. Godfrey’s remarkably high figure meant more though, given that his name had been mentioned sixteen times more often than Dan’s since Disclosure.

What was surprising to Clark, Dan and Emma was Godfrey’s deviation from the agreed upon script. Fortunately, he got back on track right after mentioning Walker and touched on the upcoming Security Council discussions with word-for-word accuracy. The core of his statement was that life had to go on. When he was through, he handed over to Dan with a question about how Dan planned to spend the upcoming weeks and months.

Dan knew the first part of what he was supposed to say but couldn’t remember what came next. “I’m going to trust the international process,” he began, trying to look to Emma for clues. But she was too far away, standing next to Godfrey’s people near the entrance.

“As we all must,” Godfrey jumped in to save him.

“And I’m going to go back to work,” Dan said.

“Exactly,” Godfrey said, pretending Dan hadn’t gone off-track. “We will all trust the international process and take things as they come.”

Take things as they come, Dan thought. That was it. Dan had no problem with the sentiment and scolded himself for fluffing his lines. “Right,” he said. “We’ll all take things as they come.”

Unflustered, Godfrey closed with another word of gratitude to Dan and the people of Birchwood. “From the bottom of my heart and on behalf of the rest of the world,” the Prime Minister said, “thank you.”

Godfrey held his expression for several seconds until Dan noticed the sea of red lights in front of him fade. Before leaving for New

York, Godfrey tilted his head slightly upwards and leaned towards Dan's ear, whispering a message with none of his previous gravitas:

"I mean it. Whatever ends up happening, at least you gave us a fighting chance."

D plus 18

RMXT STUDIO #1
MANHATTAN, NEW YORK

Though something of a curtain raiser for the epoch-defining international discussions set to occur the following morning, the live Focus 20/20 broadcast emanating from the RMXT Studio — just a stone's throw from the UN building — utterly captured the public's attention. Prime Minister William Godfrey's presence brought an air of heavyweight political legitimacy to an already combustible line up, as reflected in the unprecedented viewing figures and social media engagement metrics.

Ordinarily, several of the panellists wouldn't have agreed to sit in the same room for all the money in the world. The animosity between Billy Kendrick and Joe Crabbe was well known, but the two now found themselves on the same side of the argument and the same side of the long curved desk. The next seat was empty; tellingly, the production team had been unable to find another high profile personality willing to argue against The Shield.

After Marian de Clerk's chair in the middle came Jan Gellar, the

controversial editor of *The Daily Chat* whose decisions to publish the video of Dan McCarthy finding the Kerguelen folder and to leak the audio of Richard Walker ordering the bugging of Dan's house had decisively shifted public opinion against Richard when it had momentarily looked as though he might wriggle his way out of trouble. Jan's prickly history with her neighbour, Jack Neal, was not a matter of public record; the two utterly detested each other on the back of a decade-long cold war between XPR and Blitz Media that began when Jack uncovered evidence of illegality that could easily have landed Jan in prison.

Jack, essentially present as a proxy for President Slater, also had a less than cordial recent history with the man on his other side: William Godfrey. Godfrey in turn had long detested the regional influence of the final panellist, Timo Fiore, who was participating via satellite from his home in Varese.

All previous dislike was left in the past, however, as panellists on both sides of the table understood that the issue at hand was too important to be sidetracked by personal grudges.

de Clerk introduced the panellists one by one then took a moment to emphasise how unique this edition of *Focus 20/20* really was; as well as being the first to focus on one topic for the full forty minutes, she explained, it was also the first ever live broadcast in the show's storied history. Her face beamed with pride.

Unsurprisingly, de Clerk invited William Godfrey to speak first.

Godfrey set the tone by echoing President Slater's statement that the launch of the first part of *The Shield* was potentially just months away. "The core module for China's new space station is already set to launch in a matter of months," he said, "and it won't require too much re-purposing."

Marian de Clerk then asked Timo Fiore to share his feelings. With the breakneck pace of the discussion, no one picked up on Godfrey's telling use of the word "won't" rather than a conditional "wouldn't".

"I'm here to contribute in any way I can," Timo said, "whether

we're talking about a ship, a shield, or even a dedicated telescope to spot the alien home world. The only thing I won't do is build an evacuation ship and sell tickets. You wouldn't think I'd have to say that, but someone wrote an article saying that was my plan! What I will do is fund whatever people deem helpful, even if it's just to show proof of concept."

"We appreciate all such offers," Godfrey replied, "but I expect there's going to be a firm consensus that no private money will be spent on The Shield. While we're on this, the informal discussions I've had so far suggest that we won't accept higher than pro rata contributions from places like Qatar, either. As Mr Fiore alluded to, this can't become a situation where the wealthy buy influence. The sensible course of action is for active members of the international community to come together and—"

"We're hardly an active member of the international community," Billy Kendrick interrupted. "Unless you count bombing everyone who doesn't do what we say?"

"Mr Kendrick," Godfrey said, raising his hand along with his voice, "this isn't about previous foreign policy. This isn't about the past at all; this is about the future. Our collective future. And the UN building where these discussions will occur, just round the corner from here... who do you think pays for that? The United States funds 22% of the United Nations' budget, which is more than the UK, France, Russia and China combined. So whether you agree with your government on everything or not, you can't reasonably say that the US isn't an active member of the international community."

Billy was stunned into silence; of all the things he'd expected Godfrey to do tonight, going out of his way to defend America wasn't one of them.

"Is this the new charm offensive?" Joe Crabbe challenged. "Pretending you don't hate America after badmouthing us from London for so long?"

"I've talked about this, Joe. There's a difference between

criticising a nation's political class and its people. And this is all water under the bridge, anyway. Ask my friend Jack here: President Slater and I are on the same page."

"That certainly seems to be the case with you personally," Marian de Clerk said, "but your Deputy Prime Minister has been making yet more questionable comments in the last hour or so."

Godfrey's expression momentarily reflected his unease — he didn't know what John Cole had said now — but he managed to remain composed. "Are you going to tell us what he said?" he asked. "Or is it a secret?"

de Clerk looked at her notes. "His exact words were: "Of course the Americans should pay for it. While Britain stood alone, with France having fought valiantly, America joined in when the Nazi forces were tired and stretched. They're the only ones who benefitted from the war; just look at Bretton Woods and the Marshall Plan. Even to this day, their tax-dodging mega corporations do business in our countries and give nothing back. Why do you even have to ask? Of course they should pay." His comment ended there."

Godfrey cleared his throat. "John and I are different people," he said, maintaining frame. "John is John. We don't have to personally agree on everything, and none of us have to agree with everything a nation's leaders did in the 1940s to consider that nation a firm ally today." Godfrey paused and smiled slightly, confident that he had found the perfect way to shut down the current discussion. "For goodness' sake... after the United States, the two member states who provide the most UN funding are Japan and Germany!"

Jack Neal tried to hide his own smirk; Godfrey was a political force of nature, and Jack was glad to be on his side for a change having spent too long in his sights.

As Richard Walker had known when he anticipated Godfrey's verbal victories over President Slater, the Prime Minister was well schooled in the lost art of classical debate; for all of his flaws, he at least understood the theory behind his words and knew how to

present a coherent argument. Joe Crabbe, like his fellow shock jocks but also most modern politicians, was all presentation.

Contrasted with his American contemporaries, who operated in a political climate where a squeezed middle-ground meant that everyone said essentially the same things with different accents at different volumes, Godfrey had earned his chops in a markedly more difficult environment. Britain's recent political past meant that conservative leaders were chosen largely on their ability to sell unpopular policies to working people who wouldn't benefit from them, so Godfrey was an even stronger debater than his predecessors and rivals.

Jack joined the conversation at this point. "I know that a lot of people wanted the UN discussions to be televised," he said, "but this panel has far more entertainment value. The international talks won't be as heated as people imagine for the simple reason that no one intelligent enough to represent their nation will argue the kind of points that Joe and Billy here are continuing to regurgi—"

"Only because politics is filled with people as demented as Godfrey and Slater," Billy Kendrick snapped in an uncharacteristically venomous tone. "Only because of a self-selection process where only sociopaths like them and rat-faced liars like you make it through, where violence and profit are the only languages you all speak."

"We used to call people like you two shout-louders," Godfrey said. "I remember an occasion during my sixth form when a particularly short-fused shout-louder lost his temper in a debate and was told to "stop behaving like an American." People like you are the reason such stereotypes persist."

"Your bully-boy tactics won't work on Billy and they won't work on me," Joe replied, turning away from Godfrey and towards the camera to make the rest of his point. "I know that regular people can see the truth here. As per usual, the pampered Eurocrats want to be safe but don't want to pay anything. These champagne-swiggling European socialists are never happier than when they're spending

someone else's money."

Godfrey laughed heartily. "Socialist? Joe, I've been called a lot of things in my time..."

"You can dress yourself up however you like," Joe said, "but I can see through it."

"In that case, do you think you could perhaps spare a few moments of your wit and wisdom to convince the unions at home of my socialist credentials? Could you do that for me, Richard?" Godfrey asked. "Sorry, I meant Joe. Easy mistake."

"Enough," Marian de Clerk stepped in. She looked directly into the camera. "We'll be back after these short messages."



Despite de Clerk's best efforts to control the panellists, Focus 20/20 returned from its commercial break midway through a heated argument about the prudence of placing nuclear warheads in orbit.

Godfrey hadn't given any suggestion that a nuclear deterrent might eventually form part of The Shield, but senior officials in both China and Russia had. And as most now realised, the Security Council's five permanent members had already discussed The Shield and none were likely to call for anything that didn't have the tacit support of the other four.

Marian de Clerk firmly ended this argument by raising her voice and knocking twice on her desk like a judge with no gavel. "We'll start again with Billy Kendrick," she said.

Godfrey threw his hands in the air in a theatrical show of impatience.

"Enough," de Clerk ordered, quickly growing tired of repeating herself.

"I can see that you're not going to say anything about the nukes," Billy said to Godfrey. "Fine. But more generally, we've all heard a lot about space-facing weapons this week. What I want to know is whether you're prepared to state right now, categorically,

that any agreement struck in the next few days will forbid the installation of any orbital weapons capable of striking terrestrial targets. Are you prepared to state that?"

Godfrey held Billy's eyes. "No."

"No?"

"No."

"Why the hell not?" Joe Crabbe interjected.

"Because that would be like designing a car that can't reverse," Godfrey said. "Whatever projectiles The Shield may one day be equipped with, we must be able to launch them in any direction. Imagine if we detected a physical threat and successfully dealt with the worst of it. Okay? Now imagine that some pieces splintered and continued towards Earth. We would need the capacity to strike again, even if the threat was inside The Shield's orbit. That's not controversial, it's essential."

"So you want space-based weapons that can strike terrestrial targets? What happens if one nation wrestles control away from the others? This is madness," Joe said, scanning the panel for agreement. He found it only from Billy. "This isn't just a threat to our country from the others, it's a threat to anyone who opposes the globalists and their shiny new toy!"

"Come on, Joe," Godfrey said, palms raised in a show of exasperation. "Even if we go along with your crazed conspiracy premise for the sake of argument... if your government had a domestic enemy that it deemed worthy of attacking from space, don't you think its existing military strength could deal with that enemy using conventional methods? And as for this notion of one country seizing control of a hypothetical future weapon, it's utter fantasy. You and your friends on internet forums seem to think that the real world is a game of Risk, or whatever you all play these days. But our very existence is threatened; that's the core fact here. The old rules don't apply. We're living in a new world. All of us, together, are living in a new world."

The broadcast feed cut to Jack Neal desperately flipping through

his notes. Jack, not having expected anything like this to come up, didn't have a comment ready. Like a child who hadn't been listening to his teacher, he quietly hoped that Marian de Clerk would call someone else's name next.

Unfortunately for Jack, de Clerk took his fidgeting as an indication that he wanted to join in. "Over to Jack Neal," she said, keeping things rolling.

"Uh," Jack stammered. "On the military permutations, specifically?"

"Everything is a military permutation," Billy Kendrick jumped in. Jack breathed a sigh of relief. "Our leaders can only relate to issues like this in military terms because our leaders are men of war. Men and women of war, I should say," Billy added, focusing his gaze on Jack and, by proxy, President Slater.

"It's almost like when you meet your old friends at a funeral," Billy continued. "That's what it takes to unite us. But why can't we come together on our own terms? And that's the worst thing: I'm talking about a funeral, but no one is dead! Nothing bad has actually happened, but we're sending weapons into space."

"Nothing bad has happened yet," Godfrey noted.

Billy reflexively chuckled at how overt Godfrey's message had become. "This is the only time I'll ever agree with Walker on anything," he said directly to Godfrey, "but you, more than anyone else, are only in this for your own electability. I wish you would stop pretending this is about protecting future generations, because the future beyond your own lifetime has never mattered when it comes to cleaning the oceans or protecting the rain forests. You ignore them because they're not populist issues."

"I really don't know what you have against the idea of humanity defending ourselves," Godfrey said, successfully projecting genuine-sounding confusion.

"You might not know my history," Billy said, "but I haven't spent as long as I have campaigning against nuclear weapons only to sit back and watch as they're put into space. You're all falling

right back into old patterns and pushing for a new cold war against an enemy we can't even see. And just like every other war you all push for, there's only one winner: the firms you're all in bed with who are going to secure the big contracts, just like they always do. None of this is about safety or protection. It's all about money. I don't know how President Slater could sit there with a straight face and use the bank bailouts to support her argument when this whole thing is just your newest scheme to transfer public money into private hands."

Marian de Clerk held an open palm towards Godfrey, encouraging him to let someone else speak. Jack Neal took the opportunity to recover from his earlier stuttering: "Billy, just because we can't see them, that doesn't mean they're not there. Hasn't that been your line for about a decade?"

Billy sighed, exasperated with the direction of the discussion. "You always were a weasel," he snapped at Jack, "and there you go again trying to misrepresent my words before my mouth's closed behind them. I said the Messengers aren't our enemies, not that they're not there. I'm the one calling for us to look there; to look where we know they are. Look, listen, talk... you know, behave like intelligent beings? But I should have known better than to expect so much from our leaders. Christ, the elites have been making weapons we don't need for decades and making up enemies to use them on for just as long! That isn't just how the system works, that's what the system is. I should have known what would happen when they stumbled across a genuine "other" like the Messengers."

"May I take that one?" Godfrey asked, looking at de Clerk. She nodded. "Thank you. You see, this is what it always comes down to with people like Billy and Joe: this talk of a shadowy "elite". It's always vague enough to protect them from scrutiny as to who exactly this "elite" is, but it appeals to the lowest common denominator and helps maintain their listenership. Everyone has to make a living, even Billy and Joe, but this isn't the stage for their baseless conspiracy theories."

de Clerk turned to Billy. "Very briefly, Billy."

"I'm coming at this from the reasonable angle that the Messengers aren't hostile," he said, "because a race capable of pooling their own resources enough to achieve interstellar travel must be better than us, so why expect the worst? So from that angle, how will it look to them if we start launching weapons into orbit? Will that not make us look like a threat, which might in turn implore them to deal with us? It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy."

Godfrey dismissed such concerns with a patronising shake of the head. "We've dropped nuclear bombs on ourselves and detonated them in space," he said, "so it's not like anyone who's been watching could think we're pacifists. And really, in your scenario where the aliens don't want us to defend ourselves, isn't that the ultimate reason why we should?"

"Have they harmed us?" Billy asked, almost shouting. Silence greeted his question. "Exactly."

"Have they helped us?" Jan Gellar chimed in. "Beyond scattering a set of ambiguous messages that could easily be some kind of trojan horse, what have they ever done for us?"

"Billy," Timo said, rejoining the conversation in an effort to calm his longterm friend. "If you take a step back, I think you might —"

"You do not poke a sleeping bear!" Billy yelled towards the screen which relayed Timo's satellite feed.

Timo reacted to the unexpectedly combative tone with wide eyes and closed lips.

"We are chimps to these aliens," Billy said. "Think about that. Think what we would do if a troop of chimps began sharpening sticks to attack each other with; we would ooh and aah and take notes. But if those same chimps began sharpening those same sticks and throwing them at us, would we not take those sticks away?" Mixing his animal metaphors under the pressure of the moment, Billy repeated his previous point for emphasis: "You do not poke a sleeping bear."

"No," Godfrey replied, "you don't. But nor do you absentmindedly sleep in a campsite full of bears and hope for the best. We as leaders have a responsibility to protect our citizens, Billy. That is why we will fortify. That is why we will build The Shield."

Billy took a deep breath. "There's a point I didn't want to make," he said, "but since military threats are the only ones you seem to care about, here it is: if by some million-to-one shot they are hostile, we don't have a chance. Nuclear weapons, laser weapons, whatever we can come up with... it wouldn't be a patch on their arsenal. How do you defend against a magnetic pulse? Let me tell you, Mr Godfrey: you don't. That's why we don't want to annoy them. That's why we don't want to throw the first stone."

"Two quick points, if I may?" Godfrey said to de Clerk. She encouraged him to hurry up with a wave of her hand. Godfrey turned back to Billy. "Your argument is like telling people not to eat healthily to prevent heart disease because there's nothing they could do about a sudden aneurysm," he said. "And more to the point, who says our weapons can't defend against them? Nazi bombs destroyed the craft in Topnitz, after all, and that was in 1945. Okay, so you're talking about defending against their strikes rather than destroying their vessels, but give us some time and we'll see who's defences aren't good enough. When the existing knowledge of governments in Europe, Russia, China and the United States are pooled... and when all of our backs are against the same wall in an atmosphere of open collaboration... you don't think we can defend ourselves? You have less faith in humanity than I do, Mr Kendrick. Far less."

There was no studio audience to applaud Godfrey's words, but everyone on his side of the argument nodded in agreement.

"We're almost out of time," Marian de Clerk said, sounding more relieved than frustrated. "We'll go to one last question, which was sent in by Lucy Lindgaard in Hartford. It's for William Godfrey and reads as follows: "Who would represent Earth in the case of a real-time contact scenario?"

"He's going to say himself," Joe said. "Who else?"

de Clerk ignored Joe for timekeeping's sake. "Prime Minister?"

"Well it definitely won't be a bureaucrat from Luxembourg or Malaysia," he said. "The world wants a leader, not a pencil-pusher."

"So are you nominating yourself?" de Clerk asked.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves. All I'm saying is that two-way contact is a matter for the Security Council, not the Office for Outer Space Affairs or anyone else. Because with the greatest of respect to the work they do, this is serious."

de Clerk nodded, satisfied enough that he hadn't totally dodged the question. "Okay," she said, "let's have a final word from everyone, starting with Timo."

"My money's here to help," Timo said, more humbly than the words suggested.

de Clerk then looked to Godfrey, who sat at the far end of the curved desk. "Our only objective is securing the future for you and your children," he said to the viewers at home.

Next came Jack Neal. He hesitated under the pressure. "We, uh, President Slater feels exactly the same way."

Jan Gellar, who had spoken fewer words than anyone else, took the opportunity to shill The Daily Chat, promising "one-stop coverage of the UN discussions" over the next few days.

"Joe?" de Clerk said.

Joe Crabbe silently shook his head in undisguised disgust at the way the panel had unfolded.

"And for the final word, Billy Kendrick."

Billy took his time, almost defiantly, and gazed at Godfrey. "Why poke a sleeping bear?" he asked.

With producers screaming the time in her earpiece, Marian de Clerk cut Godfrey off before he could answer. "Tune in next week for another exciting edition of Focus 20/20," she said, quietly wondering what the world would be discussing by then.

As the camera panned out and the credits rolled, the final shot

showed Joe Crabbe appearing to console Billy Kendrick. Billy pushed Joe's hand away from his shoulder and stood up to leave.

"I guess that's that," Emma said from the couch in Birchwood. She and Clark turned to Dan, as they often did, to see how he would react.

"I want to watch Independence Day," he said.

Clark glanced briefly at Emma and then back to Dan. "Why?"

Dan walked to get the disc from its case and met Clark's eyes only when he held it in his hand. "Because I haven't seen it in ages," he said, "and the humans win."

MONDAY

D plus 19

UNITED NATIONS HEADQUARTERS
MANHATTAN, NEW YORK

A Jordanian TV reporter stood directly in front of the UN building at 3pm in New York, ready to give a live recap of the day's event for his 10pm viewers at home. With little information leaking out from the discussions inside, it had been a day full of excitement but devoid of detail.

The Jordanian and his colleagues from around the globe waited patiently as they might have outside a courthouse during a high-profile trial. Every report ended with a call for viewers to stay tuned to ensure they didn't miss anything.

There was a real buzz in the air, one that hadn't been felt since the bygone days when enigmatic leaders of nations blacklisted by the United States had made rare visits to New York from the likes of Havana and Tehran.

Dan McCarthy, as keen an observer as anyone, couldn't help but think back to some of the old sci-fi novels from the 1950s which always had the aliens appearing outside the United Nations. Since

then, the UN had been ignored and proven toothless so many times that it seemed unlikely any intelligent race would lend it any credence. The problem, as Dan saw it, was that the Security Council's veto system meant that the UN had never held any sway over the powerful nations.

But today was different. Today, the powerful nations, recognising the unique magnitude of the situation, had decided to operate within the UN system. Without question, today was the most relevant that the United Nations had felt for a generation.

The Security Council meeting during which the real decisions would be made wasn't scheduled until Tuesday afternoon. The usual nations expressed their disquiet with the Security Council's makeup; primarily India and Brazil. Still in an awkward position given the circumstances of the spheres' initial discovery, Germany said nothing. Japan, meanwhile, knew that several of its technologies would be crucial to The Shield and thus its voice would be heard.

Godfrey had already addressed the perceived unfairness of certain countries being more equal than others, insisting that the Security Council was essentially going to decide where and how future decisions would be made, and that all countries would be welcome to contribute ideas and funding to future projects. And in any case, he said, there was an all important precedent: it had been agreed at the UN, decades earlier, that any replies to messages received from alien civilisations should go through the Security Council. And so it went.

In international terms, Security Council resolutions were as binding as anything got. But in a more realistic and basic sense, the combined will of the permanent members would be done, regardless of formalities. With the United States on the same page as its old challenger in Russia and its new one in China — not to mention William Godfrey making the most of his quite baffling global popularity to unite everyone behind the cause — there were no real obstacles to productive discussions.

What no one considered, even for a second, was that nothing would be agreed during these discussions. This was due in no small part to Godfrey's near-guarantee of a tangible response, which had created an even greater sense of urgency among governments than already existed.

The global population had expressed their collective demand for a reaction in the mass marches on every inhabited continent, and stalemate was not an acceptable outcome. National leaders knew this only too well and understood the implications for any national government blamed for an impasse.

Some of Godfrey's comments over the previous week had gone further still and revealed quite specific elements of what could be expected. Godfrey told his public in simple terms that he understood that something had to be done and wouldn't return from New York until the ink was dry on an international commitment to fund and develop The Shield, a name which he himself had popularised.

One pertinent point which Godfrey strived to make clear late on Sunday evening, realising that he hadn't been clear enough on Focus 20/20, was that the defensive station he had been talking about was not The Shield but rather a mere part of it.

"The Shield will be an ongoing project," he said, "the development of which will outlive everyone who sees it begin. The orbital station we hope to launch this year, built around the Chinese core module, will be the first and most important part. This is, if you will, our own proof of concept. The initial launch will prove the doubters wrong once and for all by showing them that humanity can indeed unite to defend itself."

Prior to these comments, Godfrey had already explained that the first defensive station would be modular — like the International Space Station before it — and so would be assembled in stages, in orbit, over a period of several years.

Privately, Godfrey and his fellow decision makers were cautiously optimistic that the first launch would provide enough of a spectacle to placate their protection-craving citizens. When

concerned parents screamed “what are you doing to protect my children?”, as they had been all week, Godfrey and his counterparts needed a concrete response.

They needed an agreement; they needed construction sites; they needed an ambitious but achievable series of launch dates.

In short, they needed something they could point to and say: “This. We’re doing this.”



The afternoon’s main drama came shortly after 5pm when the building emptied and unconfirmed reports began to circulate that a former Soviet republic — its identity unknown beyond the clarification that it wasn’t Russia — had called for financial reparations from the United States.

The fact that NASA’s top brass didn’t know about Hans Kloster’s secret didn’t mean that Kloster hadn’t quietly applied his first-hand knowledge of secret alien technology during the “crippling space race,” the argument went; a period in which Kloster played an understated but not unimportant role.

Though the media were grateful to have something new to talk about, these reports were never verified. Those inside were aware that the request was indeed made and that Russia did not ask for such talk to cease but rather ordered its unnamed neighbour to stop wasting everyone’s time.

Aside from this, the only information leaking from inside was that the general mood among smaller nations was unusually hostile towards the United States. In the words of one ageing Irish reporter on the street: “The mood hasn’t been quite like this since my first visit to this building in 1982, a year when Richard Walker was still serving in Congress and the United States was being non-bindingly outvoted 134 to 1 over its continued investment in apartheid South Africa.”

Not even sworn enemies believed that the US political

establishment had been involved in a grand cover-up, but even staunch allies were angry that a former senator and presidential candidate had been able to pull the wool over the eyes of so many for so long.

In the evening, Japanese state scientists revealed that they would “share with the world, free from conditions,” their conceptually proven ultraviolet laser which had been designed to safely eliminate small pieces of space junk. The laser was capable of firing tens of thousands of pulses per second and certain elements of the technology could quite feasibly be scaled up to deal with larger threats, the team said.

It was universally understood that the term “larger threats” was a catch-all term used to include hostile visitors as well as roaming asteroids without having to say so explicitly.

This inclination to tiptoe around words like “hostile” and even “aliens” had been seen throughout the day from representatives of many countries. William Godfrey, who had made a habit of using both terms liberally, was politely asked by several other European leaders to stop doing so. Repetition of the terms was causing “undue fear,” they said, which could prove disastrous if no agreement was reached. Keen to play the statesman, Godfrey agreed without complaint.

What Godfrey’s concerned counterparts didn’t know was that tomorrow’s decisions were already made.

TUESDAY

D plus 20

UNITED NATIONS HEADQUARTERS
MANHATTAN, NEW YORK

With several billion expectant citizens watching from their homes around the world, the UN Secretary General made a short formal announcement at 5pm on Tuesday.

Within seconds, and for the rest of the evening, news networks in every country dissected the statement with the same attention they had devoted to the announcements concerning the sphere and plaques a week earlier.

ACN's reporter on the ground in New York fought to maintain his sought-after position directly in front of the building's main entrance. "To recap what we just learned," he said, raising his voice to be heard over the bustling crowd, "the first stage of The Shield will indeed launch from China in four short months. We also now have a name for the station: Defensive Station 1, or DS-1 for short. The ongoing Shield project will be overseen by a new supranational entity which has been christened the Global Shield Commission. Details are thin on the ground right now as to the GSC's precise

mandate, but we know that Great Britain's William Godfrey has been installed as the Commission's first Chairman by way of a unanimous vote and that he has resigned from his position as prime minister with immediate effect. Confirmed GSC members so far include India, Brazil, Japan, Canada, Germany, Italy, Norway and Argentina. The wording we've seen suggests that the Security Council's five permanent members will form a kind of "inner circle" within the GSC, but we will await clarification before relaying that as fact."

The announcement of the new Shield Commission, and particularly William Godfrey's appointment as its inaugural Chairman, was broadly welcomed by the swathe of reporters.

Godfrey had played the last few weeks entirely by ear after jumping on Dan McCarthy's initial IDA leak in a desperate bid to save his own career. Events transpired in such a way that Godfrey soon found himself on a platform he had never anticipated, and before long his platform became more of a pedestal. Countless British commentators noted the great irony in the fact that a figure as domestically divisive as Godfrey would now lead a Commission which could be considered nothing but the epitome of international unity.

The ACN reporter continued: "One of my colleagues has been reporting comments from a French source which suggest that the GSC's founding members see DS-1 as something of a test run for a fleet of nuclear-armed defensive satellites which may soon watch over major population centres from geostationary orbits, around eighty times further away from Earth than DS-1."

"What do you mean by a test run?" the ACN anchor asked from her studio.

The reporter pressed his finger against his earpiece to make out the words. "All of this is very new," he said. "Russia and Europe have been engaged in space-related cooperation with both China and the US for a long time, but the US and China have done nothing together. Nuclear cooperation, if there is any truth in these reports,

is something else altogether.”

“It certainly is.”

“Yes, and I think it’s worth emphasising something again: the very fact that our leaders even met to discuss these issues is a sign of just how urgent the need for a concerted response was. And the fact that they’ve actually managed to reach a meaningful agreement... well, this is certainly going to ease some minds, that’s for sure.”

“And what’s the mood on the street? Excitement?”

“I would call it relief rather than excitement,” the reporter said. “There’s definitely a lot more optimism than there was an hour ago. Because while this might only be one step on a long road to planetary security, it’s a big first step, and it’s a step in the right direction.”

On either side of the ACN reporter, correspondents from hundreds of countries gave similar accounts in dozens of languages.

Within the hour, they would have a new statement to mull over when William Godfrey released his own detailed reflection on the day’s events. Godfrey described DS-1 as “the first cog in our impenetrable Shield” and promised that construction of the next stages would be the international community’s top priority from that moment on.

“Together we are strong,” his sign-off read, “and together we are safe.”

D plus 21

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

“This is what we wanted,” Clark said. “Right?”
Dan hesitated. “I think so.”

ONE WEEK LATER

D plus 22

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

By Tuesday of the following week, life felt closer to normal than it had for a long time. As William Godfrey put it, it was as though the whole world had collectively exhaled; though many remained anxious about the future, the fact that something was being done enabled them to at least detach the future from the present and go about their daily lives largely as they had before.

A school shooting in Delaware continued to dominate the news as it had since Friday morning. Dan felt bad for the victims in the same abstract way he usually did, but he was mainly surprised by how easily the news networks slipped back into their regular rhythm.

The Shield — and particularly DS-1's forthcoming launch — still featured in most bulletins, but it was no longer the automatic go-to top story.

William Godfrey and President Slater, as well as their international colleagues and countless other powerful individuals,

took to the airwaves frequently to soothe the latent trepidation that some citizens felt over the prospect of placing any kind of weapons in orbit.

A tiny handful of public figures continued to argue against The Shield. Most notable among them was Billy Kendrick, who reiterated the folly of needlessly raising the Messengers' ire. The fact that few people other than Billy were still openly fretting about the potentially imminent alien threat vindicated William Godfrey's stated belief that a construction project would occupy people's minds. As Godfrey predicted, the Shield project provided something for citizens to rally around and crushed the depressive helplessness that had been circling so many since the Kerguelen plaques were first revealed.

Such was the level of relative serenity, guests on the news networks even began to analyse the secondary benefits of The Shield. Economically, the days following the landmark announcement of the Global Shield Commission's creation had seen a marked uptick in discretionary spending. Not only had spending on entertainment and other non-essentials recovered to the pre-Disclosure baseline, they had actually surpassed it.

"People feel good," a smiling Harvard economist told Blitz News. "This project has the potential to galvanise the global economy to an unprecedented extent. As well as the mood factor, we're also going to benefit from the creation of huge numbers of new jobs to meet The Shield's ongoing construction needs. We're all united behind a common goal, which has all kinds of benefits. One of my colleagues put it like this, and I can't disagree: Disclosure is like a war without the destruction."

In Birchwood, Dan McCarthy was revelling in the physical energy and mental clarity that came with the kind of all-night sleep he hadn't enjoyed since stumbling upon the Kerguelen folder. The universal approval of DS-1's launch from every guest who had been on the news succeeded in abating Dan's personal misgivings, and he now truly understood William Godfrey's repeated assertion that the

world was safer now than it had been before the truth came out.

Dan had come to think, with little room for doubt, that the second plaque really was an asteroid warning. Nothing else made sense. He still didn't know why the aliens didn't destroy the eventually incoming asteroid themselves if they cared enough to warn us about it, and nor did he pretend to understand their logic for scattering the spheres in such remote locations. But however incomplete Dan's understanding was, it made a hell of a lot more sense in his head than the alternative.

The most recent tangible announcement had been the GSC's approval of extensive testing of Japan's laser-based system for impact avoidance. In William Godfrey's own words, that system would receive "however much funding it takes". This emphatic comment, which few picked up on, assured Dan that Godfrey and other world leaders shared his personal belief that an asteroid impact was a far more credible threat than a hostile alien return.

The only real dissent to the trajectory of the GSC's project came from a loose coalition of highly prominent scientists and futurists who insisted that more should be done to prepare for the worst-case contingency: that the dreaded asteroid might prove too large or approach too suddenly for The Shield's impact avoidance technologies to prevent an extinction-level event. Like Dan, this group took the asteroid hypothesis as a given and didn't perceive alien hostility as a realistic possibility.

On Tuesday morning, Timo Fiore spoke on behalf of the nameless group. "We're all glad that something is being done," he read from a pre-prepared statement, "but the Messengers didn't go to the trouble of showing us New Kerguelen for no reason. We therefore call for an expansion or offshoot of the GSC to co-fund serious research and development into interstellar travel. We consider it prudent to act as though our planet will be destroyed while simultaneously doing our utmost to ensure that it won't. These projects don't have to cannibalise each other; we have the personnel and the resources for both. We therefore propose a firm

commitment to the construction of a starship ark in Earth's orbit and the departure of that ark for New Kerguelen before the end of this century. Gliese 667 Cc, the closest candidate planet, is 24 light years away. We must now act as though we have no choice but to get there. The search to confirm New Kerguelen's identity must continue while we build, with serious investment in observation and further analysis of already known exoplanets. We cannot afford to let a lack of clarity over our destination delay the construction of the ark which will take us there. We must begin today based on what we know today, for tomorrow might be too late."

Timo's comments were headline news from the moment he uttered them. Though no one liked to think about the prospect of The Shield's defensive measures failing, many shared Timo's view that humanity ought to prepare for all eventualities. Some social media users even turned Godfrey's "trust in God but tie up your camels" comment against him and used it to call for investment in a fallback option.

There was far less clamour for this than there had been for DS-1, however, since the abstract notion of species preservation didn't strike the same chord with most people as their core biological drive for self preservation. And as Godfrey had mentioned in the aftermath of the plaques being revealed, any kind of planetary evacuation would provide scant consolation to the overwhelming majority of humanity who would be left behind.

Domestically, Emma was preparing for her own evacuation in the form of her move to Mrs Naylor's house next door. Piled-up boxes of Emma's things filled the McCarthys' living room having been delivered by XPR from her New York apartment as "a gesture of goodwill".

Emma's move was set for the following Tuesday. She had arranged Dan's ad-shoot, which was funding the purchase with plenty left over, for Friday. While Dan and Emma were in Amarillo making stupid amounts of money for a few hours' work, Clark and Mr Byrd would visit Henry's hospital to discuss the prospect of him

coming home sooner rather than later. Clark's last phone conversation hadn't given him much hope of success, so he hadn't told Dan about the upcoming visit.

Rarely an hour went by without Dan thinking about Henry and wondering when he would be home and when he would be better, but he didn't have the words or emotional dexterity to talk about it. No one talked about it. Emma had picked up on this quickly and went out of her way not to intrude. Every now and then she would touch the wrong thing and receive a quiet reminder that it was Henry's and therefore off-limits; these reminders were usually gentler when they came from Clark. Though Emma appreciated Dan taking her in, it was things like this that made her crave her own space.

Unbeknownst to Emma or Clark, Dan had made a few phone calls of his own over the last few days and had arranged to return to his work at Wolf & Sons Traditional Bookshop on a trial basis. Mr Wolf at first reacted with a variation of the "do you realise how famous you are?" line that Emma had spouted when Dan first suggested the idea, but he quickly came around when he considered the priceless PR he would get from having the Dan McCarthy behind his store's coffee counter.

Dan didn't know how the trial run would go, but he wanted to give it a shot. His name never seemed to come up on the news anymore, and the sharp downhill graph that appeared on Emma's SMMA app when Dan entered his name really hit home how quickly most of the world had moved on from caring about who got the ball rolling.

No part of Dan minded this whatsoever.

Every few hours Dan smiled to himself as it dawned on him all over again that aliens were real and that he had been the one to prove it. Godfrey's whispered words about giving the world a fighting chance echoed in Dan's mind semi-frequently, but that wasn't what Dan was proud of and it wasn't why he'd risked so much to leak the Kerguelen folder in the first place.

To Dan McCarthy, then and now, all that ever mattered was the truth.

FOUR MONTHS LATER

D plus 23

JSLC LAUNCH AREA 4
DONGFENG AEROSPACE CITY, CHINA

“In a matter of mere hours,” William Godfrey said grandly, addressing the lucky few media personnel who had been granted access to DS-1’s launch site, “we will take our first step towards securing the future of our species and our planet.”

Godfrey stood in front of a huge window with an unobstructed view to the launch pad and DS-1’s core module, known officially as Límíng. President Slater and an orderly line of her international counterparts watched on, facing Godfrey from the other side of the cameras.

“As its name suggests,” Godfrey continued, “the launch of Límíng truly does represent a new dawn for mankind. Never before have so many nations come together with such urgency and commitment, and never before have any succeeded so completely in turning a moment of adversity into a moment of triumph. My job as Chairman of the GSC has been an easy one thanks to the men and women who stand before me today. I feel privileged to be among

them — much less above them — and in this new era of unprecedented political cooperation and scientific collaboration, I am confident there is no limit to what we can achieve together.”

Godfrey took a step forward and motioned towards Chinese Premier Ding Ziyang, the first of several national leaders set to say their piece ahead of the historic launch. President Slater was fourth in line, behind not only the Russian President but also Godfrey’s successor as Prime Minister, John Cole.

Cole’s meteoric ascent had necessitated a somewhat awkward defection from his own party to Godfrey’s, but the by-election and leadership election which followed were both as straightforward as could be; with Godfrey’s public backing, Cole was a made man.

Even Cole’s smug face and detestable mannerisms couldn’t dampen Slater’s spirits, though; having recovered incredibly since the distant and turbulent days of the IDA leak, the President was now enjoying the best approval ratings of her entire term. Jack Neal, who had accompanied Slater to China, put her recovery down to the fact that everyone had been duped by Richard Walker. Most respected Slater’s humility in navigating the fallout, as well as her refusal to stoop to Walker’s level of personal attacks.

When it came Slater’s turn to speak, she thanked her gracious hosts and echoed the sentiments of everyone who had already addressed the media.

“It’s often said that you can best judge a person by their actions under pressure,” she said. “And if you can judge a species the same way, then we are hours way from passing our biggest test.”

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

“You can watch that at the drive-in,” Emma said, encouraging Dan to take his eyes away from his brand new TV, get off his brand new couch, and get into his same old car. She was dressed for the cameras and had already ensured that Dan was, too.

“One minute,” Dan said. “I just want to hear France.”

“It’ll be on the radio.”

“We need to wait for Clark, anyway.”

Clark emerged from the bathroom on cue, revealing a surprisingly presentable outfit. “How many times do I need to remind you that it’s not called the drive-in anymore?” he asked Emma in a deliberately annoying know-it-all tone.

“You know,” she said, “it’s weird. Whenever I don’t see you two for a few days I start to think, “I kinda miss those guys.” But then I see you, and that thought goes away.”

“Obviously,” Clark said.

Dan turned round to agree. “Yeah. That’s like saying if you’re

thirsty and you drink some water, you won't still be thirsty."

Emma groaned and lifted Clark's keys. "Whoever doesn't want to walk to the drive-in better get in the car."

Dan stood up.

"I don't know any drive-in around here," Clark said.

"Bye then."

Clark laughed and turned off the TV. "Let's go."



To Dan's annoyance, the live interviews from the spaceport in China weren't on the radio. In their place, the station was replaying headline-making moments from the five months since Dan first leaked the contents of the Kerguelen folder. Hearing it all in such quick bursts made the road to Disclosure and DS-1's launch seem a lot smoother than it had been in reality.

Though the months since the Global Shield Commission's creation in New York had been far less eventful than the roller-coaster weeks beforehand, there were still plenty of talking points.

The imminent launch of DS-1's core module and the broader focus on The Shield's future components had made water cooler talk out of previously uninspiring topics like different types of orbits and propulsion systems.

One thing that wasn't widely discussed was the issue of the GSC's funding. Dan couldn't imagine that China had shared the *Líming* module with everyone else for free — they didn't build it for free, after all — but he understood why most considered it uncouth to talk about money. He also recognised the likelihood that people weren't biting their tongue on this issue, they just didn't care.

Happily, no fear-worthy asteroids had been detected in the last four months and no hostile visitors had returned. In these respects and most others, the world was largely the same place it had been before the New York agreement. There had been no "hot" conflicts between major nations before the agreement and there were none

now; many expected the GSC's existence to ensure that this remained the case, eradicating the risk of war between member states in the same way the EU had in Europe.

Timo Fiore's campaign for investment in a starship ark gained momentum for several weeks after the agreement until William Godfrey felt compelled to comment. "I'm not going to forbid anyone from participating in side projects that make them feel warm and fuzzy," Godfrey said, "but the GSC has an unwavering responsibility to protect this planet, not abandon it." To say this took the wind out of Timo's proposals would be something of an understatement.

Outside of the news, Dan greatly enjoyed a high-budget series of British documentaries named *The Great Nazi Treasure Hunt*. The series took a detailed look at the expeditions to New Swabia, Kerguelen, Bouvet Island and Lake Namtso, and also covered the meta-conspiracy surrounding the dumping of fake currency in Lake Toplitz and the deliberately spread stories of secret gold. Kloster's letter had touched on this idea of using lies to protect secrets, but the documentaries explored it on a much deeper level.

Demographers, meanwhile, noted some statistically significant but unspectacular trends such as a slight fall in the birth rate and a more noticeable decline in marriages relative to the same four-month period in previous years. "People just aren't thinking as long-term as they used to," one expert told ACN.

Economists made similar comments about mortgages and insurance policies, the uptakes of which had fallen while overall spending remained constant.

A political scientist Dan heard on Blitz News one afternoon tried to delve into "the national psyche," as he kept calling it. The professor said the American people had no opportunity for the kind of truth and reconciliation type hearing that typically followed a major lie being exposed or a major injustice being ended. The reason for this, quite simply, was that there weren't really two sides.

"Richard Walker was one man," the professor said, "like Hans Kloster before him. So what we have now is an atmosphere not

unlike the kind a nation might experience when a dictator falls: people don't want to talk, they want to topple the dictator's statue and kick it until their toes bleed."

But fallen statues usually marked the end of fighting, and people knew that the real battle — the battle for survival — was just beginning.

In simple terms, the world had bigger things to worry about than Richard Walker. As William Godfrey put it, there was no sense in flogging a dead horse. This attitude marked an about turn from Godfrey's previous "one way or another, he will pay for this" comment; as inaugural Chairman of the Global Shield Commission, such tact and restraint was necessary.

Richard Walker soon faded from the front pages like Dan McCarthy had before him and continued to lie low in his undocumented second home in Eastview, Colorado. Through some combination of fear and respect, Joe Crabbe agreed to covertly provide Richard with large deliveries of food and other essential items every time he visited his family in Denver. Richard had paid Joe handsomely for his assistance and secrecy on each of his two visits so far. Joe continued to broadcast his anti-globalism message four times per week, but his listenership figures were in terminal decline.

Billy Kendrick, Joe's one-time-only ally on the record-breaking Focus 20/20 panel the weekend before the agreement, had ceased broadcasting altogether. Having gone from zero to hero and straight back again in the eyes of the fickle media more quickly than anyone before him, Billy cut himself off from the world.

Billy's most recent public appearance came at a pre-scheduled commitment to publicise someone else's already obsolete book on meta-conspiracies. Since then he had retreated even further after his three-month beard received a relentless mocking on the front page of The Daily Chat: "Does Santa Claus have a drinking problem? Nope, but Billy Kendrick just might..."

Fortunately for Billy, the media didn't care enough to hassle him

at home. Richard Walker, meanwhile, knew that anyone who really wanted to find his own second home could have done so with relative ease. As far as he was concerned, the fact that he was still a free man was further proof of the spineless kind of non-leadership that had gotten the country into the mess it was in, forced to crawl into bed with communists and globalists to keep itself safe.

"Keep looking for the interviews," Dan called from the back seat. "I wanted to hear France. Do a manual scan."

With Emma driving, Clark held his finger on the scan button until the numbers stopped moving. An oddly familiar chorus filled the car:

"So while you're out there in them old boots,
running from your rags to riches;
Spare a free thought for the dead man,
who gave them boots their stitches."

"Why do I keep hearing this song?" Clark asked no one in particular.

"Seriously? I've heard it a few times, too," Dan said.

"Yeah?" Clark said, turning to check that Dan wasn't messing with him.

"Are you two serious right now?" Emma asked. "Have you never heard a song twice?"

"It's a pretty obscure old song," Clark argued.

"Then the radio's obviously haunted," she shrugged. "It's either that or confirmation bias, but that would be crazy, right?"

Clark kept scanning until he looped all the way back to the first station. Emma slowed before reaching the recently installed gate at the end of the street and waited for it to recognise the car.

More so than in the world at large, a lot had changed in Birchwood over the last four months. This frustratingly unresponsive gate was just one example.



The most immediate change in Birchwood following the New York agreement was the rapid media exodus from the drive-in. The leak was old news — Disclosure itself was old news — and there was no reason for media outlets to maintain a permanent presence in Dan McCarthy's home town.

Even Maria and Kyle from ACN left to cover other things. Trey took some time off at home with his wife Louise and their new baby, whose middle name happened to be Daniel.

As soon as the media left, Phil Norris invested heavily in fast-tracked renovations to the lot and pinned his hopes on tourism. His giant "BIRCHWOOD PLAZA" sign didn't look out of place now that three stores had moved in to the old retail units alongside his own commercial venture.

Always a fan of a pun, Phil opted to make the most of the lot's association with the leak and to name his flagship restaurant appropriately: New Ker-Grillin' Bar & Grill.

Dan now drove to New Ker-Grillin' for a brief meet and greet session every Thursday, of which there had been three since opening night. Dan agreed to do this only because it was a condition of Phil's business loan being approved, but he was happy to help out since the tourist dollars his appearances brought in would benefit not only Phil Norris but the whole town. Everyone in Birchwood had been good to Dan after his father's accident, and no one had ever expressed resentment at the sometimes intrusive media attention he'd brought upon them.

The "Welcome to Birchwood" signpost just beyond the old drive-in now included the words "Proud home of Dan McCarthy," and that pride went both ways.

Clark had made use of his "eat free for life" pass at New Ker-Grillin' eighteen nights in a row, but Phil didn't begrudge it since Clark was a minor celebrity in his own right courtesy of his regular appearances at Dan's side during countless televised events. Clark kept a running count of the value of the food he'd eaten and used it to playfully tease Phil.

Every night, Clark said the same thing: "I bet you regret giving me this pass now!"

Every night, Phil smiled and shook his head.

It certainly wasn't as though Clark couldn't afford the ever-larger mountains of food he was challenging himself to consume each night; not since Dan's three ad shoots brought in more money than they ever dreamed possible and Emma surprised them both by opting only to keep what she called a "standard 17% cut" for brokering the deals.

Dan's remuneration was the kind of money that necessitated meetings with multiple accountants and attracted visits from enthusiastic investment managers. Clark took care of everything on his own; and though the sudden influx of capital led to more than a few stressful days and sleepless nights, he much preferred these high-class problems to his old ones. There was no longer a gap at the bottom of the front door, for one thing.

Dan was only too glad to leave the money side of things to Clark. He knew how much there was but tried not to think about it or spend any more than he had to. This was partly because it didn't seem fair that he could make so much in a single day when so many had nothing, but mainly because he was worried that the ad agencies might suddenly realise they had added a few too many zeroes to his contracts.

However many times Emma tried to explain the value that the three brands in question would gain from an association with Dan, he couldn't grasp how he could possibly add enough value to offset what they'd paid him. He sat down one night to calculate how many extra bottles of cola Lexington would have to sell solely because of his ad to make up for the expense, and the numbers just didn't make sense.

When he showed Emma the numbers, she pointed something out: "That's just what they paid you to shoot the ad. They still have to pay the networks to air it. That thirty-second spot would cost half a mil if it aired during a football game. So when they debut them

right before the DS-1 launch... I can't even guess a number."

"If you weren't worth it, they wouldn't pay it," Clark had said.

"Pretty much," Emma agreed. "The stock price rose 6% when they announced you were doing an ad, so the market liked it."

The ad Dan felt most conflicted about was the one for Beanstox Coffee, whose aggressive tactic of running smaller coffee shops out of business had been one of his dad's favourite subjects to rant about. Dan's decision to go back to work for Mr Wolf at the bookstore-cum-coffeehouse wasn't solely based on guilt over this ad, but it did play a part.

In any case, Dan's trial return to work was both a great success and a colossal failure. It was a failure in that the store was overrun within minutes of Dan's arrival and a success for precisely the same reason. Mr Wolf took delight in the free publicity and thanked Dan profusely, but the episode decisively ended Dan's faint hopes of living anything resembling a normal life. Having never given any thought to what he would do if he didn't have to earn money, Dan felt like he had floated purposely through the last few months.

Emma, meanwhile, continued to revel in her new and similarly work-free life. Her situation was different from Dan's in that she had been working a highly demanding job in New York for most of her adult life and had dreamed of a break like this for almost as long. It would be a long time yet until she shared Dan's restlessness.

The biggest event for Emma since her move next door had been a two-week visit from her sister. Tara slept in Emma's house on only two of her fourteen nights in Colorado, and neither Dan nor Clark ever saw her in person. Emma explained that Tara had decided on a whim to spend the whole of the first week with people she met in Colorado Springs then followed one of them to Denver for a few days and nights towards the end. "She's always been good at making friends," Emma said. "Making friends and spending money"

But the biggest news for everyone else in Birchwood, not just Dan and Clark, was that Henry McCarthy would be coming home

from hospital in just over a week.

Dan had seen him twice since the doctor's called Clark to tell him Henry was exhibiting signs of major progress and could soon be self-reliant. Dan cried when he walked in and saw his father sitting up for the first time in months. Henry's mental faculties had recovered greatly even since Clark's last visit, and he was overwhelmed with emotion to both see and recognise his two boys.

On the way to the hospital that day, just two weeks ago, Clark told Dan not to say "anything about anything." Dan understood what he meant: Henry didn't yet know that aliens had been discovered and the world flipped on its head in the months since his accident, much less that Dan had set the whole thing in motion.

Between that visit and Dan's next, Henry learned everything. When Dan and Clark walked in together for the second visit, Henry greeted them with a real smile; his real smile.

"They told me one of my sons might just've saved the whole damn world," he said. "I guessed Clark, and they told me to guess again."

"So you guessed Clark again," Dan butted in, preempting the punch line with a smile.

"So I guessed Clark again," Henry said, his face creasing with laughter. He wasn't usually talkative or jovial like this, but then he wasn't usually seeing his sons properly for the second time in six months.

Henry wore a brave face for a once athletic man who had recently been told he would never walk again. A tiny fraction of Dan's ad money went into the structural modifications needed for the house to meet Henry's new needs — things like ramps, handrails, and wider doorways.

Everything was set, and as far as Dan was concerned, the imminent launch of the *Líming* module was something to get out of the way before Henry came home.

Dan might have gone to watch the launch on Phil Norris's big screen if he wasn't obliged to, but Emma had taken that decision

out of his hands. For his part, Clark couldn't wait to meet the man who had come to see Dan: none other than Miguel Perez, the Argentine cult hero who first spotted the sphere coming out of the sea at Miramar.

Miguel, a frail man of a good age, had his travel to Birchwood paid by the same news station who had given him the binoculars he used to spot the sphere. The station, ADLTV, contacted Emma a few weeks earlier with their offer. She took the money. When Dan asked why, given that money was the last thing they needed more of, her answer was simple: "Because you always take the money."

As soon as the old drive-in came into sight, Dan felt unexpected excitement bubbling in his stomach.

The first section of a space station which would ultimately function as one of many Earth-defending asteroid-killers was about to launch into space. Aliens were real. They warned humanity about an asteroid. All of this was only known — and the launch was only happening — because of Dan's undying commitment to the truth.

Between this excitement and the stronger-every-second anticipation of Henry getting home from the hospital, Dan decided it was time to take a deep breath and smell the roses. He had nothing to complain about and everything to be grateful for. Hundreds of people were waiting to see him at the end of the street and billions more were waiting to see a rocket launch from China. It was a good day to be alive.

Clark noticed Dan's zen-like expression in the rearview mirror. "What are you thinking about?" he asked.

"Hmm?"

"What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing," Dan said. "Why? What about you?"

"I was just thinking... do you reckon Richard Walker will be watching the launch?"

"Everyone will be watching the launch," Emma answered.

"You think? Even Walker?"

She nodded. “Especially Walker.”

D plus 25

*JSLC LAUNCH AREA 4
DONGFENG AEROSPACE CITY, CHINA*

“Mr Godfrey, sir,” a Chinese media liaison officer whispered in his ear.

“Yes?”

“Seven minutes, sir. You still wish to stand by the window with your back to the camera for the launch?”

With mission control completely closed to the press, this maximum-security viewing area was the focus of the world’s attention. Billions were watching these scenes.

Details mattered.

“Sir?” the liaison officer pushed.

Godfrey nodded.

“Okay, sir. And who do you wish to stand on your right-hand side?”

Godfrey scanned the roomful of leaders, most of whom were giving their final pre-launch comments to their respective home country’s sole media representative. He saw John Cole and Valerie

Slater side by side — together would be too strong a word — talking to the British and American reporters.

“No one,” Godfrey decided.

“No one, sir? Not even Mr Cole?”

Godfrey considered it again. Ding Ziyang would be standing to his left, of course, and three figures silhouetted against the fiery launch site would project a more powerful image than two...

“Scrap that,” he said.

“Scrap that, sir?”

Godfrey nodded again.

“Mr Cole, sir?”

“No,” Godfrey said after a moment’s hesitation. “Let’s go with Slater.”

DRIVE-IN
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

Dan stepped out of the car to the sight and sound of fireworks emanating from the top of Hawker's Hill. An upbeat vibe surrounded the drive-in, as Dan insisted on continuing to call Birchwood Plaza; it hadn't been a drive-in for fifteen years and everyone had still called it that, he said, so no amount of fancy new signage could change it now.

There were plenty of cameras waiting for Dan, including those belonging to the Argentinian network who had arranged for Miguel Perez to meet him while wearing a jacket with their logo all over it.

The media attention was certainly nothing compared to what Dan had faced on his last major media engagement, when he shook hands with William Godfrey as the world held its breath over the then-imminent international summit in New York.

Tonight, on this starry Tuesday evening, the drive-in was quite literally a different place than it had been then. Everything was clean; fresh; new. One of the reporters present for the launch party

went so far as to clumsily exalt the once dilapidated lot's rejuvenation as a "perfect metaphor for the New York agreement's far-reaching effects."

Emma led Dan towards Miguel. The old man beamed from ear to ear and hugged Dan like a long-lost grandson. "Thank you," he said in forced English. Dan could tell that Miguel was genuinely glad to be there; and regardless of ACLTV's motives, Dan was glad to have him.

Dan then spent a lot longer than he realised talking to Miguel through his interpreter, Sofía, the middle-aged Argentinian woman who had arranged everything with Emma.

Miguel told Dan that he hadn't always been a big believer in aliens or anything else he hadn't seen for himself but that he saw truth in Dan's eyes the very first time Dan gave an interview. Miguel looked around the drive-in lot and pointed all around. "In this very place," he smiled.

Dan was so engaged in the conversation with Miguel and Sofía that he didn't know how imminent the launch was. Emma tapped him on the shoulder while Miguel was talking about the sphere's salty aroma, which had wafted down to him from the steps of the Coast Guard building where Juan Silva presented it to the public.

"Five minutes," she said.

Dan immediately looked up to the screen. Godfrey was talking and the countdown timer in the lower right corner said 00:04:51.

"Here's to a safe launch," Dan said, excusing himself to go with Emma.

Sofía passed the message on. Dan saw Miguel speaking and waited to hear the translation.

"Come on," Emma said, pulling Dan towards the screen where Phil Norris had set out three seats for them and Clark, his three special guests.

"Just a sec," he said. He looked at Sofía. "What did he say?"

"He said yes," Sofía replied.

"It was longer than that," Dan said.

Miguel read the confusion on Dan's face and repeated himself.

"He is old," Sofía said. "Senile."

"What did he say?"

"Seriously," Emma stressed. "The ads are about to start and we're supposed to be in those seats."

The interpreter rolled her eyes. "Fine. He said: let's hope they don't mind."

Emma yanked Dan's arm strongly enough to give him no choice but to follow.

"Did you hear that?" he asked her as they hurried to their seats in front of the big screen. The scaffold stage made famous by Emma's speech on the night they revealed the Kloster letter was still there beside the screen, untouched by Phil in his effort to retain something of the lot's charm and attract more tourists.

"I heard her say he's senile."

"Yeah, but..."

"Shut up," Clark said from his seat on Dan's right. "The ads are starting."



The broadcasting deal surrounding the launch of DS-1's core module was highly atypical in that everything went through the Global Shield Commission's media division. The GSC provided one feed for each international market, featuring the launch footage interspersed with commercials. This feed was made available to commercial news networks free of charge on the condition that it be relayed exactly as-was. This meant that ACN and Blitz News couldn't air their own commercials within a one-hour window around the launch, depriving them of a colossal payday. Though it infuriated the networks' bean-counters, this pleased Dan; if anyone else was going to make money from his ads, he would much rather it was the GSC than a faceless corporation.

With a counter in the bottom-right corner of the screen relaying

that just four minutes remained until the moment of truth, the commentators in China introduced the final pre-launch commercial break. Unbeknownst to Dan, the upcoming two minutes would be the most expensive in advertising history by an order of magnitude. The reasons for this were manifold: everyone was watching the same thing at the same time, they were a captive audience, and — crucially — they were in a state of heightened anticipation which also heightened their susceptibility to the effects of advertising.

Of the four commercials which were broadcast to the largest audience in American history, three featured Dan McCarthy. Everyone around him cheered when his face appeared on the big screen. Dan had little more idea than anyone else what the ads were going to be like; he remembered his lines for each of the three, but they were nothing more than basic testimonials. Emma had seen the final cuts and told Dan it would be funnier if he didn't know what to expect. He vehemently disagreed but had no recourse when she refused to budge.

The first of Dan's three ads to air was for Mansize Clothing, a behemoth of online trading which catered to the big and tall market. Big usually meant fat, as Clark liked to remind Dan at every opportunity, but Dan's height just qualified him for the lower end of Mansize's tall range. In the CGI-heavy ad, a tall shadowy figure appeared outside Dan's window in the dead of night.

"Clothes," an alien voice croaked through the open window.

Frightened, Dan pointed to his drawer unit. Seconds later, shirts and socks and everything else began floating through the air and out towards the alien.

"Finally," the alien said, its voice an octave higher and its tone much friendlier. "This is the fifth shirt I've tried on tonight. Everyone else's were too small!"

"I shop at Mansize Clothing," Dan said. The camera zoomed in on his face. "And so should you."

Clark slapped Dan so hard on the back that it almost knocked him out of his chair. Dan instinctively thrashed an arm to smack

Clark in the head, but Clark was already doubled over in a fit of laughter.

The next ad, Beanstox Coffee's, was more low-key. Dan entered a quiet branch overlooking a meadow and sat down in a luxurious armchair. The table in front of him was scattered with newspapers featuring mocked-up headlines like "Aliens Real!", "Shield Gets Go Ahead!", and "Nothing Will Ever Be The Same!".

A smiling female barista handed Dan a warm cup. He took a sip and revelled in the flavour.

"To your taste?" she asked.

Dan took another sip and looked into the camera. "Some things never change."

The third commercial, to everyone's surprise, was for Blitz News. It featured a rapid-fire montage of their coverage from the last five months, highlighting all of their exclusive reveals and blockbuster guests. "This is airing on ACN," Emma whispered as the ad neared its conclusion. "Imagine how pissed they must be."

This struck Dan as a stupidly expensive way for Blitz to get one over on their rivals, but it didn't surprise him.

The fourth and final pre-launch ad was for Lexington Cola. Lexington were known for sparing no expense when it came to maintaining their brand's position, so Dan expected something good. What he didn't expect was for Hollywood megastar Kaitlyn Judd to appear on the screen.

The camera quickly panned right from Kaitlyn and landed on a football player that even Dan recognised. From there it continued along a line of nine genuine A-listers before landing on Dan. He hadn't met any of these people in the studio.

"Taste both and tell us which you prefer," a friendly voiceover instructed the celebrities, who were now all in one shot in a completely white room.

The camera zoomed in on Kaitlyn again. "Lexington," she said. The other eight celebrities and Dan all said the same.

"There we have it," the voiceover said. "Lexington Cola. It's the

—”

“Wait...” another voice begged. The camera panned right to show an alien standing beside Dan. It was a textbook Grey; head too big for its body, eyes too big for its head. “I prefer Pickerman’s Cola.”

“Get out of here,” Kaitlyn Judd called from the other end of the line. Her fellow celebrities joined in the heckling until the alien skulked away.

The triumphant voiceover returned: “Lexington Cola. It’s the best!”

For the final shot, the camera focused on Dan. “Ten out of ten earthlings agree,” he said.

Clark finally got enough control of his laughter to squeeze out some words. “You earned every fucking penny,” he said, setting himself off again.

The old drive-in’s big screen faded to black and the Global Shield Commission’s logo appeared for a few seconds before the live pictures from China returned.

00:01:49.

00:01:48.

00:01:47...

D plus 27

JSLC LAUNCH AREA 4
DONGFENG AEROSPACE CITY, CHINA

William Godfrey cut a statesmanlike figure as he looked out at the Límíng module and the rocket which would imminently send it into orbit. It went without saying that this first launch would be the most important of all that would soon follow, marking a seismic shift in world politics.

Understanding the power of imagery, Godfrey had put his personal history with President Slater to one side and now stood at the building's massive window flanked by the leaders of China and the United States.

These leaders' unity had calmed their citizens, and the Límíng launch would settle the last few remaining nerves once and for all.

"Twenty seconds," the media liaison officer said, for the benefit of the rocket-facing trio who couldn't see any of the room's large screens.

Godfrey took a deep breath. "The three of us standing here when that rocket takes off..." he whispered to Slater, sounding almost

*childlike. “It’s going to be some picture.”
He wasn’t wrong.*

DRIVE-IN
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

The rocket cleared the tower and began its ascent without incident, bringing excited cheers and applause from most of the crowd at the drive-in. For some, like Dan, the overwhelming emotion was closer to relief than joy.

A large cascade of fireworks erupted from Hawker's Hill, inviting still more cheers.

"How long do we have to sit here?" Clark asked after another minute or so spent watching a rocket soar through a sky so clear that it almost looked like nothing was moving.

"Yeah," Emma said, rising to her feet. "That's pretty much it."

Dan rose to join Emma and Clark. A particularly loud triple-booming firework caught his attention. But while Dan's eyes were focused on the sky in admiration of the source of the bangs, his ears discerned what was by far the loudest and most synchronised collective gasp he had ever heard.

"No," Emma whispered breathlessly, her eyes fixed on the

screen. "No...."

Clark instinctively threw his arm around Dan and pulled him in close.

Dan had to manoeuvre his neck to see the screen. He immediately wished he hadn't.

Because there it was, hurtling to the ground in the middle of the Gobi Desert: DS-1's core module, engulfed in a stomach-churning fireball.

D plus 29

*JSLC LAUNCH AREA 4
DONGFENG AEROSPACE CITY, CHINA*

In near-poetic contrast to the violent chaos in the sky, the world's most powerful political leaders watched on helplessly from a room more still and more silent than anyone could bear.

William Godfrey stood frozen to the spot with his hands on his head. President Slater remained by his side, watching through her fingers. The sudden sound of sharp nasal breathing broke Slater's focus on the sickening sight outside. She flicked her eyes towards Godfrey without moving her head and saw a tear trickling down his cheek. Without giving a thought to how it would look, Slater put a hand on his shoulder.

Godfrey didn't recoil. His breathing slowed.

Slater left her hand there.

The silence and stillness in the room was then broken as Ding Ziyang decided he had seen enough and slowly walked away from the window, his eyes glued to the ground.

Jack Neal hurried over to Slater and Godfrey. "Damage

limitation,” he told them, maintaining an admirable focus. “We need to get out of here right now and think about what we’re going to say and how we can come back from this.”

“Jack,” Godfrey sighed, finally turning away from the fireball to meet his eyes, “there is no coming back from this.”

D plus 30

*DRIVE-IN
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO*

"I have to see Miguel," Dan said.

"We're going home," Clark insisted, leading him towards the car.

"Clark," Emma said. "He said something weird."

"Miguel?"

She nodded.

"About something bad happening?" Clark asked, already curious enough to have changed course.

"I think so."

"There he is," Dan said. "Miguel!"

The old man spotted Dan coming towards him. Before Dan even got there, Miguel was waving his hand horizontally in a clear "no" signal and repeating the same two words over and over again: no accidente.

"Terrorists?" Clark asked him.

Miguel shook his head and said something in Spanish, too fast

and unfamiliar for any of them to understand.

“What does that mean?” Dan asked Sofía, vaguely recognising only Miguel’s final word.

Sofía repeated the Spanish phrase as a question to make sure she had heard Miguel correctly over the panicked muttering of the crowd around them.

Miguel nodded absently and said it again to avoid any doubt. Dan made out the same word — oso — but still couldn’t place it.

“What the fuck is he saying?” Clark snapped.

Sofía turned away from Miguel, flicked her eyes between Dan and Clark, and said the last thing either of them wanted to hear:

“We poked the bear.”

Part 7

DISASTER

*“All truth is simple...
is that not doubly a lie?”*

Friedrich Nietzsche

*McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO*

Within an hour of the DS-1 launch disaster, many of the media's pessimistic pre-Disclosure predictions came true.

Dan McCarthy could only watch on helplessly from his couch as fear-induced looting swept the nation throughout the night. Bottled water, batteries, and ammunition — all of the things which had been temporarily cleared from shelves by eager buyers four months earlier — were now ripped down and fought over in crowded aisles.

Irresponsible news reporting of the first few such instances ramped up hysteria levels and encouraged copycat scenes across the country. Many large stores had already closed their doors to keep the mobs at bay, but this only served to agitate them further. Local police forces were quickly overwhelmed.

Blitz News devoted the left side of its screen to footage of looters in Chicago and the right side to the immeasurably more sombre scenes at the launch site in China. In passing, the anchor wondered out loud what kind of fallout there would have been had the launch

failed sooner than it did and the blast or falling debris reached the onlooking world leaders. The only consolation that Dan or anyone else could take was that neither those leaders nor anyone else had been killed.

In that narrow sense, the DS-1 disaster was inexpensive. But in terms of international morale and planetary security, the cost was unprecedented.

The official GSC footage replayed endlessly. When this footage was slowed down, the entire screen flashed white for an instant right before the Límíng core module became engulfed in a fireball. For a single frame of the recording, total whiteness filled the screen. It might have been a camera glitch or some kind of feedback, but no one could be sure; the remoteness and security level of the launch site meant there was no amateur footage to compare it to.

Emma stayed with Dan and Clark as they and everyone else tried to make sense of what had just happened.

“Why hasn’t Godfrey said anything yet?” Dan asked after mulling over the data in Emma’s SMMA app and seeing that the GSC’s Chairman was still the most talked-about person in the world. “He just has to say that everyone is still committed to The Shield. Do you think the silence means that maybe it was... you know...”

Emma shrugged. “He can’t say anything official until everyone in the GSC agrees what he should say. And whatever actually happened, a lot of people will be saying that the next launch, if there even is one, shouldn’t be from China.”

“Wait,” Clark said, standing up straight and narrowing his eyes in thought. “Isn’t that a pretty strong motive for someone to sabotage the launch?”

This thought had already crossed Dan’s mind. “That site is probably the most secure place in the world,” he said, shaking his head. “There’s literally no way anyone could have interfered. It’s not even like this launch was an international effort; China had it ready to go.”

"I guess," Clark said.

Emma searched her app for "sabotage" to see if any high-profile figures had shared similar suspicions. "It's getting even slower," she said as the loading circle spun and spun and spun.

TIMEOUT ERROR.

"That's weird." She tried again. Ten seconds later, the same message appeared. She closed the app and opened her phone's browser. It was painfully slow, but her last-viewed site eventually loaded. "Internet's okay," she said. She then navigated to the social media site's homepage, where desktop users logged in. The blue loading bar crawled, stopped, stuttered, and eventually reached the end. Nothing else happened. "It's down."

Dan checked on his phone, launching the regular app. "Mine too," he said.

"Shit," Clark said. "Has it ever been down before?"

"Not for more than a few minutes," Emma replied. "And not since everyone started depending on it as their main method of communication."

When the service failed to return within ten minutes or so, the news networks took notice. A full screen "RED ALERT" appeared on Blitz News, complete with an unsettling drum beat. The anchors casually tossed around phrases like "communications meltdown" and "digital lockout."

Talk inevitably turned to the prospect of a massive cyber attack. "But it's a little early to talk about this being the start of an alien attack on our core infrastructure," one of the anchors said. She then added, with no hint of irony or self-awareness: "so we don't want to get ahead of ourselves."

"Could it just be overuse?" Dan asked.

Emma nodded and told him there was a chance that the situation wasn't too unlike widespread outages in the early days of cellular communication, when systems would often die at midnight as December gave way to January and tens of millions of people in the same time zone suddenly tried to make calls and send texts at

the same precise moment. The infrastructure was much improved since those days, of course, but the data demands and sheer number of users had also increased; and however much server redundancy was built in, no digital service was truly built to cope with everyone accessing it simultaneously.

The service returned intermittently over the next half hour. Each time it did, Emma saw post after post from users accusing the police of shutting it down on purpose as they had in localised areas during unrelated instances of organised looting earlier in the year.

These accusations, as unfounded as they were, only worsened the atmosphere in major cities and heightened tensions between citizens and the authority figures who they felt were failing them.

Disturbances in some cities escalated throughout the night as police reactions to the initial looting prompted angry responses. At this point the problems became self-perpetuating.

Shortly before 1am in Birchwood, the news coverage shifted across the Atlantic to report on the enormous queues which had formed outside banks up and down the UK. ATMs in many areas had emptied overnight, the reporter said. In case the snaking queues didn't speak for themselves, he added: "more than just fear and uncertainty, these scenes reflect a sudden and perhaps justified lack of faith in our core political and societal institutions."

"All our money's in the bank," Clark said.

Neither Emma nor Dan said anything as the reporter for Blitz's UK associate began to walk the queue in search of someone who looked interesting. Two police officers stood outside this bank on the outskirts of Manchester, but the queue was surprisingly quiet and orderly.

The reporter settled next to a man and woman in their mid-to-late thirties, only seven or eight places from the front. "Can I ask why you've decided to withdraw your savings this morning?"

"We don't have much," the woman said, "but we have to have it."

Her partner nodded. "Before the shit really hits the fan."

The reporter gave a stock apology for the man's language and quietly wished he had chosen someone else.

SHTF — an acronym typically used in discussions of potential apocalyptic scenarios in which the Shit might Hit The Fan — had been all over many of the night's most shared social media posts.

Hearing the Englishman in the queue say it made Clark think of someone else. "Phil is into all that prepper stuff," he said. "Phil Norris. He has all kinds of stuff stored away. You know, in case things really do go to shit."

"They won't," Emma replied, almost a grunt. "Besides, pretty much the only thing I know about preppers is that they don't like sharing their stuff with people who aren't prepared."

"Yeah, but it's us we're talking about," Clark said.

Emma rolled her eyes and focused again on the TV, where the flustered reporter was searching for a less potty-mouthed interviewee.

"What does your app say people think about the accident?" Dan asked. "That it was an accident?"

"No reliable data," Emma said. "That usually just means they haven't decided on the exact wording of the yes/no statement yet. It might take a few hours."

Dan shrugged.

And then they heard it: outside... at the back door...

Three firm knocks on the glass.



For a moment, they sat in silence.

Clark acted first.

"Who's there?" he yelled. He stayed in the armchair, with one hand out to keep Dan and Emma quiet.

"Open up!" a male voice yelled back. Three more knocks.

Not knocks; bangs.

Clark jumped to his feet. "Dad's room," he mouthed to Dan. He

signalled with his hand that he was talking to Emma, too. "Now."

"I'm not leaving you," Dan said.

Clark walked over to Dan, covered his mouth with one hand, grabbed him by the collar with the other, and lifted him from the couch. The movement was effortless, like a lion lifting its cub. Dan struggled at first, but Clark dragged him towards Henry's room. Clark looked over to Emma and tilted his head towards the same room. He didn't have to tell her twice.

"Shut your mouth," Clark whispered in Dan's ear before releasing him at Henry's door.

Three more bangs on the door. "Open up!"

"You're going to stay in there until I tell you to come out," Clark said, opening the door to Henry's room and unceremoniously shoving Dan inside. "Whatever happens, you don't come out until I say it's safe."

"Please!" the voice at the door shouted, banging over and over again. "Let me in!"

The change in tone gave Clark pause. The voice still wasn't familiar, but it now sounded more pleading than aggressive. He pointed Dan to Henry's bedroom window, which faced outside to the back.

"I can't see him," Dan whispered a few seconds later. "He must be right against the door."

"Cameras!" Emma said, suddenly remembering. "The console is in the kitchen."

"So's the back door," Dan said to Clark. "Whoever he is, he'll see you."

"He already knows we're in," Clark said. He then closed the door and ran to the kitchen as quietly as he could. The man outside was still banging intermittently but no longer talking. Until Clark reached the kitchen and his shadow crossed the door, that was, at which point the pleading resumed.

"Dan?" the man said, guessing wrong. "Please... you have to let me in. We're in serious trouble. Both of us."

Clark hadn't yet reached the camera console, but these words stopped him in his tracks. "State your name," he said, rolling up his sleeves and inching carefully towards the door.

"Is that Clark? Please, just let me in so—"

"State your fucking name!" Clark barked.

"B-Ben," the voice stammered in reply. "Ben Gold."

Clark unlocked the door and yanked it open. "Get in and shut up," he said.

Ben nodded like a scared child and shuffled inside. He was panting heavily. There were tears in his eyes. "Wh-where's Dan?"

"Dan!" Clark shouted. "It's safe." He pushed Ben against the closed door, no harder than necessary, and frisked him thoroughly. He finished just before Dan and Emma appeared at the other side of the kitchen, both wearing expressions that would have been equally fitting had Ben been an alien.

"They know everything," Ben panted, speaking too quickly for his lungs to cope. "They know. I think they might already have Richard. We're next. They know!"

"Ben..." Emma said, talking in her calmest work voice. "Slow down. Who knows what?"

"Everything. They know everything!"

"What's everything?" she asked, focusing on one thing at a time and trying to maintain her facade of composure through the frustration and fear she felt inside.

"They know what we did."

"The aliens?" Dan asked, butting in. Billy Kendrick and Miguel Perez's bear-poking concerns circled in his mind.

Ben shook his head and leaned back against the door. He covered his eyes with his palms, leaving his trembling lips exposed. "There's something you need to know," he whimpered.

Emma raised her hand to keep Clark from yelling impatiently. "Tell us," she said as softly as she could.

Ben lowered his hands, rubbed his eyes, and looked to the floor. "There are no aliens."

For five long seconds, no one heard anything but their own heartbeats.

Clark broke the silence. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

Another uncomfortable pause followed as Ben Gold closed his eyes and grimaced, as though expecting a blow to the head. Eventually, Ben took the deepest breath of his life and forced out the four-word sentence that pierced Dan McCarthy's heart like a rusty dagger:

"It was a hoax."

D plus 32

DRIVE-IN
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

Amid chaotic scenes eclipsing anything that had come before, a heavy police presence descended on the old drive-in lot.

Members of the public were cleared from the area and instructed to return home.

Phil Norris and Mr Byrd stood safely inside New Ker-grillin' Bar & Grill, looking down at the crowd.

"This is going to get bad," Phil said. "Real bad."

Mr Byrd said nothing.

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

“You’re lying,” Dan said, utterly rejecting the idea that any part of the leak could have been a hoax.

Ben Gold solemnly shook his head. “Not anymore.”

“Why would I believe someone who says they’ve been lying for months but they’re telling the truth now?”

“I have more proof than you’d ever want to see,” Ben said. “A photo of Kloster with the sphere when it was being made; a photo of Richard beside a blackboard with plans for what would be on the plaques; two other variations of Kloster’s letter; the actual dash-cam that recorded you finding the folder... all of it. You have to believe me. I’m not lying.”

“Bullshit,” Dan said, more out of denial than defiance. “Why would you keep so much proof of your own lie?”

“In case something went seriously wrong and we had to prove it was a hoax,” Ben replied.

“Bull. Shit.”

Ben coughed to clear his throat. "You don't want to die for that," he grunted, mimicking the voice he had used in a moment he still remembered just as vividly as Dan.

Dan's eyes closed of their own volition. His legs momentarily buckled, forcing his right hand to catch his weight on the back of the couch. "It was him," he said, mainly to Clark. "He's the guy who dropped the folder."

Emma dug her nails into her forehead and looked at Clark through her fingers. Only Clark kept his eyes on Ben, who didn't know where to look.

"So he's the guy who flashed a gun at you?" Clark said. He cracked his knuckles and moved towards Ben.

Emma quickly stepped in front of Clark and put a hand on his chest. "We need him," she said, almost silently. She then sat down.

Cowering against the door, Ben took several shallow breaths. The ticking of a clock in the living room was the loudest sound in the house.

"Talk," Clark demanded.

Ben looked at the floor.

"You talk or you bleed," Clark snapped, unnervingly convincing in his delivery.

"I came here to talk," Ben squeaked. "That's why I'm here. We're in trouble."

Emma and Clark shared a brief glance. Her eyes told Clark that she would lead; he got the message and sat down next to her, firmly instructing Ben to take the seat opposite. Dan stayed by himself in the living room, leaning against the couch. He felt sick; dizzy; disoriented.

"Why would you do this?" Clark snapped at Ben. "What kind of psychopath would—"

"Clark," Emma said under her breath. He stopped talking. "Let's start with how."

Dan walked through the open door between the living room and the kitchen. "No," he said. "Why."

Emma shrugged and looked at Ben. “Go. Everything, starting with why.”

“The short answer is China,” Ben said. He focused on Emma and sometimes Dan, trying to ignore Clark’s crippling intimidating presence. “That’s why it happened when it happened: to keep China off Mars. Richard hid his intentions in plain sight over China, but the whole thing started with Kloster. He wanted a decisive weapon. A lot of people did in the ’80s; that’s what the IDA was really for. Richard knew the plan to plant fake evidence could work, but he was never interested in the weapon. That wasn’t why he went along with it.”

“This isn’t a game where you say one part and I ask what you mean,” Emma said, frustrated by Ben’s pause. “You talk until I tell you to stop.”

Ben nodded feebly. “Richard knew that Kloster’s idea could work if they ever needed it to. Kloster sold it to him as an emergency stop — a giant reset button in case the Soviets took the upper hand in space or we were ever losing a war. The two of them were working on this before any of you were born. All of the letters, the comments, the videos... they set it all up to look like evidence of a real cover-up.”

“What about you?” Dan said, spitting out the words.

“I never met Kloster, and Richard only brought me in a few days before you found the letter. He told me about the plan he’d had in place for so long and said he needed my help to start the leak sequence. I didn’t like it, but he told me this was humanity’s one chance to secure peace by uniting against an outside threat. Real peace through fake panic, he said. He sat me down and said that the dream so many millions professed to share — the dream of world peace — was finally within reach. He said it was selfish to let an abstract notion like truth stand in the way, because peace doesn’t make itself.”

“And you bought that shit?” Dan challenged.

“He meant it,” Ben said. “Richard didn’t really care about peace

— he just wanted to stop China — but he knew it would be a side effect. He was right: everyone did pull together. And peace built on a lie is still peace.”

Dan shook his head in disgust. He had no words.

“Was the DS-1 explosion an accident?” Emma asked.

“I don’t know why it wouldn’t be,” Ben said. “There’s no angle. This doesn’t just make China look bad, it makes the whole GSC look bad.”

“And when did you last speak to Richard?”

“Three days ago. I’ve been trying to reach him all night but I couldn’t get through. His phone is switched off, his car is still there, the doors are locked, and his dog was barking non-stop. I knocked on every door and every window. I don’t know where he is. I left my car there — hidden, obviously — because I couldn’t exactly drive it here.”

“So how did you get here?”

“On foot.”

“You walked?” Clark said. “Where the hell is Walker’s place?”

“Three or four miles south of here,” Ben said.

“Jesus,” Emma sighed, stunned by how totally Richard had pulled the wool over their eyes and amazed by his audacity to stay so close. She rubbed her temples. “Start again. How much of the story was fake and how much was real?”

Ben hesitated as he considered the best way to put it. “It was all fake,” he eventually said, “but they built it around reality. Kloster was at the heart of everything; they used his story as the base of the lie then sold the lie as a secret. They dressed it up as a cover-up.”

“So where does Dan come in?”

“Richard read his Vostok article,” Ben said, talking directly to Emma as Dan stared vacantly at the table. “He checked him out and liked what he saw: Dan was young, local, had the right kind of look and the right kind of background. A fireman’s son and a soldier’s brother? It writes itself. Richard told me that before Dan, his best option was Kendrick. But he always thought Kendrick was too slimy

for some people to believe. He wanted someone pure. Idealistic.”

And gullible, Dan thought, cursing himself.

“We didn’t know he had you on his side until you slapped that hypnotist on TV,” Ben added.

Dan paced the few steps to the table and sat down on the empty seat. “Why didn’t you just do my part?” he asked. His voice sounded less angry now; more defeated than anything else. “Why did you have to bring me into it?”

“There’s no way I could have played your part,” Ben said. “There’s not an actor in the world who could have played your part, just like no one else could have done what Richard did. After I ran into your bike and dropped the folder, all I really had to do was stand beside Richard and not shout out that he was lying. I didn’t speak to the press until the “truth” was out and the hard work was done.”

“What about that video call when we were in Italy?” Emma asked. “When you said you thought Richard might be lying. Does that not count as acting?”

“That was the hardest part to pull off,” he recalled. “But Richard was sitting opposite me with an A3 sheet of card filled with pre-written responses. He was listening in and pointing to what I should say. You were basically talking to him through me. I’m not blowing smoke up his ass when I say that no one but Richard could have even come close to pulling any of this off.”

The room fell silent again.

“I thought using a civilian was risky,” Ben went on, “but Richard said we just had to sell the lie to the right person and everyone else would buy the secret; we only had to fool a truth-seeking shepherd and the herd would follow. He knew you would post it online or go to the media, and everything was set from there. All of the breadcrumbs Richard and Kloster had been leaving for thirty years were ready to be found. And Richard never stopped; he kept creating more evidence to incriminate himself. He filmed the footage of Dan finding the folder, and he played Jan Gellar like an absolute fiddle.

You know, when he ordered her to have this place bugged? He knew that by forcing her into the bugging and then calling Blitz out for doing it, he would provoke her into leaking the call that “exposed” him. She was the only other person he really used, apart from Raúl.”

“So the security guy doesn’t know, either?” Emma asked.

Ben shook his head. “No one else knows.”

“Literally no one?”

“Well, they didn’t,” Ben said. “But if someone has taken Richard, maybe it’s because they found something.”

“What about Godfrey?” Dan said.

Ben was shaking his head. “Godfrey was a godsend. But if you listen to what he said, he didn’t commit to anything until the breadcrumbs started piling up. And you heard what Diane Logan said: he was only using the drama over the leak to take attention away from his own problems. Godfrey was the second biggest stroke of luck Richard had.” Ben looked at Emma. “He couldn’t have even dreamed that someone like you would show up. The plan would have worked just as well without Godfrey — maybe a little slower — but you made everything happen. You forced the issue.”

Emma said nothing.

“And then when Kendrick brought Timo in...” Ben said, sounding almost nostalgic. Emma had no intention of telling him that she had been responsible for soliciting Timo’s offer, too. “That gave us another hundred million dollars’ worth of free momentum. The only thing that caught Richard off guard was when Dan didn’t post Kloster’s letter straight away. He had to be careful not to deny anything that hadn’t been brought up yet!”

Ben accidentally met Clark’s piercing gaze for a moment. It humbled him, lowering his tone back to something more sombre and appropriate.

“At first I asked Richard if a plan like this could really work now that everyone online thinks they’re an amateur detective,” Ben went on, focusing again on Emma. “But Richard just smiled and said that’s the thing with the internet: sure, it makes it harder to

hide the truth, but it also makes it a hell of a lot easier to spread lies.”

Emma had been in PR long enough to know that.

“He said that as long as the nuts and bolts and dates and names checked out, we’d be fine. Because when people are desperate to believe in something, they’ll believe in anything.”

Dan stood up and walked to the back door. He opened it and took several gulps of fresh air, trying to clear the taste of sickness from his mouth.

No amount of air would ever be enough.

D plus 34

JSLC LAUNCH AREA 4
DONGFENG AEROSPACE CITY, CHINA

“I have to give them something,” Jack Neal said, interrupting a quiet meeting between President Slater and William Godfrey which had already far exceeded the “an hour at most” line Jack used to keep the handful of international media personnel at bay.

John Cole sat in the vast meeting room with Godfrey and Slater, but his body language suggested that he hadn’t participated much in their discussions.

Slater glared at Jack. “I told you to wait until we—”

“He’s right,” Godfrey interrupted. “Thanks, Jack. Give us ten minutes.”

“Okay.” Jack opened the door to leave.

“Wait,” Godfrey called. He turned to John Cole. “John, go next door with Jack and tell our reporters that everything is under control and we’ll have a full statement for them soon.”

Cole nodded and used the arms of his chair to raise his substantial frame. “I’ll hold the fort,” he said proudly.

As Cole walked to the door, Godfrey called Jack over with his hand.

“Yeah?” Jack asked when he reached him.

Godfrey leaned in to whisper: “Make sure they understand that nothing he says gets recorded or reported, okay?”

“Why?”

“Because John Cole is the last thing the world needs right now.”

Cole stood at the door, grinning his absent grin, eager to give his never-to-air interview in the next room.

“Anything else?” Jack asked.

“Leave your phone,” Slater requested.

“My phone? Why?”

“Because,” she said, holding her palm open to receive it.

“Neither of us have Emma Ford’s number.”

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

Dan stayed by the back door. While half listening to Ben's painful explanations, he looked up at the sea of unoccupied constellations mocking him from afar.

"There had to be an easier way," Emma said. "There had to be something easier than all this meta-conspiracy bullshit."

Ben shrugged. "Name one. Like I said, the spark for the whole plan was Kloster's line: "The safest way to sell a lie is to dress it up as a secret." Kloster ended up having other ideas, but Richard was in charge by then. He said 9/11 reinforced just how much things can change overnight and that it made Kloster want to do something more spectacular; it made him long for the kind of instant chaos you only get from burning buildings and a visible enemy. But it's impossible to fake an invasion for any length of time. Hell, you couldn't even spoof an alien signal for long without being found out. It had to be a fake cover-up that led to carefully controlled physical evidence."

“The sphere?”

Ben nodded. “But even if there had been options, Richard said he always had faith in the leak sequence. He got more and more confident over time when he saw such a huge public appetite for mundane leaks about diplomatic relations and internet spying. Because when those things were getting people so excited, it wasn’t difficult to imagine what an alien cover-up would do. When he told me what he wanted to do, I said people wouldn’t buy it. He just looked at me and said: “Ben, all we have to do is engage the public’s well-earned distrust in their government.” He kept going on and on about how we alone could save the world... about how this was the hand we’d been dealt and how Kloster was our ace in the pack.”

Clark mumbled something under his breath. Ben heard the words “fucking Nazi” and little else.

“Exactly,” Ben said. “Kloster had that built-in back story. He genuinely was recruited by the inner party in 1938, he genuinely did work on rocketry in Germany during the war then here afterwards, and he genuinely did have friends who fled to Argentina. It’s not like Kloster’s life just happens to fit the story; the story was built around him.”

“So what about that guy Mattheus Scholl?” Clark asked.

“The inner party recruited him for something else. Again, Hans used him in the story because there was a real story there. He just twisted it.”

Emma, growing impatient of the way Ben kept repeating certain things and leaving others out, latched on to the biggest piece of the puzzle that still didn’t fit. “But what about the sphere? How did they get it in the ocean? And when?”

“They dumped it when Kloster was still alive. I don’t know exactly when. I did ask, but Richard told me not to worry about any of that. He said they had it made in the ’80s and that Kloster kept it at his place in Argentina until they dumped it. Kloster got the idea from seeing other supposedly alien spheres in the news. He wanted to leave his confessional letter in the sphere along with the plaques,

but Richard didn't want to commit to one version of the letter until he had to. The messages on the plaques are basic compared to everything in the letter, but Richard wanted to be able to choose which version of Kloster's confession to leak depending on the political mood at the time."

"Wait," Emma said, still focused on the early part of Ben's reply. "You said they had the sphere made?"

Ben nodded.

"So someone else made it?"

"To Kloster's exact specifications."

"That means someone else knows," Emma said. She looked to Dan, anticipating a reaction. Sure enough, he turned round.

"How many people?" he demanded, sitting back down and staring at Ben.

"None," Ben said. "There were only two or three of them — other Germans living in Argentina — and Richard said they're long dead. He doesn't leave loose ends."

"So why are you here?" Clark snapped, pounding the table with his fist. "If Walker doesn't leave loose ends, where the fuck is he and why are you worried that someone might have found you both out?"

Ben didn't have an answer to that.

"Why would they sink the sphere so long ago?" Dan asked. He was still reeling from the gut-punch of finding out that the truth he had fought so hard to spread was in fact a lie, but his thoughts had now cleared enough to focus on the specific elements that still didn't make sense.

Ben sighed, almost as impatient as the others given that he had already asked Richard all of these questions some five months earlier. "Kloster had the boat and the place in Argentina," he said. "And they had to do it while he was healthy. They knew there was a risk it would be found too early, but so what if it had been? There was nothing identifying in there. No one would have believed it was extraterrestrial without the context of Kloster's confession and the

other documents.”

“But how could it fool the scientists?” Dan said.

“Context,” Ben said, repeating the word with added stress. “The world had already decided it was real. Do you remember the wording of the statement the scientists made? The context of your leak was the only reason they thought their findings were “consistent with the notion that the sphere is extraterrestrial in origin.” Because it’s not extraterrestrial in origin, it’s just unusually pure magnesium. It wasn’t cheap, but I don’t think it was too difficult. That was the key thing: Richard and Kloster left the fanciful stuff to the artefacts they didn’t have to hoax. That’s why Kloster’s confession says the alien craft was made of a ridiculously light alien alloy but that the spheres were just “impossibly pure magnesium.” They couldn’t afford to over-promise.”

Emma and Dan glanced at each other. Without words, each knew that the other saw the logic in what Ben was saying.

“It was the same with the spheres being perfectly and flawlessly sealed before they were first opened,” Ben said, “but then there was a hairline along the hemisphere. They couldn’t make a flawless sphere with plaques inside it, so they built the flaws into the story. The magnetism, too. They couldn’t actually make the sphere float out of the water like it was supposed to have when the Nazis first found it, so Kloster’s letter said it was the rings that attracted the spheres. You know, the conveniently lost rings. When Richard told me all of this he said they’d put all the right details in all the wrong places. He said it was a fine line to walk because they wanted the overall story to seem totally unbelievable at first but get more credible the more you looked into it. Basically the opposite of most alien stories.”

“Why the hell would Walker want it to be unbelievable?” Emma asked.

“Partly so people could laugh it off at first,” Ben said. “But there was another reason. He wanted the story to be so serpentine that no one would ever think someone would make it up. That’s why Kloster

and the Nazi angle worked so well. Obviously it was convenient that Kloster could actually write a fake confession and leave his fingerprints all over it, but Richard knew it was deeper than that. He knew what people would think: if you're going to make up a lie about aliens, which sets off enough alarm bells on its own, why would you throw in Nazis? It was almost like an inverse of the laughter curtain... so crazy, it had to be true. Scattering the spheres all over the world makes no kind of sense, and that was the whole point."

Dan thought back to the early days of the leak when, in an effort to convince Emma that he was telling the truth, he had asked her a similar rhetorical question about why he would intertwine a story about aliens with a Nazi treasure hunt.

In that moment, Dan felt more than used. He felt worse than used. Fooled, tricked, conned... no words came close.

"The same thing went for the plaques," Ben said. "They wanted the plaques to be ambiguous. Richard always said the only thing that mattered was that the story stayed consistent with itself. Small details had to be right, like the two named U-boats that really did surrender in Argentina and the cartographer who really was killed. But when it came to the bigger picture, the more out-there it was, the better. He framed it as embellished history over alternative history, since they built the lies around real events."

"Why, though?" Dan asked. "Why would Walker want the plaques to be ambiguous? What if there'd been a consensus that the aliens were peaceful? That wouldn't have stopped China."

"It would," Ben disagreed, "but there was a contingency plan. Kloster's confession mentions two more plaques which he never got to see. Richard and Kloster kept two blank plaques, manufactured at the same time to the same specifications as the two they dumped in the sphere. The blank plaques were their emergency fallback in case the world reacted the wrong way. Even after Kloster and the manufacturers were dead, Richard had the equipment to neatly engrave the plaques with whatever new message he needed people

to believe. Then it would have just been a case of him doing something to provoke a police search and they would have found the plaques.”

“You’re a bunch of sick fucks,” Clark muttered. He didn’t know what else to say. Sitting at the same table where Dan first showed he and Emma the Kloster letter, Clark was even more speechless than he had been then. Needless to say, this was an altogether more uncomfortable kind of speechlessness.

Emma tried to maintain an emotional distance and stay focused on what she could control. “Where are those plaques?” she asked. “At Richard’s? Because if someone finds them...”

“I have them,” Ben said. “Richard expected his place to be raided, so I have everything.”

“You have to destroy it,” Emma said. “Tonight.”

Ben gulped and nodded slowly.

“What are you talking about?” Dan asked them both. “We have to show everyone! If Walker hasn’t already been caught out, we need the proof.”

No one replied. After a few seconds, Emma looked into Dan’s eyes and put her hand on top of his. “Dan...” she began. Her expression said the rest.

Dan immediately pushed his chair away from the table, scraping its metal feet against the tiles, and rose to his feet. He stared wordlessly at Emma then moved his eyes to Clark, hoping to find support. He didn’t. “No. You can’t... you can’t seriously want me to keep this quiet? You can’t expect me to keep this quiet?”

Ben knew better than to answer on their behalf.

“If anyone found out...” Emma said. “Think about what that would do to the world.”

Dan’s hands were on the back of his head. “No. People deserve to know. They have a right to know.” He paced back and forth past the table. “I can’t believe you’re asking me to do this.”

“It’s not just about you,” Emma replied. “The world is a powder-keg as it is. People are rioting now, so think what this

would do.”

“They’re rioting because they’re scared of a threat that’s not even real!”

“A threat which has united the world like never before,” Ben said, daring to butt in.

“It’s a fucking lie!” Dan screamed at him.

Ben rose from his seat and squared up to Dan. He spoke very slowly, one chunk of the sentence at a time: “The ends. Justify. The means.”

“Fuck the ends,” Dan spat back at him.

“We’ll get the blame,” Emma said, talking to Dan as softly as she could. “You’ll get the blame.”

“Why? We’re not the only ones who bought the lie.”

“Bought it?” Emma echoed, almost caustically. “Dan, we’re the ones who sold it!”

“Yeah, but—”

“There is no but,” she interrupted, speaking in the kind of forceful tone Dan had heard her use on so many others but had never himself been on the wrong end of. “If you buy a vat of poisoned milk, and you sell that milk to a bunch of schoolkids, and those schoolkids die... that’s your fault. No one gives a shit about the guy who sold you the milk. I know how you feel about the truth, Dan, but this truth isn’t even an option.”

Dan turned away from Emma, more disappointed in her than he had ever been in anyone. He looked at Ben for several seconds, then Clark. “Say something,” he begged.

Clark sighed. It hurt him to look at Dan — to see the pain etched on his face — but he managed to hold his gaze for a few seconds. “I’m sorry,” he said, the first time in his life Dan had ever heard him utter those words. “But this is bigger than us.”

“Coward,” Dan said.

Clark took it on the chin.

“We’re all on the same side,” Emma said, trying to cool things down.

Dan glared at her. "No we're not. I don't side with liars."

"Enough," Clark said firmly.

"I can't live with this," Dan told him.

"We'll work it out."

"What is there to work out? If you want me to shut up, you're going to have to make me. Because I can promise you this: the truth isn't dying without me."

"Shhh," Ben said.

"Don't shush me," Dan snapped.

Ben raised his hand. "Listen. Is that someone's phone?"

Emma heard the buzzing sound and hurried through to the living room, where she found her phone vibrating its way across the coffee table. She lifted it up with no idea what name to expect on the screen.

"Who is it?" Dan asked, walking with Clark towards the couch. Ben followed close behind.

Emma looked at the screen and took a long, deep breath. "It's Jack."



"Jack Neal?" Ben asked, aiming the question at no one in particular.

"Isn't he in China with President Slater. Oh, shit."

Emma looked only at Clark. "Should I take the call?"

Clark nodded.

"Hello?" Emma said, immediately pressing the loudspeaker button.

"Ms Ford."

Everyone stood silently for several seconds, stunned by the words. Because rather than Jack Neal, the voice on the other end of the line belonged to William Godfrey.

Emma looked at Dan and held an urgent, desperate finger to her lips.

"Tell him," Dan said loudly. "Tell him everyth—"

Clark tackled Dan onto the couch, covering his mouth in the same motion. Dan flailed and fought to free himself, biting a small fold of skin on Clark's palm. Clark pushed the weight of his other arm against the underside of Dan's chin, no harder than he had to.

"Outside," he mouthed to Emma.

She followed the order.

As soon as Clark heard the door close behind her, he uncovered Dan's mouth and let him go.

"What the hell?" Dan protested.

"I'm just trying to protect you. I wasn't here to protect you from this prick when everything started, but I'm here to protect you from yourself now."

"I don't need you to protect me," Dan yelled. "You're not Dad, okay? You might like to think you are, but you're not."

Clark sat up, lifted his phone from his pocket, and handed it to Dan. "You want to talk about Dad? Fine. Ask him what to do. Call him, tell him that the whole alien thing you convinced everyone was true was actually a lie, and ask him if he thinks you should tell William Godfrey all about it."

Dan was silent.

"Unless you already know what he'll say?"

"You're an asshole," Dan said, refusing to even look Clark in the eye. He stood up.

Clark watched Dan walk away, ready to jump up if he made a move for the back door to interfere with Emma's call. Dan didn't change course. Slowly, with his head hanging low, he walked into his bedroom and slammed the door behind him.

Clark turned to face Ben, who was still standing gingerly against the wall.

"I'm more sorry than I could ever say," Ben said.

"You're going to take me to Walker's place," Clark replied. "And then you're going to go away and never come back. Is that clear?"

While Ben was nodding meekly, Clark heard Emma opening the back door to come back inside.

"What did Godfrey say?" Clark called over.

"Nothing. The call is recorded if you want to listen back, but all he said was that it's important Dan doesn't say anything in public that conveys fear. He was like: "That's very important. I can't stress enough how important that is." And he said he's about to appeal for calm and that no one is going to blame China, even though he thinks it was a technical failure on their end. He wants to keep that quiet for the sake of stability. Just like we're... you know."

Clark nodded.

"He's with Slater right now," Emma said, "and neither of them know what we know." Her expression changed when she reached the front of the couch. "Wait, where's Dan?"

Clark pointed to Dan's bedroom.

"What if he hurts himself?"

"He won't." Silence circled for a few seconds until Clark broke it by clapping his hands together. "We're all going to Walker's place, anyway."

"Why?" Emma asked.

"This scumbag has to show me where it is, and I can't leave you with Dan. Not when he's like this. He might try to go to the drive-in."

"But why are you going at all?"

"The doors were all locked and Walker's car was still there two hours ago," Clark said. "I reckon he's still there. He could be lying there dead, which would mean no one else knows anything."

Ben's expression softened, as though he hadn't given this possibility as much consideration as he now realised it deserved. Despite how long he'd known Richard for, and as disturbed as it sounded, Ben knew that this would definitely be a better scenario than finding the house empty.

"You think he's there?" Emma asked.

Clark shrugged. "One way to find out."

Evidently in agreement, Emma walked over to Dan's door and knocked. "We're going to look for Walker," she called in. She pressed

her ear against the door then turned to Clark and mouthed the words: “he’s crying.”

“I’m coming in,” Clark announced. Upon opening the door he immediately turned his head in disgust at the sight — and more so the smell — of a puddle of vomit on Dan’s floor.

Clark held his nose and looked in again. He saw Dan curled up in a fetal position on his bed, sobbing into a pillow he held against his face.

“We’re going to look for Walker,” Clark said. He stopped deliberately short of sharing his recent suspicion that Walker might have died rather than been taken, which would mean that they might not be in too much trouble after all. Clark kept this to himself for now because he knew that the consequences of being so utterly duped weren’t why Dan was so upset. In lieu of saying anything else, Clark simply sat next to Dan and placed a hand on his back.

Emma appeared a minute or so later with a mop and a bucket.

“Thanks,” Clark said. “But you don’t have to do it.”

Emma looked over at Dan. He had always been fragile — she knew that from the start — but now he was broken. She shook her head at Clark. “It’s okay. You stay there.”

Dan sat up slowly, roused by the natural embarrassment that came with showing so much vulnerability. “I’ll clean it up,” he croaked.

“No you won’t,” Clark said. He helped Dan to his feet and past the almost impressively wide puddle. “Come on through to the kitchen and we’ll get you some water.”

Emma grabbed a set of fresh clothes from Dan’s drawer unit.

Clark led Dan into the kitchen and stopped at the door to look at Ben, who was still in the living room. “What are you waiting for?” he asked, motioning towards Dan’s room. “It’s your fucking mess.”

Ben stood up and trudged into Dan’s room.

In the kitchen, Clark poured Dan a cold glass of water. “Godfrey doesn’t know anything,” he finally said as he placed it on the table. “Neither does Slater. 100% confirmed.”

“So who took Walker?” Dan asked after a long sip.

“I think he’s still there. He might have fallen or something. And I know we have different ideas about what to do next, but right now we have a bigger problem. If Walker is alive — anywhere — we have to find him before Ben gets him alone and tells him that we know the truth. Because if Richard Walker has a reason to want rid of us, that’s the last problem we’ll ever have.”

Dan thought through the implications of Clark’s words. “So if we do find Walker,” he said, staring at his glass, “and if he is still alive...”

Clark nodded. “I’ll take care of it.”

D plus 36

*JSLC LAUNCH AREA 4
DONGFENG AEROSPACE CITY, CHINA*

“The launch failed,” William Godfrey said to a handful of cameras.

The sparsely populated Chinese press room was a far cry from the standing-room-only crowds that Godfrey and other world leaders had addressed over the last few months. None of those addresses, however, had been more important than this one.

“Accidents happen, and we all just saw one. But our project will continue. Is this a setback? Yes. A painful setback? Of course. But no one died. No one was injured. So what we must do now is be thankful for that, learn lessons from this incident, and move forward. Together, we must continue forward.”

Godfrey stood alone at his podium against a backdrop of the GSC logo. President Slater, John Cole, Ding Ziyang and the other attendant leaders were in the next room with Jack Neal and a handful of Chinese security and media liaison staff.

“To the anglophone media in particular, I respectfully stress that now is not the time for unqualified technical analysis of the Límíng

module. Continued Chinese participation in the Shield project is essential to its success and the security of our planet, and I urge media outlets to bear that in mind.”

He spoke with no notes and no autocue.

“But the main announcement I’d like to make today is this: DS-1 has been scrapped.”

The reporters in attendance, few though they were, gasped in unison.

“From the beginning, Defensive Station One was hamstrung by the fact that its core module was designed and built before we found the sphere; before we knew what we needed. Every nation involved in the GSC owes a tremendous debt of gratitude to our Chinese friends for providing *Límíng* unconditionally and without compensation. But while today’s incident was by no measure a blessing in disguise, nor was it a fatal disaster.”

Looks of mild confusion met Godfrey’s words.

“I have witnessed with great sadness the scenes of panic and disorder across the world, and I want to tell those involved this: I understand. I understand your fear and I understand your panic. But I also want to tell them this: you don’t know what I know. You don’t see what I see. You haven’t spent your life at the top of a world of cut-throat international politics, and you haven’t seen how completely everything has changed in the last four months. Some of you might think that unity is nothing but a new buzzword.”

Godfrey paused for several seconds and shook his head.

“But that’s where you’re wrong. Unity is not our new buzzword; unity is our new reality. And when today’s panic subsides, I hope you will reflect on the calm of the last few months. Disclosure brought panic and the plaques brought more, but unity brought peace. The New York agreement — of which DS-1 was the lynchpin — brought peace. To that end, I refute any suggestion that DS-1 was a failure.”

President Slater nodded as Godfrey spoke; not for the cameras — there were none on her — but because she truly agreed.

“Defensive Station One was a stop-gap,” Godfrey continued. “We knew that. We were, as you’ll see if you look back, highly candid about that. Richard Walker’s actions temporarily destroyed the American public’s faith in their leaders, and President Slater bore the brunt of that. But thanks to China’s generosity, we were able to react immediately with DS-1. To be candid again: DS-1’s real purpose was to serve as proof that we could come together to defend ourselves from an external threat. And come together we did.”

The only British reporter in the room, and the only other person present who Godfrey already knew, finally looked as though he understood what Godfrey was saying. With nothing else to go on beyond his well-honed gut instinct, Godfrey took the reporter’s expression as positive feedback.

“In light of this, I leave you today with the news that our full attention will now turn to Defensive Station Two. Using our combined knowledge and experience, DS-2 will be built from the ground up by the world’s greatest minds and tailor-made to suit our planetary security needs. Shifting our focus to DS-2, rather than trying to work around Líming’s limitations for DS-1, will actually expedite the meeting of several key goals. The two reasons we pressed ahead with Líming and DS-1 were finances and urgency. I want to stress that the urgency we felt was just as man-made as the financial pressure. We as leaders had to do something quickly due to the media’s ravenous fearmongering. If we had announced that a new space station would launch in four years, the media would have whipped up hysteria about how that was too long. So what happens now that we don’t have a pre-built module to fall back on? What happens now that we need more than four months? Do we continue to let the sensationalist corporate media shape public views, or do we pull ourselves up by the bootstraps and knuckle down?”

Godfrey let a few silent seconds go by.

“We do what our species has always done: we survive. Today will be hard and tomorrow might be harder, but in another four months we’ll look back and wonder why we ever let this setback get the

better of us. I can't give you firm details on DS-2 right now because I don't have them, but rest assured that the planning starts now and I will keep you informed of every key development."

Godfrey stepped to the side of his podium in indication that he was finished.

"Until then," he said, "I'm trusting you all to be strong and stay safe."



William Godfrey walked out of the press room and into a room full of the world's most powerful politicians. The scene would have looked surreal to any outside observer.

President Slater was the only person to have had much idea of what Godfrey was going to say beyond the promise that work on DS-2 would begin imminently, so he quickly tried to read everyone else's facial expressions.

"What did you think?" he said, surprising everyone by addressing the question to Jack Neal.

"Firm," Jack said. "Uneven in places, but firm."

"It was fine," President Slater said.

"Hole in one," John Cole added.

Godfrey ignored Cole's typically sycophantic comment but took Slater's approval in the positive spirit it was intended. He then looked directly at Ding Ziyang, who, with respect to everyone else, was his only other truly indispensable ally.

The man, who carried himself with a quiet dignity rarely seen in western politics, said only three words in accentless but broken English: "I speak now."

"By all means," Godfrey said.

Ding and three of his security guards walked towards the press room.

"You sure this is a good idea?" Jack whispered.

Godfrey didn't answer.

STEVENSON FARM
EASTVIEW, COLORADO

Ben Gold sat in the front passenger seat of the car, reluctant but ready to guide the way to Richard Walker's plain-sight hiding place. Neither Ben nor Emma had been overly keen on Clark's idea to go looking for Richard, but he refused to sit at home in front of the TV and wait for events to unfold. "We've done enough of that shit," he'd said.

Immediately before they set off, Emma ran next door to her house and returned with a cardboard pack of latex gloves. Two words — "fake tan" — answered Dan's question as to why the hell she had so many.

Ben took a pair, keeping his thoughts to himself. He knew that leaving fingerprints would be the least of their problems if someone really had taken Richard, but it struck him as unwise to say so; the gloves wouldn't do any harm, and there was no sense in causing another argument when it could be avoided.

"This fucking gate," Clark moaned as the new security gate at

the end of their street refused to open. He reversed the car, told everyone to hold on to something, and accelerated straight into the metal barrier. Its already temperamental magnetic locking mechanism buckled without resistance. Clark drove on.

Dan slouched next to Emma in the back seat. As Clark sped past the drive-in, which still bustled with reporters discussing the night's disaster and William Godfrey's impassioned call for unity, Dan looked back and caught sight of something outside.

The words on the signpost hit him hard, another brutal punch to the gut: "Welcome to Birchwood, proud home of Dan McCarthy."

Within minutes, Ben told Clark to take the next left.

"Seriously?" Emma said. "He's been hiding this close the whole time?"

Ben only nodded.

"And this isn't the address you gave to Jack Neal, right?"

"No," Ben said. "I gave him Richard's decoy address. It's a cabin in Utah."

"What if Richard went there?" Dan asked.

Ben shook his head. "Zero chance. He knows I gave the address to Jack."

No one said anything else until Clark passed comment on the narrow, pitch-black, isolated dirt road Ben insisted would take them to Richard's house. "This looks like the kind of place people go to get murdered when a horror movie is running out of time," he said.

"Thanks for that," Emma sighed.

At the end of the road, a small building came into view. The car's headlights were the only light source. Clark pulled up beside Richard's car and killed the engine. "I'll leave the lights on until we get inside," he said, turning to see Emma and Dan in the back seat. "You two can stay in the car if you want."

Emma shook her head. "Lights off and everyone stays together."

Clark turned off the headlights, plunging the car and everyone inside into a rare kind of total darkness. Emma activated the flashlight on her phone and opened the door.

Outside, she led the way. Clark used his phone to illuminate the area to their left and Dan pointed his towards the field of chin-high corn to the right.

The scene was unshakeably eerie; getting more and more like the movie Clark had mentioned, Dan thought. All that was missing was a rusty swing creaking in the wind.

Emma asked everyone to stand back and knocked firmly on the door. No one answered.

When knocking on every window and screaming at the top of their voices did nothing, Clark was first to lose patience. He picked up a rock and sent it clean through a low window. Other than smash the glass and send Richard's dog into a hysterical fit of barking, even this provoked no reaction.

"Fuck it," Clark said. "I'm going in."



Clark approached the front door, took five steps back, and used the weight of his shoulder to break through with minimal fuss.

A frightened cocker spaniel bounded towards the broken door, stopping at Clark and immediately cowering against him.

"Hey, little guy," Clark said, fumbling for the dog's collar.

"His name's Rooster," Ben said.

Rooster heard Ben's voice and ran towards him.

Dan watched on, hoping that this was the part when the dog would nudge Ben towards the house and lead him inside to wherever Richard had fallen. Instead, Rooster hid behind Ben and whimpered.

Emma took off her scarf and looped it through the ring in the dog's collar like a makeshift leash. She handed the scarf to Ben since Rooster was already familiar with him.

"Come on," Clark said. He led the way. Emma encouraged Dan to hang back with her so they could keep their eyes on Ben. Rooster stuck as close to Ben's side as he possibly could, his head low.

“Richard?” Ben yelled. “It’s me. Richard?”

The kitchen lay at the end of the old house’s narrow hallway. “Empty,” Clark said.

Emma and Dan, previously at the rear, now led the group back down the hallway to the next door. Emma opened it without knocking. “Nothing,” she relayed. “Empty bathroom.”

“That’s his bedroom,” Ben said, pointing Dan to the next door.

When Dan reached for the doorknob, Rooster began to bark.

“It’s okay, boy,” Ben said. Rooster kept barking.

Dan pushed the door open.

Rooster’s protests reached new heights; the frightened yelps turned to defensive growls. Ben tried to lead him towards the open door, but the dog jerked the makeshift lead out of Ben’s hand and ran head-first into the wall on the other side of the hallway.

“He’s not here,” Dan said as Ben tried to calm the crazed dog. “He’s gone.”

Rooster continued to work himself into more and more of a frenzy. “Close the door,” Ben suggested. Dan did so. The barking stopped.

“Did something happen in there?” Clark asked, crouching down to Rooster’s level as though hoping for a reply. When Rooster did nothing other than cling even more tightly to Ben’s leg, Clark briefly reopened the bedroom door. Right on cue, Rooster worked himself into another frenzy. Clark closed the door and didn’t touch it again.

No one knew what to make of the dog’s terror.

“Are there any cameras?” Emma asked after a few seconds of silence.

“Shit,” Ben said. “Yeah.” He led Emma to a small camera console in the kitchen. It was the same brand as Dan’s, but a much older and cheaper model. Emma quickly saw that it had only four feeds — two outside, two in — and lacked the useful feature which automatically highlighted potential incidents.

“I have to skip through it manually,” she said, using the touchscreen to navigate back to three days earlier and then skipping

forward one hour at a time on the feed from the mailbox-cam at the end of the driveway. Richard's car never moved. "Nothing."

Emma turned the console upside-down and removed its memory card.

"What are you doing?" Ben asked her.

"I can put this in our console and look for incidents. If anyone has come or gone, even for a minute, we'll see them. We can't go through all of this manually; four feeds for three days is nearly three hundred hours of footage."

"Okay," Clark said. "We'll go through it at home."

"Are we taking anything else?" Dan asked.

Ben looked down at Rooster. "I can't leave him."

"Are you sure he's not microchipped?" Emma said.

Ben nodded. "Richard doesn't go for stuff like that. Will I take his computer and phone, too?"

Clark and Emma agreed that this was the best option. In case Richard had left of his own accord and the truth was still unknown to anyone else, they wanted to make sure all potentially incriminating evidence was gone. Neither of them wanted to touch any of it; and since Ben didn't even have their "we were tricked" defence to fall back on if Richard had been found out, they knew he would dispose of the evidence properly.

"Help him load his car," Clark said to Emma. "Me and Dan will search for notebooks and anything else that might be dangerous."

Emma agreed and went outside to Ben's car, which was parked under some trees at the edge of Richard's property.

"What do you think?" Dan asked as soon as they were gone.

Clark closed the drawer he had been about to search. "Every door was locked from the inside," he said. "So either Walker left through his bedroom window, or someone came in through it."

"Why would he leave through a window?"

"Exactly. But a professional would have spotted the cameras and taken the footage, so I dunno."

"Either way," Dan said, "we can't let Ben go, right? In case he

finds Walker and tells him we know. Like you said... right?"

"Right. Not until we know for sure what's going on with Walker. We'll bring Ben back to ours, have a look at the footage, and take it from there."

After six or seven minutes spent searching through drawers and cupboards, Clark called time.

Emma was waiting for them at the front door.

"Is Ben still loading stuff?" Clark asked, a hint of concern in his voice.

Emma's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"I mean where the hell is Ben?"

"He left."

"He what?"

Emma looked between Dan's eyes and Clark's, as though she was missing something. "He took the computer and the phone and the dog," she said, "and then he left. Just like you said."

"We were bringing him back with us," Clark said. "Fuck. Why did you let him go?"

"Because that was the plan! Was I supposed to guess that you changed it?"

"You're supposed to not fucking let him leave, is what you're supposed to do," Clark shouted.

Dan closed his eyes. Just as it had on the only other occasion when Emma and Clark had seriously clashed — when Clark first got home from Iraq — the intensity of their argument brought forth vivid memories of his parents fighting. It was almost uncanny to see and hear how many of Henry's mannerisms and speech patterns Clark took on when he started arguing.

"Who do you think he's going to tell, anyway?" Emma asked, slightly less aggressively.

"Walker," Dan said before Clark could say the same thing. "If he finds Walker, he'll tell him we know. And then we become Walker's problem."

Emma shook her head. "You're overthinking it. Even if Walker

left on his own, and even if Ben finds him, they know we're not going to talk just like we know they're not going to talk. There's no upside. For anyone."

Neither Dan nor Clark said anything.

"Look," Emma continued, "I can't pretend to be in control of this or even to know what's going on. But there are only two possibilities: either someone took Walker because they already know — in which case Ben doesn't matter — or, more likely, Walker decided to go somewhere else for some totally mundane reason."

"You really think he would have left through the window?" Dan asked.

Emma shrugged. She reached into her pocket and lifted out the camera console's memory card. "One way to find out."

*McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO*

Shortly after 3am, Emma inserted Richard Walker's memory card into the camera console in Dan's kitchen. She opened menus and performed gestures on the touch screen too quickly for Dan or Clark to see what she was doing, but within a few seconds they were all looking at a simple message:

"Three flagged incidents (low sensitivity). Review now?"

Emma pressed yes. At the next pop-up, she chose "Most Recent."

The first incident that played on the screen began as Clark's car arrived. With low sensitivity selected, the system considered their whole visit one distinct incident. Richard's primary camera was mounted to a tree facing his house. Clark's headlights illuminated the house, flagging the beginning of an incident.

Instead of rewatching what they'd just done, Emma skipped to the second incident. This incident, from around thirty minutes after the launch disaster, showed Ben Gold arriving in his car. They watched as Ben desperately knocked on doors and windows, exactly

as he'd told them.

Emma's finger hovered over the "Proceed" option.

"What do we want this to show?" Dan asked.

After several seconds of thoughtful silence, Emma answered: "Walker coming out on his own and leaving in another car, long before the launch disaster."

Clark nodded. This would still mean Walker was out there somewhere, but he couldn't think of a better scenario.

"Press it," Dan said.

Emma did.

As usual, the footage began just before the sudden change which the system flagged as an incident.

"Shit," Emma said.

"What?" Clark asked. As far as he could see, nothing had happened yet; the dim light of the moon barely illuminated the house.

"Look at the time-stamp."

Clark looked. So did Dan. They both saw that this incident occurred just twenty minutes before Ben's arrival.

"That was the time of the launch," Dan said. "Give or take a few minutes."

"What does that mean?" Clark asked.

Emma shushed him. Dan shrugged. They all watched to see what happened next.

After ten seconds of footage, the entire screen turned white. It was a sudden and brilliant white, provoking their eyes to blink. Only the time-stamp overlaid in the bottom corner remained visible during the seven-second flash.

"Some kind of interference?" Emma said.

"Maybe," Clark said. "What kind of light source would fill the whole screen evenly like that?"

No one knew.

The time in the corner continued to tick.

"Is there sound?" Dan asked.

Emma rolled the volume wheel on the side of the console from minimum to maximum. Immediately, the sound of frenzied birds rang out.

“Go back,” Clark said. “We might have missed a gunshot.”

Before Emma could rewind, the flood of white disappeared. With Richard’s field-facing motion-activated floodlight having been triggered by the swarm of fleeing birds, the house was now clearly visible.

After another ten seconds, the incident ended.

Emma navigated through the console’s menus and began playing the footage where the incident left off. Knowing the time of the incident made this straightforward, even if nothing else was.

Hundreds of birds continued to protest loudly at whatever had startled them. When nothing else happened, Emma switched to the next camera and skipped back to the start of the incident.

This second camera faced outwards from Richard’s kitchen at the back of the house. Again, very little was visible in the moonlight. And then, as had been the case with the first camera, the entire feed turned white for seven seconds. They listened carefully for a gunshot or any other noise. None came. The flash brought with it an immediate cacophony of frenzied chirping. When the all-white interference faded, the area outside the kitchen was now visible courtesy of the floodlight. But other than more birds fleeing the scene and tree branches swaying in the breeze, there was nothing to see.

Emma moved on to the third camera. No one had to say anything; they all knew that the two remaining feeds were from the cameras inside Richard’s house.

The first internal camera was mounted above Richard’s kitchen door, facing the hallway. This was good, Dan knew, because the feed showed every other internal door. Whoever came or went, they would see.

The feed began with Rooster sleeping against Richard’s bedroom door.

"It better not flash white," Clark said.

Seconds later, it did.

Though there were no voices under the blanket of absolute white, whatever caused the flash — if something so persistent could be called a flash — also prompted Rooster to begin barking manically. He sounded more aggressive than scared at first, but when the flash faded he was jumping up at the front door in a desperate effort to escape.

"Okay," Emma said. "I'm officially freaked out."

Clark stood with his hand covering his mouth, his fingers scratching an itch that wasn't there.

Dan's eyes were glued to the camera console. "Last one. If we don't see Walker, we have to run through more incidents on high sensitivity. Maybe he left last night when there was no moonlight and it was too dark to trigger an incident on low?"

"Maybe," Emma said, "but something's still happening here. Something is still causing the feeds to go white and something is upsetting the animals."

Dan pointed to the console, encouraging her to tap the screen. As soon as she did, everyone leaned closer.

"Holy shit! There he is."

Sure enough, the fourth and final camera showed Richard Walker asleep in his bed. The camera was mounted inside his bedroom, above the door. The red numbers on a digital alarm clock beside the bed provided the only light, but it was enough. Richard's loud snoring played through the camera console's speakers.

"He's going to be gone when the flash stops," Clark said. "Something's going to happen and we won't see shit."

"We'll hear it," Emma said.

Clark couldn't argue with that. He paid close attention.

Richard's snoring stopped when the flash obscured the feed. Rooster's barking immediately filled the silence. But then another sound began; as best as Dan could have described it, it sounded like a much softer version of the old 56k modem noise.

The noise ended when the flash ended.
Richard Walker's bedroom door was still closed.
His bedroom window was still closed.
His bed, however, was empty.

"Told you," Clark said.

Emma and Dan stared silently at the screen.

"Fucked if I know what it means, but I told you."

"Seven seconds," Emma said, shaking her head incredulously.
"What the hell happened? How would it even be possible for him to leave that quickly, never mind for someone to take him?"

Clark shrugged. "Someone must have messed with the feeds." Like Emma, he knew no more now than he had before viewing the footage. They both turned to Dan after a few seconds of fruitless thought.

"I dunno," he said, as though he had been accused of something.

"What are you smiling at?" Clark asked him.

"I'm not. I'm just tired."

Clark's eyes narrowed. "Seriously, what are you thinking about?"

"Nothing," Dan insisted. "I just need a few hours of sleep. Wake me if you find anything else in the footage."

"Okay."

"I'll be here, too," Emma said. She then moved towards Dan and gave him a very one-sided hug. "None of this was your fault," she whispered in his ear. "The whole leak... it was an honest mistake."

"I'm fine," Dan replied. "But thanks."

Dan heard Emma's worried whisper to Clark as he walked away — "Will he be okay? I can't even imagine how he must feel..." — but he managed to ignore it. Safely out of their sight, he felt a return of the confused but hopeful smile that Clark had noticed moments earlier.

He then climbed onto his bed, opened his tablet's browser, and typed three words into the search bar:

"Alien camera interference."

WEDNESDAY

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

Dan yawned himself awake after a longer than expected sleep. His tablet's screen told him it was 08:43.

Not yet fully awake, Dan rolled over and grabbed the tablet to check the latest news. The top story, which Dan knew nothing about, was Ding Ziyang's speech from the DS-1 launch site. Apparently irked by speculation that Chinese engineers were to blame for the accident, Ding explicitly blamed the explosion on "an unclear external factor."

In mild defiance of William Godfrey's guidelines, Ding point-blank insisted that the accident was not a result of human error. No invited reporters were foolish enough to push for questions, so this was all the news networks had to run with. Inevitably, fears of hostile alien intervention soon filled the void.

William Godfrey had since tried to downplay Ding Ziyang's comments, telling the public there was no reason for alarm. Godfrey walked a fine line, keen to calm growing fears over alien hostility

but loath to step on Chinese toes with any overt insinuation that the failure was the result of a terrestrial technical oversight.

The next article concerned the economy, discussing the strict withdrawal limits American savers would face throughout the day as their government sought to avoid the kind of turmoil that a full-scale bank run had already caused on the other side of the Atlantic.

Dan sat up. He reached for the notebook on his bedside table, in which he had scribbled some findings from his late-night research into alien camera interference. Several high-profile “abductees” claimed to have attempted to record their frequent experiences but failed due to inexplicable technical hitches.

None of the cases Dan found mentioned a white flash or a successful sound recording, but he still couldn’t see a better explanation for the footage from Richard Walker’s bedroom. Clark and Emma would never believe him, but he couldn’t shift the thought. Like Emma said herself, how else could Walker have left or been taken silently and without a trace in just seven seconds?

Dan walked over to the calendar on his wall — Earth From Space — and drew a big red X through the previous day’s square. He had been doing this since finding out when his dad would be home from hospital. Amid a whirlwind of chaos and confusion, performing this simple routine act calmed Dan’s mind.

Four more days.

A moment later, Dan heard an odd noise coming from the other side of his door. It wasn’t a frightening noise, but it was out of place. He opened his bedroom door and saw that the source of the noise was exactly what he thought: a dog.

And not just any dog...

Rooster.

“Is Ben here?” Dan asked. Emma and Clark — and no one else — sat in the living room, each clutching several sheets of paper. A metallic blue box lay open on the coffee table.

“Hello?” he said. “What the hell is going on?”

Emma and Clark shared a brief look, as though deciding who

should speak. Clark took it upon himself to deliver the news.
“Dan...” he said, his voice breaking.

“Yeah?”

“Ben’s dead.”

D plus 40

DRIVE-IN
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

Maria Janzyck stood in her old spot at the old drive-in having been redeployed to Birchwood by ACN overnight in the wake of the DS-1 disaster.

Now, a full hour after the first reports came through, her bosses had finally given her the go-ahead to deliver the breaking news.

“This just in,” Maria announced. “A body has been found in the staff parking lot of the IDA building in nearby Colorado Springs. Unofficial comments from responding officers suggest that the death was a suicide, and the deceased has been informally identified as Ben Gold. Stay tuned to ACN for more on this extraordinary developing story.”

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

“Suicide?” Dan asked, praying for a yes.

Clark nodded.

“Definitely?”

*“According to the police who found his body,” Emma replied.
“They said he used a homemade exit bag.”*

“So how come we have all this stuff? And the dog?”

*“Ben left everything in the shed,” Clark said. “He was gone
before we even knew he was here. Emma heard Rooster barking
when she opened the back door an hour ago.”*

*“And none of this is your fault,” Emma said, striving to make
that clear before Dan blamed himself. “Ben got himself into this and
he took himself out of it. That’s on him.”*

*Dan thought for a few seconds. Though he didn’t much like
himself for it, the dominant thoughts in his mind were positive.
After all, Ben hadn’t just gotten himself into this whole mess; he had
gotten Dan into it. And as uncomfortable as Dan was with the idea*

of protecting a lie, he could at least breathe easily knowing that the elimination of Ben Gold — the only other person likely to crack — meant that control was back in his hands.

“Fuck him,” Clark said. “He made his bed.”

Dan found himself quietly agreeing with Clark’s harsh appraisal of the situation until something dawned on him. “Wait. He was in our car a few hours before he died. That means his clothes will have bits of our skin and hair all over them.”

“It won’t come to that,” Emma said. “But if it does, which it won’t, we’ll say he came here to apologise for not spotting Walker’s cover-up then said he was going away.”

More than her words, Emma’s relaxed tone convinced Dan that he was worrying too much. His full attention then turned to the suitcase-sized box on the coffee table. “What’s in it?” he asked.

“These are declassified interrogation transcripts from the two real U-boats,” Clark said, holding up the stapled-together sheets he had been scanning through. “U-530 and U-977. There are police reports about other sightings, too. I guess the highlighted parts are what they used to make up the story about the third U-boat.”

Emma held out the sheets she was holding. “These are the two alternative Kloster letters he mentioned last night. Same stupid handwriting, same paper, same seals on the envelopes. I don’t know what they say, but I can make out some of the words: Walker, Kerguelen, Toplitz... pretty much what you’d expect.”

Dan walked over to examine the box. Stacked neatly beside it, he saw several gold bars. Golden rather than gold, in fact; they were as fake as everything else. He quickly browsed the remaining contents of the box. There were several folders identical to the Kerguelen folder but for their labels. Dan saw the Slater folder Ben had dropped face-up on the street. He looked inside. It was empty. So were the others, whose labels were blank.

The dash-cam which had recorded the folder pickup was present, memory card and all, as was a hardback book on the Nazi expeditions which had inspired Kloster’s tallest of tales.

The presence of this evidence in Dan's own living room was salt in his wounds, but the Polaroid pictures of Kloster with the half-finished Kerguelen sphere pushed him over the edge. He collapsed onto the couch.

"There's something else," Clark said, deciding there was no sense in comforting Dan now only for him to get upset all over again in a few minutes. "I put it in the kitchen. It was wrapped up with your name on it, so I didn't open it."

It took all of Dan's energy to stand up and traipse into the kitchen. Emma put her hand on his shoulder as he passed.

On the table, he saw a parcel — roughly the size of a ream of copier paper — wrapped in thick brown paper. "DAN" was scribbled in black ink. He tore into the paper, keen to get it over with. With so much to come to terms with so quickly, Dan had forgotten what other evidence Ben told him about. Because of this, it came as a surprise when he threw the wrapping paper to the ground and saw two metallic plaques.

These plaques were identical to their two world-famous analogues in all ways but one: they were completely blank.

Ben had taped a small scrap of card to the top plaque. "Your call..." was all it said.

"Holy shit," Clark said when he realised what Dan was holding. "We could—"

"Don't even say it," Dan cut him off.

"Dan," Emma said softly. "People are panicking because they believe a lie we spread. If it takes another lie to put things right..."

"No."

"You know she's right," Clark said. "Sometimes one more lie can clean the rest up. We could figure out a way to engrave a new message that says the aliens are friendly or that they've already taken care of the asteroid. We can fix this."

"I said no. There's no way."

"When the hell are you going to grow up and realise that some things are more important than how you feel?" Clark snapped.

“No! No! No! It’s bad enough that you ask me to keep my mouth shut... but this? There’s not even a discussion. I will die before I do this. Seriously: if you two want to do this, I’m in your way.”

Neither Clark nor Emma had a reply.

Dan took the plaques into his bedroom and slammed the door behind him.



After half a day of self-imposed isolation, Dan returned to the living room with the plaques in his hands. He saw Clark sitting in the armchair.

“Where’s Emma?”

Clark turned away from the TV, which showed William Godfrey talking to a reporter above a “Tensions Grow In China” banner on Blitz News. “She took the dog outside,” he said.

Dan sat down on the couch.

“You don’t have to hold those plaques all day,” Clark said. “I’m not going to steal them.”

“We have to destroy them,” Dan said.

“Fine. If we’re not going to do anything with them, then you’re right; we can’t keep them lying around. Put them in the box. We’ll burn the paper and take care of the plaques tomorrow. Acid or something.”

“Thanks.” Dan placed the two plaques inside the blue box.

Clark muted the TV. “Thanks? Thanks? This isn’t a favour, Dan. This is me doing whatever it takes to get us out of a situation you got us into and won’t even talk about cleaning up. So save your fucking thanks.”

Without so much as looking at Clark, Dan went into the kitchen, took two bottles of water, and returned to his bedroom.



Clark went to bed at 1am, more than forty hours since he last lay down.

Emma fell asleep on the couch minutes later; though enough time had now passed since the launch disaster and Richard Walker's sudden disappearance to assure her that anyone who wanted to silence them would have done so by now, she still wasn't quite ready to spend a whole night in a house alone, however nearby.

Rooster, who had taken a quick shine to Emma, curled up on the floor beside the couch.

Emma woke up thirsty at 3:07. She rose to walk to the kitchen in the dark, brushing against Rooster's tail as she went. "Sorry," she whispered.

As Emma turned toward the kitchen, she saw light escaping from under Dan's bedroom door.

"Are you still up?" she asked, quietly enough not to wake him if he wasn't.

He didn't reply.

Emma decided to walk closer and ask again. But when she neared Dan's door, Rooster let out a sudden yelp.

"It's okay," Emma reassured him. "It's just Dan." She leaned against the door and held the handle, ready to open it slightly and reach in to press the light switch.

With no further provocation, Rooster began to bark like a dog possessed. He then dashed rapidly towards the front door, running straight into it several times in a row.

The commotion roused Clark, who appeared at his bedroom door in a panic of his own. "What the hell's wrong with the dog?"

"I don't know," Emma said. "I was just asking Dan if he was awake because I saw his light was still on."

Clark looked at Emma's hand on the doorknob. He looked at Rooster, going crazy to get as far away as he could. And then his mind turned to the events of 24 hours earlier, when the same dog had exhibited the same fear when Emma stood with her hand on a different door: Richard Walker's.

“Step away from the door,” Clark said quietly.

Emma stepped away.

Immediately, Rooster stopped barking.

Emma and Clark both stared at the dog. Their eyes then slowly moved to Dan’s door, and finally to each other. Neither said anything for a few seconds. Amid the silence, Emma saw something in Clark’s expression that she had never seen before: fear.

She had seen him upset plenty of times, helpless, even... but not scared; never scared. This amplified her own fears tenfold.

Clark stepped away from his bedroom door and towards Dan’s. He stopped right beside Emma. “I’ll open it,” he said.

She nodded and moved further back.

Clark reached for the handle and pushed the door open quickly.

As Rooster’s barking reached new heights, Clark turned towards Emma. His expression was more than scared now; it was petrified.

Emma knew what Clark was going to say before he said it, but that didn’t make the words any easier to swallow:

“He’s gone.”

Part 8

DISCOVERY

*“Faith is to believe what you do not see;
the reward of this faith
is to see what you believe.”*

St Augustine

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

“Cameras,” Clark said, running into the kitchen. He handed the console to Emma. “Hurry up!”

Emma navigated the console’s menus as quickly as she could and soon had the feed from Dan’s bedroom. It began ten seconds before the flagged incident.

Clark saw the time-stamp: just over an hour ago. He watched the console’s screen more helplessly than he had ever watched anything in his life.

He didn’t have to say what he feared might come next; Emma feared it, too.

“Thank God,” Emma said as the recording showed Dan slowly getting out of bed. That he left of his own accord raised new questions over where he might have gone — not to mention why — but it was infinitely better than the unspoken alternative that the feed might have flashed white and returned with Dan’s bed inexplicably empty.

Clark was halfway to the front door by the time Emma reacted. "Keep watching and see which way he went," he called as he ran. "I'm going to tell Mr Byrd so he can help us look."

"Okay," Emma replied.

Seconds later, Clark shouted to let her know that the car was still there. This greatly limited how far Dan could have travelled, particularly given the driving rain and gusting wind that had picked up in the last few hours.

Clark knocked loudly on Mr Byrd's front door. After ten seconds that felt more like ten minutes, he knocked again. "Come on! It's Clark."

The porch light above Clark's head lit up and the door opened. "Jesus," Mr Byrd said. "Give me a chance, will you? What's wrong?"

"Dan's gone."

Mr Byrd looked as though he had misheard.

"We're going to look for him. I need you to keep an eye on the house and call me if he comes back."

"Of course," Mr Byrd said. "Do you want me to report him as missing?"

"Not yet. I'll do it if I can't find him."

"Do you think he could be sleepwalking again?"

Clark hesitated. "I hope so."

"Let me know," Mr Byrd said.

Clark ran through the pouring rain and into the house, picking up his car keys. "Which way did he go?" he called to Emma, who he correctly assumed was still in the kitchen at the camera console.

"Right," Emma replied. This didn't really help; turning left at the end of their driveway led only to Emma's house and two others. Everything else — namely the drive-in and the main road out of Birchwood — lay to the right.

"Did it look like he was sleepwalking?"

"Maybe," Emma said. "I don't know what that looks like. He didn't put on his shoes or anything, though. He didn't even get dressed."

Clark breathed an audible sigh of relief; Dan would be freezing cold and soaking wet, but at least he wasn't on his way to clear his conscience.

"I'm just checking the last two feeds to see what he has in his..."

"His hands?" Clark asked, frustrated by Emma's abrupt silence. She didn't reply.

Clark ran to the kitchen door. "What?"

Slowly, Emma lifted her eyes from the screen and looked at Clark. "He took them," she said. "He took the plaques."



Clark grabbed his phone from his bedroom and dialed Phil Norris. Mercifully, Phil picked up.

"New Ker-grillin' doesn't do deliveries," Phil joked, sounding wide awake despite the hour.

"Dan's missing," Clark said.

Phil's manner changed immediately. "Since when?"

"An hour ago. He left on foot."

"In this weather?" Phil asked. The weather might have seemed an odd thing to pick up on given the urgency of the bigger issue, but the downpour truly was exceptional in its ferocity.

"We think he might be sleepwalking. When he went through the phase, he always stuck to roads."

"Well he ain't been here," Phil said, speaking from his security office at the old drive-in; the same room in which he had kept watch over Jack Neal all those months ago. "There's still some press in trucks with their lights on at the edge of the lot, but I've been watching on the cameras and he hasn't shown up."

Clark hesitated. "Phil," he eventually said, "if Dan does show up there, I need you to make sure he doesn't talk to the press. Restrain him if you have to."

"You want me to go out there? In this?"

"I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important," Clark said. He wisely

kept the rest of his thought — it's only fucking rain — to himself.

"And you want me to subdue him if he resists?" Phil asked, sensing the worried urgency in Clark's voice.

"Try not to hurt him, but don't let him go. Whatever it takes, he can't talk to the press. If you find him, call me as soon as you can."

"Sure thing. Same for you, okay? Let me know when you find him."

"I will," Clark said. He ended the call.

"Do you have a proper flashlight?" Emma asked, as though she had been hanging on to the question throughout Clark's call.

Clark hurried out to Henry's shed without replying. He returned, flashlight in hand, to find Emma standing by the door with Rooster at her feet.

"He'll be scared if we leave him by himself," she said.

"Whatever. Let's go."

Rooster lay quietly on the back seat as Clark sped through Birchwood. If Dan hadn't passed the media crews parked outside the drive-in, he could only be walking down the main road out of town. It was late enough and dark enough for it to be plausible that no one had seen him, but Clark knew that wouldn't be the case for long.

Five minutes outside of Birchwood, Emma said what Clark was thinking: "He can't have gone much further than this."

Clark kept driving, with one eye on the mileage. At six miles — closer to the IDA building than their house — he pulled over and put his head in his hands.

"Turn back," Emma said. "Go slower. It's dark; we might have missed him."

"He always stuck to the road," Clark said. "He only sleepwalked a few times, but he always stuck to the road."

"But what other roads are there? Apart from the turn to the drive-in, there's only..."

"Walker's," Clark realised.

"He wouldn't go there, would he?"

Clark answered by accelerating towards the off-the-beaten-path farmland Ben Gold had led him to the previous night.

“Would he be there by now?” Emma asked.

“He should be,” Clark said, still accelerating. “It’s only three miles and he left well over an hour ago.”

“But why?”

Clark hesitated. “Maybe he thought of something we left behind that could expose everything.”

No one said anything else until the car’s headlights brought Richard Walker’s house into view. Richard’s car was still there and everything else looked just as untouched. Clark pulled up beside the house and got out. The rain lashed all around him. Emma stepped out and began to shout Dan’s name. Rooster barked in protest at being left alone.

Clark shone his powerful flashlight in every direction. After seeing nothing of note in three directions, he pointed towards the cornfield. There, unmistakably, he saw that a narrow strip at the edge of the field was flattened. The trail was too wide and pronounced to be anything but human.

What the hell are you doing, Dan?

Clark left the flashlight’s beam on the beginning of the flattened corn — the beginning of a makeshift path into the field — and turned back to Emma. “Get in the car,” he shouted, making his voice heard over the thunderous rain. “Driver’s seat.”

They were only a few feet apart but Emma had to raise her voice to a ridiculous level just to be heard: “No. I’m coming with—”

“Get in the car!”

“Why?”

“Because,” Clark yelled. “I don’t know what I’m going to find.”

D plus 43

STEVENSON FARM
EASTVIEW, COLORADO

The path grew less and less distinct as Clark continued into the cornfield. He held Henry's multimillion-candlepower flashlight in one hand and pushed aside stalks of corn with the other.

"Dan!" he yelled over the sound of lashing rain and stalks crunching underfoot.

No one yelled back.

Clark's corn-pushing hand eventually reached open air. "Shit," he muttered, thinking he had reached the far side of the field without finding Dan.

He hadn't.

When Clark shone the flashlight to see what lay beyond the field, he realised that he wasn't standing at its edge at all; instead, he was standing at the edge of a circle within in it.

"What. The. Fuck."

Judging by the height of the corn on the other side of the circle, Clark estimated it was roughly twenty feet in diameter. Far from

huge, but more than substantial enough to freak him out. The corn immediately in front of Clark's feet looked expertly flattened. He moved the flashlight around. It all looked expertly flattened.

And then, to Clark's right, he spotted a statue-still figure sitting cross-legged at the edge of the circle.

Dan.

"Dan!" Clark yelled, running straight over. He looked down at his younger brother, sitting barefoot in nothing but a drenched white T-shirt and boxer shorts. Though totally unresponsive, Dan's eyes were open. His hands were clasped, resting on the two metal plaques which lay on his lap.

Clark shone the flashlight's powerful beam directly into Dan's face at close range. Though Dan's pupils constricted, he neither squinted nor lifted his hands to block the blinding light. Clark moved it away quickly.

The look on Dan's face was difficult for Clark to discern. It wasn't blank; it wasn't entranced; it was just... normal. Unsettlingly normal. His eyes were neither focused nor absent; they were instead almost disturbingly relaxed, as though he was looking at something right in front of his eyes. Something that wasn't there.

Clark put the flashlight down and took the plaques from Dan's lap. Dan made no attempt to hold onto them. Clark then tucked the plaques into the back of his waistband — the best option he could think of — and lifted Dan by the shoulders. Dan neither resisted nor cooperated.

Clark had plenty of experience lifting dead weights, but not of carrying 6'3" soaking wet sandbags. Nonetheless, he raised Dan up in a fireman's carry, carefully picked up the flashlight, and began to walk.

Dan's head turned as Clark moved, maintaining a direct line of sight to the centre of the circle.

As soon as Clark stepped out of the circle, Dan came to.

"C-C-Clark?" he said weakly, teeth chattering in the cold. "Where are we?"

"It's okay. We're gonna get you home."

"Wh-what happened?"

"It's okay," Clark said again, shouting to be heard.

Dan shifted his weight slightly. His whole body shivered, belatedly reacting to the freezing air and stinging rain. The top edges of the plaques dug into the small of Clark's back as he walked.

Having lost Dan's original trail long ago, Clark exited the cornfield considerably further from the car than he'd entered it. He walked directly towards Emma and the waiting vehicle, squinting against the headlights.

Emma jumped out of the car and ran towards them the second they came into view. "Oh my god," she yelled. From her position, Dan looked like a wet scarf around Clark's neck. She was far too concerned for his wellbeing to even think about the plaques, much less ask where they were.

Clark handed her the flashlight so he had a free hand to open the door. He then gently placed Dan on the back seat. Rooster helpfully moved out of the way before nuzzling at Dan's wet legs.

"He could have hypothermia," Emma said as soon as the car door was closed.

"There's a blanket in the car," Clark replied, still having to shout over the rain. He took the plaques out from behind his back and handed them to Emma. "Come on. We need to get out of here."

Emma stepped back into the car. Curled up in the back seat, all arms and legs, Dan looked almost like a fawn. "Are you okay?" she asked, taking off her coat and laying it over his exposed legs.

"I'm sorry," Dan replied through barely suppressed tears.

"For what?"

"Making you both come out here to find me. I don't even know why I'm here."

Clark opened the door beside Dan's feet and partially covered him with an old picnic blanket; he would have given Dan the shirt off his own back, but it was just as wet as Dan's. "I need you to stay awake for me until we get home, okay?"

"Okay," Dan said.

"Can you call Phil and Mr Byrd and tell them we found him sleepwalking?" Clark asked Emma, handing her his phone.

"I don't think I was sleepwalking," Dan butted in. "It didn't feel the same."

Clark turned to face him. "What did it feel like?"

"I don't know... just different. But when we get home, you have to lock the doors and hide the keys."

"Oh, I will," Clark laughed.

"I'm not joking," Dan said flatly. "Whatever I was doing, I don't think it's finished."

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

“Crop circles aren’t real,” Clark said to Emma. Both sat at the kitchen table now that Dan was sleeping like a log in his warm bed with Rooster on the floor beside him, no longer afraid of the room. “Everyone knows that.”

“Maybe he did it before we got there. How perfect was the circle? How big? Did you see any planks of wood?”

Clark shrugged. “I could hardly see anything. I didn’t even see Dan at first.”

“Walker could have done it, too, I guess.”

“Or just a random hoaxer,” Clark said. “It could have been there for weeks for all we know.”

“Yeah. It’s either one of those, or, you know...”

The look on Clark’s face suggested that he didn’t.

“Think about it. Walker disappears into thin air,” Emma said, snapping her fingers. “Just like that. The camera flashed like it did when the Límíng module exploded, only for longer. Maybe there

actually is a bear, and maybe we really did poke it.”

“But that doesn’t make sense even if you accept the alien part. We’ve sent loads of things into space. Why would they get pissed off by this one all of a sudden?”

“This one was a test run for putting an entire arsenal of megaweapons in space,” Emma said. “It’s totally different.”

Clark shook his head dismissively. “Launches fail all the time. You heard Godfrey.”

“So everything’s all a coincidence?” Emma asked with a hint of derision.

“It makes more sense than aliens.”

“You weren’t saying that 27 hours ago when we didn’t know about the hoax!”

“Once bitten,” Clark said. “You know the rest.”

“I get that, but all I’m saying is: I spent long enough in PR to know that sometimes lies come true.”

Before Clark could say anything to Emma about how inapplicable her aphorism was to their current situation, the sound of Dan’s door opening captured their attention.

“You alright?” Clark called before he could see him.

Dan didn’t reply. Seconds later, he walked straight past the kitchen.

Emma went to see what he was doing. “Uh, Clark?”

Clark joined Emma at the kitchen door and watched Dan sleepwalking — or whatever this was — towards the blue box on the coffee table.

“Do you think he’s looking for the plaques?” Emma whispered.

“Probably.” Clark turned back to the kitchen table to check that the plaques were still there. They were.

Dan gave up on the blue box and started towards the kitchen. His vacant expression, familiar to Clark from an hour or so earlier, startled Emma. She stepped behind Clark.

“Dan...” Clark said, loudly and slowly. “I’m going to wake you up now. Okay?”

Dan continued towards the kitchen, unblinking. His eyes were more widely open than normal, his mouth more tightly closed.

Clark very gently slapped Dan on one cheek and then the other. Showing no notice, Dan barged into him in an effort to get into the kitchen.

“Dan,” Clark said, more firmly. “Knock it off.”

But Dan continued. He outstretched his arms and tried to push Clark back. His eyes seemed to look through Clark rather than at him. He soon stopped trying to budge Clark — by far the heavier of the two — and turned away from the kitchen.

“Is he going back to the box?” Emma asked from her retreated position by the kitchen table.

“I think so,” Clark said. “Wait, no. He stopped.”

Dan had indeed stopped at the back of the couch. He turned back towards the kitchen. And then, without warning, he charged.

“Dan!” Clark shouted as he sprinted nearer and nearer, head ducked and shoulder primed. “Stop!”

He kept charging.

Clark planted his weight firmly and took the full force of Dan’s charge into his lower chest. It knocked him back but not down.

The impact had no visible effect on Dan. He took advantage of the slight space left by Clark’s several steps back and now found himself face to face with Emma.

Instinctively, she lifted the plaques from the kitchen table and held them behind her back.

“Give them to him,” Clark said.

“No way.”

Dan inched closer to Emma.

Clark leaned against the counter, badly winded. “Emma, give him the damn plaques! I’ll get them back in a minute.”

Emma put the plaques on the floor and raised her hands. Though her eyes saw Dan, she felt like the person she was looking at was someone else.

Dan crouched down and picked up the plaques.

“Open his bedroom door,” Clark said.

“Why?”

“Just do it!”

Emma slipped out of the kitchen and did as Clark asked. She then waited in the living room, on the safe side of the couch, to see what would happen next.

As Clark had been counting on, Dan ignored the door that led outside and instead crossed the kitchen to head into the living room and ultimately for the front door. “Stay back,” he called to Emma.

She was already planning on it.

Of the countless differences between the two brothers, one of the most pronounced was that, unlike Dan, Clark was both built and trained to fight. Clark knew how to contain people without hurting them and how to hurt people without engaging them. Right now, Dan needed to be contained.

Clark watched Dan cross the kitchen and waited until he was one step from the living room. At that moment, he dashed the few paces between them and swept Dan’s legs out from under him in a single, rapid motion. He then dragged Dan across the floor by his feet and dumped him in his bedroom.

“Get a few glasses of water,” he said to Emma.

She got right to it.

In Dan’s room, Clark then made the foolish move of rolling him onto his back to check whether he was lucid or still in his inexplicable trance. As soon as Dan was face-up with Clark’s body looming over him, he poked Clark in the eye and kneed him in the groin.

“Motherfucker!”

Emma hurried through to see what was wrong.

“Get back!” Clark screamed at her.

Dan got to his feet and took a step towards the door. With one hand instinctively nursing his groin, Clark slammed his other forearm into the back of Dan’s knees. He held nothing back with the blow this time; the gloves were off.

Clark climbed on top of Dan and prepared to slap some sense into him, but Dan was too strong. Somehow, Dan was too strong. He freed himself from Clark's weight by sheer force of will, pushing off the ground with his arms and then using one to club Clark in the side of the head.

"Come out of there," Emma pleaded with Clark.

He heard the words, but they didn't register.

Dan picked up a pair of scissors from his desk.

"Clark, seriously!"

"Pass me the plaques again," he said.

Emma picked them up from the spot on the floor where Dan dropped them. She walked to Dan's bedroom door and slid them along the carpet to Clark.

Clark held the plaques and slowly moved towards Dan. "Swap?"

If Dan understood, he didn't show it. Without warning, he dropped the scissors to the ground and lunged at Clark again.

"Watch out for the fish tank!" Emma shrieked from the door.

Too late.

The force of Dan's charge pushed Clark back again. But this time, rather than an empty space, there was a giant aquarium at Clark's back. Clark immediately heard a crack. The glass didn't seem to have smashed, but he definitely heard a crack.

"Fill as many pots as you can find," Clark ordered Emma, his voice high-pitched in this moment of desperation. The weight of Dan's incongruously strong frame still pinned him against the tank, but Clark could now see a vein-like crack spider-webbing its way down from the top right of the side panel. "The old smaller tank is in the shed," he said, "but it might take too long to set up. Get some pots first. Pots, buckets, whatever."

"I am!" Emma called back.

Clark didn't want to move too much, worried that the pressure he was applying to the tank might somehow have been all that was keeping it in one piece. He saw water beginning to drip through the hairline crack. He felt relief that the crack was near the top of the

panel and that the water was dripping rather than flowing out, but any leakage was still a very bad sign.

More in hope than expectation, he then threw the plaques as far across the room as he could.

Instantly, Dan backed away and went to collect them.

Clark took several deep breaths. He moved his back away from the tank very carefully, holding his arm against the side panel and gradually removing the pressure. He looked at the tank and saw that the dripping was gaining pace.

When Dan passed directly by, plaques in hand, Clark spotted the opportunity for a full-nelson takedown onto the bed. He executed it perfectly then flipped Dan onto his back and delivered a stinging slap with all the force he could muster.

Dan gasped sharply and screwed up his face. When his eyes opened a second or two later, Clark knew straight away that he was back.

“Dan? You alright?”

“Aaah!” Dan moaned, holding his face. Clark had taken care to avoid his ear, but Dan’s cheek stung like a cut dipped in alcohol. “What the hell, man?”

“You made me do it! You went all... I dunno. Like before.”

Dan’s expression changed from anger to horror as he looked over Clark’s shoulder. “Clark, the tank!”

“I know. That’s why I had to—”

“Get the fish out of there,” Dan cried, jumping to his feet. “Hurry up! I’ll get the other tank from the shed.”

Clark stood dumbly for a few seconds as Dan ran into the kitchen.

Emma flinched when she first saw Dan.

“Bring those pots through to Clark,” he said. “Just fill them with the water from the tank; we need them now.”

Emma lifted two empty pots. She met Clark at the kitchen door, on his way to get the net to lift the fish out of their fragile habitat. “What are we going to do?” she asked him.

“Put the fish into pots of water until we reassemble the old tank from—”

“I meant with him. What the hell is going on?”

Clark found the net and headed back to Dan’s room. “One thing at a time, okay?”

“We can’t just ignore this,” Emma said.

“The tank could break any second. Whatever’s going on in Dan’s head, he’s alright for now.”

“How long is for now? He was fine an hour ago, and then suddenly he wasn’t. What’s the plan for making sure we’re not doing this again in another hour?”

Clark stopped at Dan’s door and shrugged. “I guess we have to keep him awake.”

THURSDAY

D plus 45

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

Emma and Rooster sat alone in the living room on Thursday afternoon while Clark and Dan drove to a speciality pet store in the city to buy a replacement side panel for Dan's bedroom aquarium. The fish seemed fine for now in the smaller tank Clark had hastily reassembled and filled overnight. Most of them were goldfish, after all, and the others — including Skid, Dan's favourite — were hardy enough and easily pleased.

Clark gave up emptying the main aquarium by hand when he realised how long it would take. After a quick online search, he rigged up a basic syphon between the tank and Dan's window.

With the brother's gone, Emma remained in their house rather than her own to keep an eye on the blue box and particularly the plaques. Clark refused to leave Dan unattended for a second, hence bringing him along.

Emma took the opportunity to catch up on the news. While she and Clark had been dealing with whatever was wrong with Dan,

politicians and citizens alike had been continuing to react to the DS-1 launch disaster.

Most notably, Blitz News reported that Ding Ziyang's decision to blame the accident on "an unclear external factor" had seen the number of American citizens who suspected alien involvement "soar past 60%." While strictly true, Emma's SMMA app told her that the exact figure was now 56% having peaked at 61% in the immediate aftermath of Ding's comments.

Most of the foreign representatives who attended the launch in China had now departed for home, with only President Slater and her Russian counterpart staying behind. The Global Shield Commission's strained Chairman, William Godfrey, also remained.

Despite growing support for the alien sabotage theory, Godfrey's pleas for calm and his promises over DS-2's swift development seemed to have worked; since the hours immediately following the explosion, no further looting had been reported in any major American or British cities.

Domestically, Billy Kendrick appeared on several news networks for interviews in which he insisted that he took no pleasure in being proven right. In Billy's view, aliens had caused the explosion. "Launches don't just fail like that," he repeatedly said. He took the fact that the explosion occurred at an altitude "high enough that no one got hurt" as proof that the aliens weren't hostile and merely wanted to "put an end to our ridiculous plans for orbital weapons before it's too late."

Emma couldn't help but wonder what Billy Kendrick would be saying if he knew what she did. His initial reaction to learning of the hoax would likely have mirrored Dan's physical sickness, but what would he think now?

What would he think if he knew that Richard Walker had disappeared without trace in a flash of light?

What would he think if he knew that Dan had been found in a crop circle in the middle of the night?

What would he think if he had seen the vacant expression in

Dan's eyes as he physically attacked Clark to get his hands on the third and fourth fake plaques?

Emma stopped wondering what Billy Kendrick might have thought when she realised that she didn't even know what she made of it all.

Hell, she thought, Dan doesn't even know, and he's the one it's happening to.



Dan and Clark left the pet store having been told that they needed a whole new aquarium. They bought the same model which, though huge, was an off-the-shelf product of very basic design. Dan noted the price in quiet shock; the cost wasn't an issue now that they were swimming in advertising dollars, but he couldn't believe Clark had paid this much first time round. As then, installation was included in the price.

"These are the slots we have available," a staff member said, pointing to a screen at the checkout.

"Next week?" Clark said. "We need it today."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible."

Clark didn't pull out the old "do you know who we are?" card — the entire store falling silent when they stepped inside hinted that everyone already knew — but instead lobbied for an exception in language that all businesses understood: "I don't care what it costs."

The staff member called his boss over and a deal was soon struck for same-day delivery and installation.

Outside, Dan told Clark that he had to pop in to the store next door to buy a few things. Clark didn't relish the prospect of being gawked at by a new set of customers and staff, but he stuck by Dan's side.

"Why do you need pencils and a notebook?" Clark asked when Dan picked them off a shelf.

Dan looked at him for several seconds without speaking, weighing up the best way to verbalise the reason he knew would sound ridiculous however he worded it. Eventually, he decided to be as straightforward as he could: "Because I think they're trying to tell me something?"

"Who?" Clark asked, genuinely missing the point.

Dan couldn't bring himself to say it. For almost five months, he and everyone else had been talking openly about aliens and Messengers and extraterrestrial intelligences. But now that the great IDA secret had been revealed as a lie, he understood how hesitant Clark would be to accept that maybe — just maybe — the real alien truth was still out there, above and independent of human politics and subterfuge.

"Wait..." Clark said, looking around to make sure no one was listening. He raised his eyebrows. "Them?"

"We have to go back," Dan said.

Clark stood perfectly still. Dan had always had his quirks, but he had never, ever, been violent. He had never done anything close to poking Clark in the eye or kneeing him in the groin, as he had last night in his single-minded pursuit of the plaques. "Walker's cornfield?"

Dan nodded, very slightly.

"Okay," Clark said. "Let's go."

STEVENSON FARM
EASTVIEW, COLORADO

Clark drove nervously along the quiet road to Richard Walker's house, seeing it all in daylight for the first time.

Dan stepped out of the car first. He stood frozen on the spot.

"Talk to me," Clark said, hopeful that Dan was still lucid.

Dan's eyes turned towards him, less blank than they had been the night before. "You can't hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"Clark... don't mess with me."

"I'm not. I can't hear anything! A little bit of wind, some birds..."

Dan put his hands over his ears and closed his eyes.

"You alright?"

He took his hands away. "It's not in my head. I can't hear it when I cover my ears."

"Hear what?"

Dan turned towards the cornfield. "Whatever is in there."

"What does it sound like?" Clark asked, suddenly rushing his

words. "The noise we heard on the video from Walker's room? That sort of modem noise?"

"Softer. Like... I dunno... crystal."

Clark tried to steady his breathing and slow his heart rate in an effort to make out whatever faint sounds Dan was hearing. However hard he tried, he heard nothing.

"I'm going in," Dan said, committing to a decision he had barely finished making.

"I'll lead," Clark said.

Dan didn't object.

Clark entered the field at the visible path he had spotted the previous night. As then, and even in the daylight, it soon became less clear.

"It's getting louder," Dan said.

"I still can't hear shit."

They kept walking. "It has to be close," Dan yelled over a sound that only he could hear.

Just a few steps later, Clark stopped. "There."

Dan stepped beside him and looked into the perfect circle of flattened corn. He stood with his hands on his ears, disbelieving that Clark wasn't bothered by the near-deafening sound.

"You going in?"

Dan nodded and reached for the notebook and pencils that Clark was carrying. He then stepped across the threshold and into the circle. As soon as he did, his expression changed; no longer wincing at the sound, Dan was once more a picture of serenity.

Clark walked into the circle after a few second's of deliberation, ultimately reasoning that it had held no power over him last time so surely wouldn't now. He sped up until he was in front of Dan and saw the same glazed-over look he'd seen the night before.

Dan sat down at the same edge of the circle where Clark had found him in the pouring rain. He looked directly into the centre of the circle and began to draw.

Clark got his phone out of his pocket and snapped several photos

before beginning to record a video. He stayed silent and walked around, taking care to capture the scale of the circle as well as the utter blankness of Dan's expression.

Dan drew extremely slowly and deliberately, without so much as glancing at the paper. His eyes remained fixed in the centre of the circle, staring close-mouthed at something that wasn't there.

Clark could only liken it to something he'd seen in his first girlfriend's living room: one of those pianos that played itself. Still recording the video, he walked over to Dan and stood behind him to focus on the drawing.

As far as Clark had always known, Dan couldn't draw for shit. But this... this was incredible. Dan, or whatever was controlling his hand, had almost finished the drawing of a picture perfect landscape of clouds, hills, clearings and trees. The foreground trees looked like actual trees, not like a child's drawing as Clark would have expected. The clouds were incredibly detailed, too; floating in an unusual formation. The gently sloping hills in the background were expertly shaded. Had Clark not seen this drawing come from Dan's hand, he would never have believed it.

Dan moved his hand away from the page. Clark ended his video and took two clear pictures of the drawing in case Dan destroyed it; it wouldn't make much sense for Dan to do so, but Clark had given up on sense a long time ago.

"Is that for me?" Clark asked.

Without speaking or moving his gaze from the centre of the circle, Dan slowly tore out the page and placed it on the ground.

Clark carefully picked it up. "Is that it?"

Dan answered by putting pencil to paper once more and commencing a new drawing.

"Okay," Clark said. The last thing he wanted to do was get in the way.

On this new sheet, Dan drew a winding vertical line with occasional gaps in it. He then drew another line parallel to the first, creating a narrow path which Clark quickly realised was a road.

When this was complete, Dan added other river-like lines emanating from the main road at various angles. In the extreme lower right corner, Dan drew a neat square. Finally, he added a small circle to the left of the page, around three quarters of the way up. He went over this circle time and time again.

“Dan,” Clark said, noticing that Dan was pressing harder and harder on the paper while still staring at the nothing straight ahead of him.

Like a stuck robot, Dan kept drawing over the same circle.

“Dan!”

Just when Clark was ready to snap him out of it with another slap to the face, Dan stopped drawing. He placed the notebook on the ground and kept staring silently ahead.

“Is that it?”

Dan didn’t reply.

“I’m going to pick you up now, okay?” Clark said, expecting no reply. When none came, he snapped a few pictures of the map and lifted Dan as promised. As before, Dan didn’t struggle.

At the edge of the circle, Dan came to. “What happened?” he asked.

Clark put him down after a few steps. “You drew something.”

“What was it?”

Clark handed Dan the first drawing of the landscape and walked into the circle to recover the notebook while Dan looked at it.

“I drew this?” Dan asked, incredulous. “I drew this?”

“Yup.”

“Where is it?”

Clark held the second drawing — the map — towards Dan. “Here,” he said, pointing at the small but heavy circle. “Or maybe this box. I think one of them is where we are and one is where we’re supposed to go.”

“It’s the circle,” Dan said confidently.

“Okay. We should be able to look at maps online and see if anything looks like this. There’s no scale or anything, though.”

“If we needed a scale they would have given me one,” Dan said.

The syntax of Dan’s statement gave Clark pause. He had just watched Dan do a perfect landscape drawing and make a map for a journey he was evidently supposed to take, but the blunt reminder that “they” had given Dan the information he needed was sobering.

It was one thing to know that Dan wasn’t in control of his hand when he made the drawings; it was another thing to wonder who was.

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

“Are you hearing yourself?” Emma said, incredulous at Clark’s suggestion. “You think they abducted Walker and blew up DS-1, but you also think it’s a good idea to follow a map they magically sent into Dan’s head?”

“I didn’t ask you to come,” Clark replied. He sat in the kitchen with Emma while Dan excitedly watched the people from the pet store assemble his new aquarium. The installers’ arrival coming before Dan and Clark’s return had surprised Emma; now that she knew that the delay resulted from a detour to the cornfield, surprise had given way to disbelief.

Emma took a long sip of her fancy lemonade. “If you’re really going through with this,” she said, knowing full well that Clark wouldn’t be swayed by logic, “I’m coming with you.”

“I thought it was stupid?”

“It is. But if I let you take Dan without me and something happened...”

“Nothing bad is going to happen. I had this talk with Dan and he says that if they wanted to harm us, they would have. But they haven’t. They took Walker, but they called Dan. See the difference? And he said it was the same with the Límíng module; they didn’t want it to reach orbit, but they let it get close enough so that no one got hurt by the blast. They’re not hostile.”

“When did we decide that they were definitely real?” Emma asked. The kitchen door was closed, so she didn’t lower her voice. “Last night you were talking about how crop circles aren’t real. There’s a box full of fake evidence literally under your bed. I’m having a hard time flipping this switch in my head back to “oh yeah, aliens are real” just because someone with a history of sleepwalking drew a map.”

“You weren’t there. He wasn’t even looking at the paper and he drew a detailed road map. How do you explain that? And this wasn’t sleepwalking; he walked into the circle wide awake.”

Emma sighed. “I’m going to play devil’s advocate, okay? If someone else told you they’d gone through everything we have in the last 48 hours, you wouldn’t believe aliens had anything to do with any of it.”

“So? We have gone through it.”

“Just hear me out,” Emma said. “Point one: whatever happened to Walker, someone could have messed with his camera feeds to add the flash. Point two: I could show you a hundred how-to videos of people hoaxing crop circles. Point three: Rooster might just be acting strange because his owner is gone and he’s in a weird house with people he doesn’t know. Point four: Dan’s in a bad place. We might think this has been hard, but we have no idea what he’s gone through. He wants to believe there’s still some truth to hold onto. He needs to believe. And sometimes when people need to believe, their subconscious mind gives them reasons to. It doesn’t mean he’s lying, but—”

“I don’t get you,” Clark interrupted. “Last night you were the one trying to convince me that they might be real! You were the one

who said “maybe there really is a bear” and “sometimes lies come true” and all that other stuff. Now we come home with more evidence and you change your mind?”

“I’m trying to keep an open mind here! You want to know what I think, deep down? They’re real. There: I said it. That doesn’t mean I think it’s a good idea to try and meet them or initiate contact. You really think we’re the right people for this?”

“Not us,” Clark said. “Dan. They chose him.”

“You totally believe this,” Emma said, still struggling to adjust to Clark’s sudden and complete U-turn. “What happened to once bitten, twice shy?”

“You gonna help me with the map or not?”

Emma lifted her phone from the table and sighed. “Pass it here.”



Dan entered the kitchen to get a drink. “Montana?” he said, responding to Clark’s statement that they had identified the roads on Dan’s map and found their destination. “That’s not too far. Could have been worse, right?”

“West Montana,” Emma added. “A thousand miles from here.”

“The thing says it’ll only take seventeen hours,” Clark chimed in.

Dan thought for a few seconds. The distance itself didn’t bother him, but he wondered how precise the marked circle could be given the thousand-mile scale. “How much have you narrowed down the actual location?” he asked, sitting down beside them to look at Emma’s phone and Clark’s scribbled notes beside the original hand-drawn map.

Clark pointed to the box Dan drew in the bottom right corner. “This is us,” he said. “But it’s a pretty big area; everything between Pueblo and Colorado Springs.”

“I know where we are,” Dan said impatiently. He pointed to the circle, which was smaller than the box. “Where’s this?”

Emma handed her phone to Dan. “Lolo National Forest. We’ve

narrowed the exact centre of your circle to within a few miles, and it's pretty near the main road. Not far from Missoula."

"What does the forest look like?" Dan asked.

Emma swiped her phone's screen to bring up some images of the area.

As soon as Dan saw the gently sloping hills sparsely dotted with trees, he knew. "That's the place. It matches perfectly."

"Matches what?"

Dan turned to Clark. "You didn't show her the first drawing?"

"We were concentrating on the map," Clark said, lifting the drawing from his pocket and unfolding it. He handed it to Emma.

She studied it for several seconds, taking in the details.

"Are you coming?" Dan asked.

Emma handed the drawing back to Clark. "We would have to bring Rooster."

Dan smiled, glad that the team was back together.

"We leave in two hours," Clark said firmly. He rose to his feet. "Ready or not."



"Have a good trip," Mr Byrd said as Clark loaded the blue box, covered by two blankets, into the back of the car.

"We will," Emma said, committed to the agreed-upon lie that Dan and Clark were kindly driving her to a family gathering. Her known dislike of flying made this plausible, and Clark's stated desire to "get away from everything for a few days" made it believable.

Dan didn't like the idea of lying to Mr Byrd. But in the context of everything else, he knew that a lie like this was nothing. A handful of secondary lies were also necessary: Dan had been sleepwalking the previous night, Emma had recently adopted Rooster from a local shelter, and the aquarium's glass had been cracked by a stray ball during a careless game of fetch.

Mr Byrd readily agreed to stay inside until the aquarium installation was complete, a task which had already taken longer than Dan or Clark expected but still had several hours to go. He would also check on the fish regularly.

Just after 5pm, Clark set off from Birchwood in search of whatever lay a thousand miles north west in Lolo National Forest. Emma sat next to him while Dan and Rooster shared the back seat.

"You're not opening those in the car," Emma said as Clark reached for the long tin of sardines in his cup-holder.

"Do you have a list of things I'm allowed to eat?"

"I've got a list of things you're not..."

While they argued half-heartedly like an old married couple, the drive-in passed by outside Dan's window. He looked back to read the sign: "Welcome to Birchwood, proud home of Dan McCarthy."

Maybe yet he could give everyone a real reason to be proud, Dan thought.

Maybe yet.

FRIDAY

D plus 48

*INTERSTATE 90
EAST OF BILLINGS, MONTANA*

Clark pulled up in a rest stop just after 6am, at the end of his second four-hour shift. Emma, now due to retake the wheel, was fast asleep. Clark stepped out to stretch his legs and let Rooster do his business. Rooster quietly climbed out without waking Dan. He was a good dog, Clark grudgingly acknowledged; it wasn't his fault he used to belong to Richard Walker.

This was the third and final planned stop on the way to Lolo National Forest. Clark had been spotted filling the tank during the second stop four hours earlier, but the two truckers who saw him were respectful in their surprise and didn't take any photos. Clark stuck to the story about visiting Emma's family when asked what they were doing so far from home, and the truckers left it at that.

With no one to talk to, the four hours since the end of Emma's shift had passed slowly for Clark; though he hadn't slept at all during his break, Emma made the most of hers and Dan had been out for the count since they left Colorado.

The radio kept Clark company. He listened to music for a while, until the country song about the old man and his boots came on. Clark almost woke Emma and Dan to tell them how weird it was that this obscure song was playing again, but he shook it off and changed the station.

Late-night talk shows filled the rest of his time. Clark didn't know these kind of call-in shows still existed, but apparently there were as many talkative insomniacs now as ever. The show Clark listened to — Gary Simon's Graveyard Shift — unsurprisingly focused on the DS-1 launch disaster and its immediate aftermath.

Some of the callers spoke of being kept awake by the fear of a hostile alien return, while others were more concerned by the prospect of a full-scale societal breakdown caused by fear itself. Whatever the details, every call boiled down to fear.

From playing around with Emma's SMMA app while she'd been driving, Clark knew the latest figures: 43% of users believed the launch had failed due to extraterrestrial sabotage — down from a peak of 61% — while 6% believed human sabotage was to blame and the other 51% accepted William Godfrey's suggestion of an unfortunate accident.

Another set of statistics that caught Clark's eye focused explicitly on users' primary fears. Given three options, 31% were most concerned by the prospect of an asteroid colliding with Earth before sufficient defensive measures were in place, 41% primarily feared a hostile alien return, and the remaining 28% saw international conflict as the greatest threat to their personal safety.

William Godfrey's approval rating as head of the GSC remained steady in the high 90s while 88% of Americans supported a “modest to moderate” tax increase to support the GSC's goal of moving forward with DS-2 ahead of schedule. Most surprisingly — particularly given that Timo Fiore and his high-profile team had kept quiet since the accident in the name of unity — the percentage of users expressing support for public investment in Timo's proposal to create a “starship ark” capable of making the generations-long

journey to New Kerguelen had skyrocketed from a low of 19% before the disaster to an unignorable 72% just a few days later.

Looking through this ocean of statistics and trends, Clark took a measure of solace from the fact that no one was reading too deeply into Ben Gold's suicide and no one knew that Richard Walker had genuinely disappeared. There was no percentage to indicate how many people thought aliens were real, because as far as the rest of the world was concerned there was nothing to think about; Clark had no reason to believe that any living person not currently inside his car had the slightest idea about Richard Walker's perfect execution of Hans Kloster's elaborate hoax.

Alone with his own thoughts, Clark didn't really know what he feared. He knew there was no specific asteroid threat and that no aliens were planning an invasion within the next 220 years, but that was all he knew. He didn't know what was waiting for Dan in Lolo National Forest... or who.

Every now and then over the course of the long drive so far, Clark had seen the lights of a passenger plane in the sky. He smiled the first time, remembering when they were kids and Dan would point to every single light and shout "UFO! UFO!"

When their father explained that the red and blue lights were manmade aircraft, Dan would quieten down for a few minutes until he spotted a light that wasn't red and blue, at which point Henry would explain that the white lights were human, too.

Clark didn't have to wonder what Henry McCarthy would have advised or done in this situation. Self-reliance had always been one of the core values Henry lived by and tried to instill in his sons, which made his recent confinement to a wheelchair all the more difficult. He also encouraged his boys to tackle their problems head-on — "before they tackle you" — and to trust their gut.

Above all, Henry McCarthy was a pragmatist. He didn't set out to raise liars, but nor did he sit down with Dan and Clark to impress upon them the value of honesty. He would occasionally say things like "look after number one without stepping on number two's

toes,” and “don’t step into other people’s problems and don’t drag them into yours.”

Clark liked to imagine that Henry would be proud of them for following Dan’s map and trying to be strong enough to deal with whatever was going on without dragging the rest of the world into it. Dan’s reluctance to keep quiet about the hoax had completely faded since he realised that Kloster and Walker’s lie might well have come true, and Clark knew that Henry would have applauded the pragmatism in that.

Dan and Clark hadn’t talked about what they would or wouldn’t tell Henry when he finally got home from hospital on Sunday afternoon. It all depended on what they found in Lolo National Forest and what, if anything, it meant for the world’s current post-Límíng instability.

After sniffing every blade of grass on the bank at the rest stop, Rooster finally picked a spot to do his business. Clark put a bowl of fresh water on the ground beside the car.

“Last chance for another six hours,” he said.

Rooster looked up at him with an inquisitive expression.

“Six hours,” Clark repeated, nudging the bowl with his foot.

The dog lapped up a few mouthfuls of water and sat obediently beside the car. Clark opened the door to let him in.

Emma looked so peaceful that Clark couldn’t bring himself to wake her, and he felt alert enough to finish the journey.

“Shut up,” Clark whispered sharply as Rooster began whimpering and refused to settle in his spot next to Dan.

The whimpering and movement didn’t stop.

“What is it?” Clark asked, leaning in to see if anything had spilled on the seat. It hadn’t. He kept looking around and noticed that Dan, still wearing his eye-mask and still fast asleep, had the notebook open on his lap.

He had a pencil in his hand.

He was drawing.

Clark lifted Rooster back outside and closed the door gently. For

the next two or three minutes, he watched through the window as Dan finished his drawing. Clark then opened the door and gently lifted Dan's eye-mask to see whether he was asleep or in an open-eyed daze. Thankfully, his eyes were closed.

Rooster made himself comfortable beside Dan with no more complaints. Clark shone his phone's light onto the open page of Dan's notebook and snapped a picture. He then returned to the driver's seat and looked at the image.

Clark saw an identical landscape to the one Dan had drawn in the cornfield. There was the same thick woodland in the foreground, the same natural clearing in the middle, and the same gentle slopes in the background; all watched over by the same unusual cloud formation.

But this time, there was something else.

It looked almost like a giant discus, lying on the ground at an unusual angle. The scale of the object was incredible: though a lack of perspective meant that Clark couldn't accurately judge it against the hills in the background, it absolutely dwarfed the foreground trees.

If this object was truly what awaited them in Lolo National Forest, Clark knew they were on the verge of a historic discovery.

Because whatever the size, he knew what he was looking at:
Unmistakably... an alien spacecraft.

D plus 49

JSLC LAUNCH AREA 4
DONGFENG AEROSPACE CITY, CHINA

As William Godfrey sat at a small table with a handful of his closest confidantes, his phone began to ring in his pocket.

He lifted it out expecting to see his wife's picture — he hadn't been able to call for more than eight hours — but instead saw just a name, only recently added to his contacts.

With nowhere else to go in the increasingly claustrophobic visitor's compound, Godfrey excused himself to the corner of the room and spoke quietly into his phone: "What's happened?"

"I've got the results," Jack Neal replied.

Godfrey's eyes darted around the room. The only people in it were his people, but he wanted to make sure none were eavesdropping on what could be big news. "How?" he asked.

"Leave the how to me," Jack said.

"No. How can you know what caused the explosion before I do? Did Ding tell Slater?"

"He doesn't know yet."

"Does she?"

"She's my boss," Jack said flatly. "I can't go behind her back and tell someone else first. Not even you."

"Let's just get back to how you know," Godfrey said; he saw through Jack's "not even you" flattery but couldn't justly argue with his loyalty to President Slater.

"Let's just say I have a source on the inside."

"Inside the Chinese space agency?" Godfrey asked incredulously. "I don't even have someone on the inside."

"Mr Godfrey, I don't mean any disrespect, sir, but I have to get back to Valerie. Do you want the news?"

Godfrey closed his eyes and breathed deeply. "Just tell me it was a design flaw."

"Well," Jack said, elongating the word, "not exactly..."

D plus 50

LOLO NATIONAL FOREST
MONTANA

Clark's phone beeped and vibrated in its holder, the GPS app announcing that their car had entered the target area. After a traffic-hit final leg, it was 14:21 in Lolo National Forest and Clark McCarthy was ready.

Emma held Dan's second drawing and looked out of her window in search of a matching landscape. She couldn't believe that a massive UFO — if that was the best word for it — would actually be visible in the middle of the day; but, like Clark, she thought that Dan might be attracted to the area as he had been to the cornfield at Richard Walker's house.

"Those are the right kind of trees," she said. "And the clouds are weird, like in the picture."

"Do you think the clearing is behind those trees or further along?" Clark asked, still driving.

Emma shrugged then turned towards Dan and tapped his leg. "We're here."

He shuffled in his seat, covered his ears with a slight wince, and settled again. His sleep had been as restless as it had been long, with the last few hours much deeper than those overnight.

"We're close," Clark said before pulling the car over at the first opportunity.

"How do you know?" Emma asked.

Clark looked in the rearview mirror at Dan. "He can hear them. Look on your phone to see if there's a safer place than this to leave the car. I'm going to get him some earplugs."

"Okay."

Rooster lay comfortably next to Dan, not at all perturbed by any noises.

While Emma searched for a place to park, Clark stepped outside and walked round to the back of the car. He pulled some earplugs out of his emergency overnight bag, shook Dan to life, and handed him the earplugs. "We're here," he said.

"I know," Dan replied loudly, speaking over a sound only he could hear. "So are they."



A few minutes later, with the car safely parked in a designated but quiet area, Clark belatedly spotted a flaw in the plan: "We can't leave the box in the car. If someone found it..."

"Emma has to come," Dan said. Both Emma and Clark were used to his erratic volume by now. "I don't know what's going to happen, but I know it won't work without her."

Clark scratched his forehead and turned to Emma. "He's obviously not going anywhere without me."

"It's just a stupid box," Emma said. "Why not take the stuff out and put it in my bag? You don't even have to pack the big Nazi book; just the notes and the photos."

"That'll work."

Emma emptied the spare clothes and assorted I-might-need-

them objects from her bag while Clark emptied the incriminating evidence from the blue box. Dan already had the plaques in a bag of his own, along with his notebook and pencils and the dash-cam from the car. He didn't expect to need the notebook or the plaques but opted to bring them along since both had factored in his previous... experiences.

With the most explosive documents in the world in a bag slung casually over his shoulder, Clark McCarthy led the way down an unmarked trail. Dan gave him a thumbs up to indicate that the sound making it through his earplugs was at least staying steady.

"Holy shit," Clark said suddenly. "There's a clearing up ahead."

"The clearing?" Emma asked, hurrying to catch up.

Clark held Dan's first drawing of the landscape out and compared it to the clearing in front of him. Dan put his hand on the back of Clark's head and turned it slightly to the right.

"Look! If we keep walking, the angle will make it all match," Dan yelled, even more loudly than before. "Come on."

"You think we should go straight down?" Clark asked.

"What?"

Clark mimed removing an earplug.

Dan took out the one in his right ear and immediately put it back in. He winced. "It's really loud! We're close."

Clark asked Emma for Dan's drawing of the craft, which she was keeping safe, then held it in front of Dan's eyes.

Dan looked at the image in awe. "When did I do that?"

"Last night," Clark said, putting a finger to his lips to encourage Dan to keep the noise down. They hadn't passed any other people in the ten minutes or so they'd been out of the car, but Dan's shouting risked attracting attention they could really do without.

"It's down there," Dan mouthed almost silently, going straight from one extreme to the other.

Clark raised his thumb then held out an open palm in invitation for Dan to lead the way. The gentle descent into the clearing was very gradual and took a lot longer than anyone expected. Rooster

walked happily beside Emma, showing no fear of whatever lay ahead.

Dan did a good job of hiding his own concerns. He didn't fear physical harm; even more so than anything else, that wouldn't make sense. But still, a large part of him felt overwhelmed by the magnitude of what might be about to happen. The recurrently inexplicable events of the last few days had left little time for Dan or anyone else to analyse them deeply. All he knew was that something called him to carry the plaques to the cornfield and that the same something had since called him here, to this quiet spot a thousand miles from home.

"Come on," Emma said to Rooster as he began to resist. "It's not much further."

She was more correct than she knew.

Without warning, Clark desperately threw his hands against his ears and screamed. "Aaaah!" He pressed as hard as he could. He then fell forward, lost control of his hands, and began to convulse.

"Clark!"

"Help me pull him back!" Emma shouted, letting go of Rooster and grabbing hold of Clark's right foot. "He hit something!"

Dan grabbed the other foot and pulled as hard as he could. His strength, combined with Emma's, managed to get Clark back on the right side of whatever kind of threshold he had inadvertently crossed. Clark's body stopped convulsing and his breathing slowly steadied, but some damage had been done: blood dripped from his ears and nose.

"Clark," Dan said, shaking him by the shoulders. "Clark!"

"The fuck was that?" Clark groaned as his eyes reopened. He winced sharply and reached for his thigh. "I think my phone blew up."

"Your ears are bleeding," Emma told him as calmly as she could.

"My ears are fine, just get my phone out of my pocket."

Dan knelt down to do it. The pockets on Clark's jeans were pretty tight, especially when he was lying down. "It's hot," Dan

said. He pulled the phone and dropped it on the grass, blowing on his hand as though he'd touched a metal baking tray.

"It's fried," Emma said.

Clark mustered the strength to sit up and look back towards the spot where he'd fallen. "Did I walk into a forcefield?"

Emma helped him to his feet. "I don't think so. You got through it and we were able to pull you out, so it's not a forcefield. It could be a sound barrier or something? I don't know."

"Someone find me a decent sized stick," Clark said, slowly rising to his feet with a grimace.

Dan ran towards the nearest tree to find the stick Clark wanted.

"We should probably look at the skin on your thigh," Emma suggested. "It could be badly burnt."

"Sure it could. But here's something I've learned about wounds over the years: if you can't treat it, don't look." Clark looked around for Dan, worried to have lost sight of him. "Dan! Where the hell are you?"

"Got one," Dan replied, returning to view with a stick in his hand. It came up to his waist. "Big enough?"

"Perfect." Clark accepted the stick and then surprised the others by removing his left shoe and sock. He then proceeded to put his frazzled phone inside the sock before tying the sock around the end of the stick in a looped knot.

"Are you going to try to trace the edge?" Emma asked, getting hold of Rooster again.

"Yeah. Hopefully the phone buzzes or something."

"I'll do it," Dan said. "You shouldn't walk unless you have to."

Clark handed the stick to Dan without complaint. "Be careful."

Dan slowly walked towards the spot where Clark had fallen, which was clearly marked by the indentations of his elbows. Right on cue, the broken phone began to crackle. Dan pulled the stick back. The crackling stopped. "It works," he announced.

"Good. Trace the circle as quickly as you can."

"Why?" Emma interjected. "Isn't this like not looking at your

wound? Because if we can't get past the barrier, why look for what shape it is?"

Clark turned towards her. "It's different."

"How?"

"Because. There might be a—"

"Guys," Dan called. "I got past."

They both turned to see him standing several steps beyond Clark's elbow marks. Clark was furious with Dan for taking the risk but relieved that he'd at least had the good sense to leave his own phone and the bag containing the dash-cam on the safe side of the invisible barrier. Clark's barrier-testing phone crackled loudly until Dan tossed the whole stick back across the threshold.

"Can you see the craft?" Clark asked, more in hope than expectation.

Dan shook his head. "I can hear the sound, though. It's quieter, but it's... fuller."

Emma let go of Rooster once more, placed her bag on the ground — phone safely inside — and looked at Clark. "Will you be able to save me if I fall in like you did?"

"Obviously; it's just my thigh. But what makes you think you'll get in? You couldn't hear the noise when he could, so you won't—"

Before Clark could finish, Emma was standing beside Dan. Rooster ran in after her. Neither showed any ill effects.

"I told you she had to come," Dan said. "They needed us both."

Emma looked all around. "Now what?"

"Stay where you are," Clark said. "I'll trace the barrier to see if there's a gap somewhere."

Emma and Dan stood like statues while Clark used his phone-in-a-sock-on-a-stick contraption to trace the circle. The phone's electronic components crackled and hissed whenever Clark moved it across the barrier. He marked the ground by dragging his heel. Before long, the outline of the barrier was plainly visible.

"How big is that?" Clark asked.

"Maybe a hundred yards across," Dan estimated. He stood near

the edge with Emma and Rooster, only a few feet from Clark. They could see and hear each other perfectly.

"I dunno," Emma said. "It looks like more than that. We could pace it out?"

Clark shook his head. "No way. What if there's another barrier or something? I can't get in there to pull you out."

"It's safe," Dan insisted.

"Safe? Dan, it literally made my ears bleed. It knocked me down. And if it can knock me down, it—"

"Yeah," Dan interrupted, "but you weren't invited. I was, and so was Emma. We're shielded from that thing, whatever it is."

"So what about the dog?"

"Maybe it doesn't affect dogs," Emma said; this made as much sense to her as anything else.

At first Emma had taken Dan's wandering to the cornfield as his subconscious mind's desperate reaction to the soul-crushing revelation that the IDA leak was a hoax, but now there was tangible proof that the "messages" Dan had received were real. After all, his map had already led the group to this middle-of-nowhere clearing where Clark had just walked straight into an invisible barrier which defied explanation.

"We didn't come all this way to give up," Dan said. "There might be an inner circle where I'll get a new message or where something will be visible."

Clark thought in silence.

"I'll walk in front of Dan," Emma suggested, trying to ease Clark's concerns. "If I hit something and fall like you did, he can pull me back."

"Okay," Clark said. "I'll walk in line with you, at the edge."

Emma set off towards the centre of the circle and beyond, counting her paces as Dan and Rooster followed a few steps behind.

"Almost half way," Clark called. He was still in line with them but now a fair distance away thanks to the curvature of the barrier.

"Sixty so far," Emma replied.

Clark gave a thumbs up in acknowledgement.

As Emma put her foot down for the seventieth step, Rooster lowered his body to the ground and began to bark aggressively.

“Stop,” Clark shouted.

They already had.

“What is it, boy?” Dan asked the agitated dog. Rooster’s barking wasn’t the frightened kind they’d all heard when Ben first took them to Richard Walker’s house, and he wasn’t trying to run away like he had then.

Emma crouched to the ground and patted Rooster. He quickly calmed down.

“Come over here,” Clark yelled. “Mark the ground where you are and walk towards me in a straight line.”

They walked over.

When they arrived, Clark had some questions. “How do you feel?” he asked.

Dan shook his head. “Just... normal.”

“You didn’t sense anything when the dog did? Nothing at all?”

“No.”

“Emma?”

“Nothing,” she said.

“Maybe Rooster just knows that they’ve been in that spot before,” Dan said. “Like at Walker’s when he wouldn’t go in the bedroom because that’s where they’d been. It doesn’t mean it’s not safe.”

“I’m happy to keep going,” Emma chimed in.

Clark felt the weight of responsibility on his shoulders. “But if you do hit something like I did, and you fall too far forward, then either Dan won’t be able to reach you or he’ll try to reach too far and end up hitting it, too. And I can’t even get past this stupid line, so you’d both be—”

A quiet but sudden movement in the shrubbery behind Clark startled him. His head shot round like a deer’s, hoping to see anything but snooping hikers. Two grey birds appeared.

"Do you still have your lunch?" Dan asked abruptly.

"Yeah," Clark said, lowering the backpack from his shoulder. "Why?"

"Bait."

Emma and Clark shared a confused glance.

"I don't think aliens eat bread and sardines," Clark said.

Dan rolled his eyes. "I meant for the birds. Remember how all the birds fled the cornfield at Walker's when the cameras flashed and he was taken? We could throw food ahead of where we stopped and see if they pick it up."

"Might as well try it," Clark shrugged. He took a foil-wrapped tub from the backpack and laid it on the ground.

Emma stepped across the outer barrier, picked it up, and stepped back in. She unwrapped the foil. "Two tins of sardines and eight slices of bread? Eight? For lunch?"

"I'm a big guy," Clark said, patting his stomach.

"No wonder!"

Dan clapped his hands together. "Who cares? We're burning daylight."

"Right." Clark said. "Rip the bread into hundreds of pieces then scatter the pieces and the sardines as far as you can without stepping past the spot where you stopped. Not one step further until I say so, understood?"

Emma nodded.

"Dan?"

"Make sure you get this all on video," Dan said, setting off towards their marker with Rooster close behind. "I put the dash-cam in my bag. There's a power bar in there somewhere."

Clark connected the dash-cam to the power bar and clipped it onto his waistband. He watched as Emma ripped the bread into tiny pieces and threw them forward. Rooster showed no aggression this time, wholly focused on the tin of sardines Dan was about to open.

"Hold one near his nose then throw it in," Clark shouted.

Dan did as Clark suggested, giving Rooster the scent then

throwing the sardine out of reach. Rooster moved towards it but stopped short.

“Throw another one, more to the side.”

Dan threw another sardine. Rooster kept his eyes on the prize and ran towards it in a curved line. He devoured it in one bite.

“I overshot,” Dan yelled. “He ran round instead of straight to it, so there’s definitely another circle, but it’s pretty small.”

A hungry bird made a bid for the bread. Rooster scared it off.

“Bring him back to me,” Clark suggested. Dan hurried over, using the sardines to tempt Rooster into following.

Clark put a sardine on the ground for Rooster and treated himself to one at the same time. Rooster sat politely, waiting for the next one.

Back at the edge of the second circle, Emma had run out of bread. Dan opened the second tin of sardines and threw them inside the rough area of the second circle. Nothing happened for a few minutes until the same hungry bird from earlier swooped and landed on the other side of the circle from Emma and Dan. The bird picked up two sardines and several pieces of bread, then moved towards another sardine. It stopped moving and began to squawk.

“That’s the edge,” Dan said. He ran round in a cautiously wide arc, scaring the bird in the process, and picked up all the pieces of bread that lay beyond the point where the bird had stopped. He threw them all further in.

“More birds,” Emma said, pointing to the sky. Sure enough, several other birds were approaching from further afield. “Come back round.”

From their aerial position, the coming birds saw one precisely defined circle — the outer threshold, detected by Clark’s phone and marked by his heel — with another inside. The inner circle was less clear but still discernible.

Dan returned to Emma’s side and watched as a small group of birds fought over their free lunch. Slowly but surely, the shape of the inner circle grew clearer as the birds hoovered up everything on the

outside and left the rest. This breadcrumb circle — a truly surreal sight — looked to be only ten or so paces across.

One bird straddled the line, carefully picking up the final accessible sardine. Another bird caught sight of this and flew over, barging the first bird well into the circle and fleeing with the sardine.

The bird that fell in flew away without so much as pecking at the feast on the ground.

“There’s something in that circle they seriously don’t like,” Emma said.

Dan scratched his chin. “Yeah, but it didn’t get hurt.”

Clark saw Dan’s pensive stance and knew instantly what was going through his head. “No! Emma, get him away from there.”

“Ignore him,” Dan said. “They didn’t invite him.”

Emma looked over to Clark then back down at the near-perfect circle of untouched breadcrumbs in front of her. “Just because the bird didn’t get hurt, that doesn’t mean we won’t,” she said.

“Nothing is going to happen unless we go in,” Dan said. “And nothing bad is going to happen if we do. They’re not hostile. I promise.”

“Emma,” Clark yelled. “I’m warning you!”

Dan opened his hand and held it out at his side. “Are you with me?”

Emma looked deeply into Dan’s eyes and took his hand.

“Emma! Dan! No!”

Together, they stepped forward.



Clark didn’t flinch; his eyes didn’t squint, and his hands didn’t shoot up to cover them. For one long moment, all of his instincts were suspended by the brilliant light.

The light emanating from the inner circle was a total light, obscuring the entire area.

Somehow, Clark felt like he could hear it, too. The sound wasn't high pitched or low pitched; it wasn't sharp or dull. It was just... there. Blocking out everything else — as the light did visually — the sound was just there.

The sound and the light were so total that Clark's functional senses were not so much bombarded as suspended.

After a wholly unknowable but stressless amount of time, the light and the sound subsided. Birds squawked as they fled nearby trees.

Though Clark's senses were now clear and fully functioning, his body was momentarily frozen in place by an unspeakable sight in the circle of breadcrumbs.

There were no competing instincts in Clark's mind. There was no thought of the debilitating pain that had come from his first accidental step across the outer threshold.

In short, there was no decision to be made.

As soon as the initial paralysing shock wore off, Clark McCarthy dropped everything he was holding, covered his ears, and sprinted towards the inner circle.

D plus 51

???

“Tell me this is real,” Dan said.

Emma squeezed his hand even more tightly than she already had been. “It’s real.”

Dan McCarthy and Emma Ford stood in the shadow of a gargantuan alien craft. Their circle of breadcrumbs was dominated by a metallic cylinder, roughly three times Dan’s height, upon which the impossibly large craft rested at a gravity defying angle. The cylinder was open at one side and not entirely unlike the elevator in Timo Fiore’s SETI observatory.

Dan turned towards Clark to tell him what they saw, but the view was obscured; nothing outside the inner circle was visible. Dan felt like he was looking through thick stained glass. He could make out differences in light, like the line between the hilltops and the sky, but no details.

“How the hell is the whole thing standing on this?” Emma thought aloud as she studied the cylinder, carefully walking around

it. "It doesn't even look like it's touching the ground; there's a gap. Look."

Dan crouched down and ultimately lay flat on his stomach to look underneath the cylinder. Just as the entire craft was supported by the cylinder, the cylinder was in turn supported by a still smaller beam that looked to be no wider than Dan's waist and no longer than his forearm. "This is insane," he said as he stood up.

Emma returned to his side and looked up at the craft above their heads. "Tell me about it."

The level of shock they were both feeling left no room for fear.

"I've read a lot of books about this," Dan said, "and when an alien craft shows up, the people who go in first are always a carefully selected team of scientists and psychologists and linguists. It's never, you know... people like us."

"That's the kind of team the government would send in if they knew about it, but they don't. Besides, you were invited, remember?"

Dan nodded slowly. "We're the contact team," he said, savouring the sound of the words.

"After you," Emma said with a slight smile. "I'll be right behind."

Dan extended his hand again. Emma took it.

"I can't believe this is actually happening," she said, one step from the cylinder.

They stepped inside. Immediately, a tall horizontal panel slid closed to seal the cylinder shut.

"Don't worry," Dan said. "We're safe."

A feeling of warmth enveloped Emma's body and mind as everything around her turned a comforting shade of white. She squeezed Dan's hand and whispered: "I know."



After a brief but gentle ascent, the cylinder's front panel reopened.

Everything Dan saw was white. This was no blinding light, however; Dan saw white curved walls, a white floor, and a white ceiling. The room was smaller than the craft had looked from outside — much smaller — but a barely perceptible rectangular outline on the far wall suggested a door which led deeper inside.

“It’s like the inside of a snowflake,” Emma said.

Dan couldn’t have put it any better. Still holding Emma’s hand, he stepped out of the cylindrical elevator and looked more intently around the room. To the right he saw another outline, this one around head height. He looked left and saw the same thing. “Do you think we’re supposed to touch one of the boxes on the wall?” he whispered. “Or knock on that door?”

“What door?”

Before Dan could reply, Emma had her answer.

The white portal rose like a blind being pulled up by an invisible hand. A quiet but surprisingly mechanical whirr filled the otherwise silent room.

Though the floor beyond the door was as white as everything else, the frame cast a slight shadow and made the doorway more discernible than before. This enabled Dan to better judge the distance between his position and the doorway: somewhere in the region of thirty feet.

Emma moved closer to Dan, hiding most of her body behind his.

“They’re not hostile,” he said. This was no mere platitude nor an attempt at self-convincing; every fibre of Dan’s being knew the statement to be true.

But however much Dan knew about the aliens’ benevolence — and for however long he had accepted their existence as fact — nothing could have prepared him for this moment.

Emma wrapped her arms around Dan’s waist in an instinctive display of fear. Because however long the road to this moment had been — with its false starts and setbacks and secret-lie-truth progression — and however much she had trusted Dan’s gut, nothing could have prepared her for this sight.

Dan's mouth fell open. Ten steps away and as real as the pounding of his heart, two alien beings stood side by side in the doorway.



Two legs, two arms, two eyes.

One nose, one mouth, no ears.

Shorter than Emma, but not by much.

Their smooth skin a bluish silver, bodies entirely covered by a seamless and patternless skintight white fabric but for their bald heads and slender hands.

Faces neotenous; oversized eyes, bulbous crania.

Unnervingly humanoid.

Strikingly unhuman.

Expressionless.

Approaching.



The aliens stopped at arms length.

Emma's head was buried in Dan's shoulder; Dan's eyes were locked on the alien directly in front of him. Its were far from the empty black eyes of a textbook extraterrestrial and more like the thoughtful eyes of a large primate. Of all of the being's physical features, the eyes were by far the most striking.

Dan struggled to take in the spatial layout of the alien's face. His eyes and mind were so used to identifying human faces that the sight of something so cursorily passible but fundamentally peculiar — of something so almost-but-not-quite human — sparked a moment of confusion. Aside from the otherwordly skin, Dan's subconscious pattern-recognition abilities balked at the subtle differences in ratios and distance between the alien's features, not to mention the surprisingly disconcerting lack of eyebrows.

The alien in front of Dan slowly raised its hand and turned its head towards the marked box Dan had already noticed on the wall.

"It's okay," Dan whispered to Emma. When she mustered up the courage to look, she saw that the alien before her was signalling to the box on the other wall.

"We're not splitting up," she said, meaning it for Dan but saying it more firmly than intended.

The alien in front of Emma turned its head slightly towards the other and addressed it verbally in a melodic tone, rising and falling like birdsong:

"Yeee oak... naa. Hoon poatsnik... taa."

The most distinct feature of this vocalisation was the abrupt fall in tone before the final sound of each sentence-like phrase. Though Dan had no preexisting interest in nor knowledge of linguistics, he made a conscious effort to remember every syllable of these utterances.

"We'll be fine," he said. "I promise."

"How can you promise?" Emma asked, wondering all the while whether the aliens could understand her speech any better than she could theirs.

Dan turned to Emma and spoke gently: "Because they brought us here for a reason, and it wasn't to hurt us."

Emma's alien walked the few paces to the box on the left wall. If it had knees, they didn't bend much. Dan's alien walked likewise to the right.

"Ladies first," Dan said.

Emma couldn't help but laugh. "Why don't we both go first?"

Dan nodded and took half a step away from Emma. She hugged him tightly.

"I'm telling you," he whispered, "we'll be fine." When Emma hugged ever tighter he kissed her on the top of her head, as though she was his frightened little sister rather than the stop-at-nothing PR guru whose guidance had kept his head above water for so long and whose temerity had gotten them both this far.

When they parted, Dan walked swiftly to his right and stopped beside the alien. By way of a rising panel similar to the door's, the outline on the wall revealed itself as an inlet storage area. Dan's alien reached inside. As it did, Dan got his first good look at its hands. They were divided into three parts: two double-wide "fingers" and what could only be described as an extending and remarkably dextrous thumb. There were no lines on the palms and no visible joints on the fingers or thumb.

The alien produced two long and thick silver cables, each segmented like a shower cord.

Dan looked across to Emma and saw that the alien on her side of the room was doing the same. "You okay?" he asked.

She nodded like she more or less meant it.

Dan's focus returned to the alien as it removed a cap from the end of one of the cables, leaving the other dangling to the floor. A quick glance revealed its partner doing exactly the same beside Emma. Dan's alien gently pulled two individual wires from the end of the open cable. With one of these inch-thick white wires in each hand, the alien walked behind Dan.

Dan caught a glimpse of the end of the wires, noting that each had a round tip roughly the size of a penny. He assumed these would function as suction pads or perhaps be removed to reveal a still smaller wire.

The alien touched Dan on the back of his neck. To his surprise, its hands were no colder than his own skin; if anything, they were slightly warmer. Dan then felt a shiver run down his spine as the alien gently placed the penny-sized pad on his neck.

"Are you okay?" Emma asked, standing uneasily as her alien — a few seconds behind Dan's — removed the cap from one of the outer cables on its side of the room.

"Yeah. I just didn't expect it to be as cold as—"

Dan gasped in sudden and intense pain as something shot out of the pad on his neck and pierced his skin. His hands shot to the pad, trying and failing to claw it away.

Emma froze in horror. The spell was broken moments later when her alien attempted to attach its pad to her neck, at which point she swatted its hand away and ran to save Dan.

Dan's alien, either oblivious or indifferent to Emma's movement, took the second wire from the cable and attached the pad to its own palm. Instantly, Dan stopped trying to claw the pad from his neck and looked directly into the alien's eyes.

"Dan!" Emma yelled. "We have to get out of here!"

He turned to her slowly. "Emma... it's talking to me."

The dread faded from Emma's expression, replaced by a mirror of the serenity she saw in Dan's. She walked back towards the alien waiting patiently on her side of the room and lifted her hair away from her neck. "Okay," she said. "Do it."



Dan stared into the alien's eyes in quiet amazement as thoughts that weren't his own echoed in his mind.

The alien didn't speak to him in a voice of its own, or even by way of distinctly delivered thoughts; rather, Dan received semi-verbal thoughts in his own mental accent and syntax.

After an initially confusing few seconds of hearing his mind thinking thoughts that weren't his, Dan made sense of one:

WE CAN COMMUNICATE.

"Where are you from?" Dan asked silently, concentrating his mind on this single thought as much as he could.

The answer came immediately but indistinctly. For Dan, it was almost overwhelming. There was no order to the components of the answer; it came all at once, more like a memory than an explanation.

Dan didn't know whether the answer was deliberately vague or an approximation dumbed down for his puny human mind, but the key parts emerged: they were from the same time and the same dimension as Dan, but a different planet. They were bona fide

extraterrestrials, not extratemporal time-travellers or extradimensional entities.

The upside of this, Dan knew, was that they came from a planet that was theoretically reachable. He focused his thoughts on two follow-up questions: “What planet? Have we found it?”

Dan’s inner voice, essentially conversing with itself under the alien’s direction, told him that earthly telescopes had discovered and named the aliens’ home star but not their planet.

“What’s our name for the star?”

This time, no answer came. There was no indication that this topic was off-limits, just a long radio silence until Dan tried again with a different question: “How far away?”

No answer.

Dan’s own thoughts were quieter than normal. He looked across to Emma, suddenly remembering that she was there, and saw her staring intently into the eyes of the alien in front of her, connected to it by the mysterious wires in the same neck-to-palm configuration as Dan was to the other. He started to wish that he and Emma’s makeshift contact team had included the linguists and psychologists he’d joked about before stepping into the craft’s cylindrical elevator; such experts certainly would have had a better chance of making sense of what was going on inside Dan’s head than he did.

“Are you going to tell me or not?” Dan asked, giving it one last shot before moving on.

NO.

Dan nodded slightly. This answer — “no” — had been by far the clearest so far. Hoping for more of the same, he opted to stick with yes/no questions.

“Did you destroy the Límíng module? DS-1’s core module?”

YES.

“Why?” Dan asked, instinctively abandoning his yes/no idea in the wake of the alien’s disturbingly cold admission of guilt.

The open-ended nature of Dan’s question resulted in another

jumble of thoughts. The core of the answer became clear after several seconds, during which time Dan consciously tried to relax his body and calm his mind. As before, the answer came in Dan's own mental accent. The clearest two-word phrase told him that any attempt to place weapons in orbit necessarily "provokes intervention."

"Did you take Richard Walker?" Dan asked, almost certain of the answer. "Was that another intervention?"

YES.

"Where is he? Dead?"

HOME.

"No he's not."

YES.

"Since when?"

HOME.

Dan had no option but to believe the alien and no real reason not to. "But why did you take him in the first place?" he asked.

This answer was the most clouded yet. As best Dan could have described, it was as though the answering side of his mind was trying to say too much at once. He picked out plenty of words here and there — Shield, manipulate, danger, fear, agitate — but he couldn't really see the forest for the trees.

"Because he would have kept scheming and agitating people to keep going with The Shield?", he asked, taking a shot at putting it together.

YES.

"But we are going on with it; Godfrey is just moving on to DS-2. What was the point of abducting Walker?"

No answer.

"What if he still has evidence of the hoax and shares it out of spite?"

PROVOKE INTERVENTION.

"You would stop him?"

YES.

“So why let him go?”

MINIMAL NECESSARY INTERVENTION.

The idea that the aliens wanted to interfere as little as possible in human affairs while protecting their interests made a measure of sense to Dan, well-read in the classics of science fiction as he was. But still, this didn't explain why they had intervened so directly in his own life by first calling him to the cornfield and then to a forest a thousand miles from home.

“Why am I here?”

Amid a jumble of ideas that surrounded this response, Dan made out the words “new plan.” The rest of the thoughts seemed to centre around an admission from the alien that Earth's leaders' defiant reaction to the launch disaster had come as a surprise.

“And the new plan was me?”

YES.

Dan thought back to the night when he had first been called to the cornfield. “Do you need the plaques for the new plan?”

YES.

Dan took his backpack off, prompting assistance from the alien to make sure he didn't disturb the wire which allowed them to interface pseudo-verbally. The alien watched as Dan removed the two blank plaques and left them on the floor.

“There.”

YES.

“Why did we have to come here?” Dan asked. “I brought these to the circle in the cornfield.”

The reply, much clearer than the previous non-binary responses but still incomplete, told Dan that a smaller and less sophisticated craft — kept inside this mothership — had been the only one to land in the cornfield.

“Why didn't you just leave it there until I brought the plaques? Can it not cloak itself?”

NO.

“So it can't cloak itself and it leaves a circle? Is that what people

have seen before? Has that craft landed on Earth before?"

YES.

Dan looked across to Emma, eager to tell her how much he was finding out. He saw the alien on her side of the room standing directly behind her with its hand on the pad on her neck, as though ready to remove it.

TIME.

"I'm not finished," Dan protested as his alien began to move behind him. Dan turned his body to maintain eye contact. "Have you taken people before?"

TIME.

"Yes or no: have you taken people before Walker?"

NO.

"Have you left deliberate messages?"

NO.

"Elaborate circles?"

NO.

"Circles?"

YES. TIME.

Dan held his hand out at arms length to signal that he still wasn't finished. He saw that Emma was looking straight ahead, calmly and obliviously waiting for the patch to come off her neck and for whatever had pierced her skin to come out.

But Dan wasn't ready to go. He still had one more question that he wouldn't leave without asking: "If you didn't take people or leave messages when you landed in the past, then why did you land?"

The alien looked straight into Dan's eyes. Dan liked to think it was grateful to him for bringing the plaques, and maybe even for believing in its race's existence when so few others did. He knew it was too much to assume that the alien liked him, but it certainly didn't seem to dislike him. As he had always predicted, it wasn't hostile.

"For research?" Dan pressed, encouraged by the alien's attempt

to answer but frustrated by yet another tangled bundle of thoughts.
“Science for the sake of science?”

YES.

Dan lowered his hand. He knew it hadn't been holding the alien back in any real sense and was grateful that the alien had answered his last few questions after announcing time was up.

The alien walked behind Dan and placed its warm hand on his neck.

“Wait,” Dan said, speaking out loud as well as focusing his thoughts. “What powers your ships?”

LIGHT.

This thought — LIGHT — was the last thing in Dan's mind as he stood in the room of unbroken white.

In tandem with its partner who stood behind Emma, the alien at Dan's back briskly pulled the contact pad from his neck.

From Dan's mind, light faded.

From Dan's eyes, white vanished.

All around him... only black.

LOLO NATIONAL FOREST
MONTANA

Clark sprinted towards Emma and Dan, both lying crumpled on the ground in the inner circle. Rooster followed and quickly overtook him, going all the way in.

Rooster showed no fear of the barrier that had kept him away from the bread and sardines, and Clark realised halfway to the inner circle that the camera strapped to his chest hadn't exploded. He took his hands away from his ears, allowing him to use his arms to run quicker. Nothing bad happened.

A bird previously nosing around the edge of the inner circle dashed in and fled with a beakful of sardines and breadcrumbs.

Thoughts ran through Clark's mind at a million miles an hour as he hurried towards the inner circle. The mysterious barriers appeared to have been deactivated, but that didn't change the fact that Emma and Dan were utterly lifeless.

When Clark reached them, he naturally checked Dan first. He found a pulse, breathed the deepest sigh of relief of his life, and

moved on to Emma. Her face screwed up and she let out a pained murmur before he touched her.

“Emma?”

“Is Dan okay?” she groaned, wincing again and putting one hand on her stomach while blowing air slowly and deliberately from her cheeks.

“He’s here,” Clark said as he helped Emma onto her front in case she vomited, which was looking like a distinct possibility. “He’s safe.”

Emma pushed herself onto her knees. “Did you see it?”

“See what?”

Before Emma could answer, she was sick on the grass.

Clark pushed Dan onto his side as quickly as he could without being rough then returned to Emma and held her hair out of the way. “It’s okay,” he said. “Tell me later. Do you want some water?”

She nodded.

When Clark turned to see how far away he’d dropped his bag, he saw Dan stirring. “Dan,” he said.

Dan rolled onto his knees and vomited violently, putting Emma’s purge to shame in terms of both volume and stench. He held his hand up to tell Clark to stay back when he heard him coming; Clark didn’t need an excuse to keep away. Even Rooster, who looked like he might have made a move for Emma’s before Clark told him to stop being so disgusting, shied away from Dan’s vomit.

Dan wiped his mouth with his hand then wiped his hand on the grass. He jumped up to his feet like he was fresh out of bed and turned frantically to look for Emma. A huge smile crossed his face when he saw that she was okay. He turned back to Clark, still smiling madly. “You saw it, right?”

“Saw what?” Clark asked, repeating his earlier question to Emma.

“We were inside,” Dan said.

“Inside what?”

“The craft.”

Clark's eyes narrowed. "What craft?"

"It was right here," Dan insisted, turning to Emma.

"Clark," she said, "seriously. It was."

"But you were only gone for a second. You were standing at the edge, there was a flash, and then you were on the ground."

Dan shook his head. "Listen to me: we didn't imagine it, okay? They were right in front of us. I spoke to one."

"Look," Emma said excitedly.

Dan and Clark turned to face her, watching as she held her hair to one side and felt the back of her neck with her finger.

"There's a mark," she said.

While Clark went for a closer look, Dan felt the back of his own neck. "There's a mark!" he yelled, giddily running his index finger back and forth across the painless puncture. "See? It was real!"

Clark inspected Dan's mark after Emma's then stared dumbly at the ever-diminishing circle of breadcrumbs. A broad smile spread across his face. He looked up to the sky and shook his head slowly, smiling all the while.

"They took Walker and blew up Líming," Dan told him.

"Is that what they said?"

"They didn't exactly say it, but they put the answers in my head. There was a wire going from my neck to one of its hands — same with Emma — and whenever I thought of a question I got the answer right back. Everything sounded like it was in my voice, but the thoughts were its thoughts. I don't know how else to explain it."

"So they didn't actually say anything?" Clark asked, no longer smiling.

"They did," Emma said. "Just not out loud. I heard their thoughts in my voice just like Dan heard them in his."

"What did they tell you, then?" Clark asked her. After taking a few more photographs of the area — including the small but pronounced hole in the centre of the inner circle which Dan would later explain had been left by the core support below the cylinder — he started walking away, leading the way back towards the car.

“They didn’t tell me much,” Emma said. “It was more like the alien was asking me stuff. There were loads of questions but most of them weren’t so much questions as, I dunno... prompts.” She rubbed both sides of her head as though it hurt from overexertion. It did. “It was like a game show when they have a rapid-fire round and the host is reading the questions as fast as he can, and by the time you finish answering one he’s already half way through the next. But like Dan said... it was my voice on both sides, like I was asking myself. But my thoughts were so quick and clear and... free. It’s like my brain was amplified.”

Dan didn’t know where to start asking Emma what she meant; he could hardly relate to any of this. “My alien didn’t ask me anything,” he eventually said. “I was asking the questions and it was answering them. Some of them, at least. What did yours ask?”

“Mainly how they could stop people from putting weapons in space without having to reveal themselves. You know, how to clean up this whole mess.”

Dan started laughing. “Shut up,” he said.

“What?”

“It was asking you for advice?”

“What’s funny about that?”

Clark jumped in: “They wanted PR advice.”

Emma grinned as the irony dawned on her. “What can I say? My reputation precedes me.”

“So what did you tell it?” Dan asked, his laughter slowly dying down.

“It kept talking about “minimal necessary intervention” and being low-key.”

“Mine said that,” Dan said. “The thing about minimal necessary intervention.”

“Right. I mean, we already knew they wanted the plaques, but it was asking what they could do with them to calm everything down. It’s so hard to explain, because none of the questions were clear cut. Sometimes I didn’t know which thoughts were mine. One second it

was like I was brainstorming ideas to myself, and then it was like “What? Where? When?”... you know?”

Dan didn’t know; he still couldn’t relate to Emma’s experience of being questioned by her alien. He didn’t envy it, either, much preferring to have been free to ask his own questions and to get answers to most of them. “But what did you actually tell it?” he asked. “Because your alien was standing behind you ready to take the pad off before I was finished talking to mine, so you must have given it what it wanted.”

Emma rubbed the sides of her head again. “Honestly, I don’t even know where to start. It was non-stop, like it had a vacuum cleaner in my brain sucking everything out.”

“But you heard the thoughts, right? Which ones echoed? Those are the ones that it thought about after you thought them.”

“Austria,” Emma said.

Dan and Clark replied in perfect unison: “Austria?”

“Yeah,” she said, mainly to Dan. Her eyes lit up as it all came back to her. “I said — or thought, whatever — that if I was going to do it, Austria would be the best place. I said an older person would be better, and that it definitely couldn’t be you this time.”

“What couldn’t be me?”

“The person who finds the new plaques.”

Clark stopped walking. “I feel like I’m missing something.”

“Is that why they wanted the plaques?” Dan asked, his eyebrows raised in surprise. “I thought they just wanted to make sure we didn’t do anything with them?”

“Still missing something...” Clark said.

Ignoring Clark, Emma shook her head at Dan. “They’re going to leave an unambiguous message of peace. Those two plaques are a ready-made solution, because Kloster’s letter told people they’re still out there somewhere.”

“So they’re going to write fake messages on the other two plaques and plant them somewhere?” Clark asked, looking at Dan. “Me and Emma were going to do that and you wouldn’t let us!”

“This is the opposite of that,” Dan said, almost scoffing the words out. “How is this fake? Actual aliens are writing an actual alien message. That’s as real as it gets.”

“But the rest of the story is still a lie,” Clark said. “Toplitz, Kerguelen, Walker... everything. The core of it might have come true, but all the details are lies.”

Emma nudged Clark in the back to shut him up; Dan was on side with the only sensible plan to get out of the mess caused by the hoax, and Clark seemed to be doing his best to change his mind.

“Details?” Dan said, a look of placidity etched on his face. “Clark, I just spoke to an alien. To hell with the details.”

D plus 53

JSLC LAUNCH AREA 4
DONGFENG AEROSPACE CITY, CHINA

William Godfrey stood before a room full of international press with Ding Ziyang by his side. Far more reporters had been invited to this announcement than any other since the failed launch, which led many of them to assume the news was good.

Godfrey spoke first. "Thank you all for joining us," he said. "We will be brief. Extensive analysis of the remnants of the Límíng module ended several hours ago, and the findings are conclusive. I'll leave the technical details for those more qualified to explain them, but what I can tell you is this: the explosion resulted from a catastrophic electrical failure, the catalyst for which was a direct lightning strike."

Flashbulbs went off around the room and reporters gasped as though this was the last thing any of them had expected Godfrey to say. In truth, it had been the last thing Godfrey had expected Jack Neal to tell him several hours earlier.

"My message to concerned citizens is twofold. First: this accident

was no one's fault. The launch site, rocket and module passed every inspection by every GSC nation's most stringent scrutineers. Likewise, no GSC nation's meteorologists forecast a non-negligible threat of lightning. And second: this is good news. The loss of the *Líming* module was without question an international tragedy, but at least this new information will put an end to the western media's irresponsible and indefensible fear-mongering that this tragedy was anything but a horrifically timed accident."

Jack Neal, who Godfrey had grown increasingly fond of over the last few days, watched on with President Slater from the back of the press room. The Russian President was also present, ready to appear side by side with Slater once Godfrey and Ding had delivered their responses.

"And the timing truly couldn't have been worse," Godfrey continued. "Fatal lightning strikes have blighted major launches in the past, but never when the media had recklessly impressed upon billions of viewers the idea that humanity's immediate and ongoing security depended entirely on the success of that particular launch. In hindsight, I can only praise the citizens of all nations for their relatively measured reactions to the behaviour of certain elements of the media. I also want to take this opportunity to thank my esteemed colleague Ding Ziyang for his remarkable restraint in dealing with those who sought to blame his scientists for this unforeseeable and unpreventable accident."

Godfrey gave his usual half-nod sign-off to the cameras and turned to his left towards Ding, who took the cue to begin his speech.

The lack of a real-time translator meant that Godfrey would have to wait a few minutes for confirmation that Ding had indeed read the agreed upon speech and reaffirmed his commitment to the GSC and its DS-2 project.

Despite the brave faces and united front, Ding's bargaining power at the GSC's top table took a considerable hit with the revelation that his country's flagship launch had been derailed by a

single lightning strike. To his right, the GSC's Chairman fought a smile.

It was a good day to be William Godfrey.

SATURDAY

D plus 54

*INTERSTATE 90
EAST OF BILLINGS, MONTANA*

Clark took over in the driver's seat from Emma at midnight having caught up on some long overdue sleep during the first leg of the journey home to Birchwood.

Earlier, before they had first set off, Clark played back the footage he recorded with the dash-cam strapped to his chest while Dan and Emma were inside the barrier-protected circle in the clearing. A flash filled the screen when they crossed the inner threshold — as everyone expected — but the entire image remained obscured by total whiteness for almost six minutes. The initial flash brought a cacophony of panicked bird calls and Rooster cycled through sporadic fits of howling, barking and whimpering for the whole duration. Clark, on the other hand, had stood silently in a state of suspension.

"It really felt like you were only gone for a second," he said.

Dan shrugged. "Six minutes sounds about right."

"But why didn't they let me in, too?" Clark asked, then in the

back seat and sounding a little slighted. "It's not even like I was able to look after the dog. Did they just not need me? Is it that "minimal necessary intervention" thing?"

"Maybe it's because you used to be a soldier," Dan suggested. He said this with reverence; he had always respected Clark for going into hostile zones to carry out his duties, even if he didn't always agree with the motives of the people who put him there. Nonetheless, Dan could understand why the aliens — quite possibly pacifists — might not make such distinctions.

"Yeah," Emma said, playfully turning to see Clark in the back seat. "They were obviously scared of how strong you are."

"They only wanted you because you're good at lying," Clark shot back.

Emma laughed, taking the close-to-the-bone joke as a compliment. "Speaking of which... I'm going to need a business card for my new firm: IPPR."

Dan and Clark waited for the punch line.

"Inter-Planetary Public Relations."

"Interplanetary is one word," Dan said.

"Yeah," Clark chided. "Even I know that."

"Ugh. Shut up and go to sleep," Emma groaned at Clark. "You're driving next."

Clark stretched his arms before getting as comfortable as he could. Rooster had beaten him to the punch and claimed half of the space as his own, so Clark's legs could only really stay bent in a seated position. He leaned against the window and tried to make the best of it. Fortunately, the burn on his thigh was nowhere near as bad as originally feared.

Dan took one final look at the trees as they faded into the distance. He thought about how many people would obviously walk over the very spot where a bona fide alien craft touched down. Places like the Kerguelen Island and Lake Toplitz would retain their spotlights while Lolo National Forest remained a largely untouched area of natural beauty. The more Dan thought about this, the more

glad he was.

“So about this lightning,” Clark mused, a few minutes after a radio recap broke the news to them. “Did the aliens actually make lightning hit the DS-1 rocket or did they just make it look like a lightning strike?”

“Almost definitely the second one,” Dan said, “but it’s impossible to know. The flash took out the cameras when it happened.”

“But do you think Godfrey and the rest of them really believe it was lightning?”

“Apollo 12 got hit twice, and NASA lost a rocket and a weather satellite to lightning in separate incidents in the ’80s, so there’s a precedent. And whether it’s right or wrong, a lot of people think Chinese launches are more prone to failure than ours.”

“I almost feel bad for them,” Clark said. “There was nothing wrong with their launch, but they’re going to get the blame.”

Emma looked at Clark via the rearview mirror. “They’re not really. Lightning is an act of God.”

God..., Dan thought to himself. Why didn’t I ask the aliens about God?

“But I do get what you mean,” Emma continued, “which is why I know there’s no way Ding would have gone along with the lightning story if he had the slightest doubt.”

“Burger joint!” Clark yelled as they passed a signpost for Missoula. “Pull in to that drive-through. No one will see us.”

Emma knew they didn’t really need to worry about being seen; it would be an inconvenience, but nothing more. The agreed upon story that she was visiting family was solid enough and no one had any reason to be suspicious of them, anyway. The smell of fries wafting through the air was enough to settle her mind.

“Yesss,” Clark said, rubbing his hands in anticipation of a hot meal.

Emma put on a pair of sunglasses and Dan raised his hood. They made it through the drive-through unspotted and continued on

their way as soon as Emma finished eating. Clark ordered three meals despite Dan's insistence that he wouldn't be as hungry as he thought after the first.

When Clark scrunched up the first wrapper and put it back in the empty box on the floor, he sighed. "I should have got four."

Dan saw Clark drifting off to sleep a short while later and roused him when something crossed his mind. "You better call the hospital from my phone and tell them yours got lost," he said; lost in this instance being a euphemism for frazzled by an alien sound-barrier. "I don't think they have my number, and they obviously can't reach us at home."

"Good idea." Clark took Dan's phone and dialled the number, which he knew by heart. The staff member thanked Clark and informed him that Henry's Sunday afternoon discharge would be delayed for a few hours due to a miscommunication over shift patterns. Clark didn't mind too much; after six months without his dad, two more hours was nothing worth getting annoyed about.

Clark then faded peacefully off to sleep, leaving Emma and Dan to talk about every little physical thing they could remember about the aliens and their craft. Dan expressed his frustration at the hopelessly ambiguous answer he received after asking what powered their interstellar travel; "light" could mean so many things that they might as well have said "fuel."

When neither could recall anything else about what they saw, the conversation turned to Emma's semi-conscious suggestions as to what the aliens should do with the plaques. Her recollections encouraged Dan greatly.

Dan had offered to take over from Emma when her shift ended at midnight so that Clark could stay asleep, but she refused. "I promised I'd wake him," she said. "And you're the one who told me how he feels about promises. Remember? When you wouldn't tell me anything about the letter until he got home, even when I was already on your side?"

"Fiiine," Dan said, rolling his eyes at the guilt trip.

Clark ate the leftover half of his third burger and washed it down with hot coffee at the rest stop to fuel his driving muscles.

“Anything happen while I was asleep?” he asked Dan upon noticing that Emma had already nodded off barely five minutes later.

“The stars came out,” Dan said.

Clark looked up. “They sure did.”

The next few hours passed quickly, with Clark asking Dan about some elements of what had happened that he didn’t fully grasp.

Dan patiently relayed what the alien told him about Richard Walker: that they had returned him home but wouldn’t hesitate to intervene again if he ever looked likely to talk.

“And how come there was a circle in Walker’s field but no marks in the clearing apart from the little hole where the support beam was?”

Dan filled Clark in on the smaller craft, kept inside the mothership, and its inferior cloaking abilities.

Midway through his answer to another relatively mundane question from Clark, a loud chiming tone on the radio cut Dan off. They had been listening to music on low volume, but the Traffic Updates feature had kicked in.

The radio’s screen displayed a scrolling message — “Latest travel news...” — but the voice that followed said otherwise: “We interrupt your regular radio programming to deliver this breaking news bulletin.”

Dan turned the volume up even further with one hand and tapped Emma’s leg to wake her up with the other.

“Hmmm?” she said.

“Shhh,” Clark snapped.

Emma sat up and looked around, quickly realising that they were listening to the radio.

“We’ve just been handed some truly incredible news,” the voice announced, “direct from the Austrian city of Salzburg...”



Emma rifled through headlines and images on her phone as Dan and Clark focused on the remarkable news coming through the radio.

The video footage showed an English-speaking reporter standing outside a police station in Salzburg.

Located near the German border, Salzburg lay within approximately fifty miles of both Lake Toplitz — where the plaques were supposedly first removed from their spheres — and also the famed Nazi repository at Altaussee where three of the four spheres were supposedly stored until looters ransacked the mines. A map in the corner of the screen made this clear.

Even though the news that came next reflected some of the thoughts Emma had experienced on the alien craft, it was just as extraordinary to her as it was to Dan and Clark.

“A metallic plaque matching those found inside the Kerguelen sphere has today been discovered in a storage unit on the outskirts of Salzburg,” the radio announced.

“Holy shit,” Clark said. “Those aliens don’t mess around.”

Emma looked up from her phone to pay full attention to the stripped-down and straight-to-the-point radio bulletin.

“The plaque was discovered by local schoolteacher, Martina Brunner, in a unit belonging to her recently deceased father,” the newsreader continued, “the internationally renowned archaeologist Karl Heilig.”

“That’s a solid place to dump them,” Dan said. “But why’s there only one?”

The bulletin went on: “Brunner immediately brought the plaque to a local police station. Verified security records from the owners of the storage lot confirm that the unit in question had not been accessed by anyone in over three years prior to today’s discovery. The first images of the plaque, and the message it contains, are expected within the hour.”

“Did you tell them to use a storage unit?” Clark asked Emma.

“I think so,” she said.

Dan had a more important question: “What kind of messages did you tell them to write? And why’s there only one plaque?”

“I think in case this one doesn’t work. I don’t know... I just said — thought — that they had to do something to kill the “eviction notice” and “killer asteroid” ideas. Something to make the crosshairs and the 280-year timescale feel less like a threat.”

“Well,” Clark said, “You did all you could. I guess we’re going to find out what they went with soon enough.”

Dan could see how nervous Emma was; her legs were shaking, which they never did, and she was biting the inside of her lip almost incessantly. “They’re not going to make a mistake,” he said, utterly sure of that and keen to share his confidence.

“Right,” Clark agreed. “They managed to get the plaques inside a locked unit within hours, and they either made the Austrian woman go there like they made Dan go to the cornfield or they knew she was going today and made the most of it. We’re not dealing with amateurs here.”

Despite the brothers’ efforts, Emma’s worries remained. After all, however capable and potent the aliens were, they had still asked her for advice. And troublingly for Emma, it was hardly a stretch to recognise that global stability depended largely on what advice she had given and which parts of it the aliens had taken. Hard though she tried, she simply couldn’t remember everything she’d thought while connected to the alien by the pad on her neck.

Like the rest of the world, all she could do was wait.



The top story on Blitz Online, which Emma read on her phone, upped the ante even further.

Following several hours of video conferencing between the Argentine team responsible for the analysis and safekeeping of the

initial two plaques and the Austrian authorities who held the newly discovered third, a joint statement had just been issued which made it unequivocally clear that the third plaque was identical to the others in size, weight, and material composition.

Emma spent the short time until the reveal checking how others were reacting. No top-level public figures had yet made any comments, but the overwhelming mood was one of hope rather than fear. The news that DS-1's *Líming* module was downed by lightning rather than extraterrestrials, true or not, had already calmed many minds; so much so that many didn't just hope but expected this new plaque would provide positive context.

The reveal of the third plaque was less polished than the reveal of the first two. There were no countdown timers and no more specific timeframe than "within the hour." Because of this, the sudden appearance of an image at the top of Emma's news feed came as a huge surprise.

"Dan!" she said, clicking on the plaque to make it full screen and holding her phone forward so Dan could see it, too.

The voice on the radio simultaneously announced that the plaque had just been revealed and did his best to describe its two panels.

"That's them," Dan said right away as he looked at Emma's phone. "That's who we saw!"

Sure enough, the right-side panel of this new plaque contained a detailed physical representation of two aliens identical to those that Emma and Dan had encountered the previous day.

One faced forward, the other faced the side.

The alien facing forward held a plaque in its hands, providing a clear scale which allowed its height to be calculated.

Underneath the anatomical engravings, there was a small linear representation of the same alien solar system seen on the first of Kloster's plaques. As before, *New Kerguelen* was underlined. This time, however, the planet found itself intersected by a crosshairs-like marking similar to the one which had caused so much fear by

intersecting Earth on the second plaque.

New Kerguelen was also touched by a familiar dashed line. But in contrast to the asteroid-panic-causing line which touched the top right of the circle representing Earth at a 45-degree angle on the second plaque, this line touched New Kerguelen's top left.

"I get it," Emma said, relief coursing through her veins.

The panel on the left displayed four spheres, each next to a plaque. Below these spheres was a familiar linear representation of Earth's solar system. Earth, predictably underlined, was again intersected by the crosshairs and touched by the dashed line.

Dan smiled. "Me too. It's showing that they sent the plaques from New Kerguelen to Earth. Obviously everyone already knows that, but the crosshairs thing being on New Kerguelen too shows that it isn't a threat... it's just a mark to show that Earth was their destination. A destination, not a target."

"New Kerguelen's not real, though," Clark said. He wasn't being facetious, just thinking out loud.

"The real aliens live somewhere," Dan shrugged. "New Kerguelen is just what people call the aliens' home planet. It doesn't have to be Gliese 667 Cc and it doesn't have to be somewhere Kloster made up, but it is somewhere."

With his eyes focused on the road, Clark tried to paint a picture from Dan's reaction. "You think it's enough?" he asked. "Will that really calm people down?"

"I think so," Emma answered. "But they've got another plaque up their sleeve if it doesn't."

Dan nodded. "Minimal necessary intervention: they won't tell us any more than they have to. But I don't think they will have to tell us anything else. Remember when the first two plaques came out? Billy Kendrick said a hostile force wouldn't tell us anything about itself, and people said the aliens hadn't told us anything about themselves... not even what they look like. Well, now they have."

"Yeah," Emma agreed. "The dashed lines being at opposite angles really makes it look like they represent a journey, not an

asteroid or an attack or anything else. You could make a serious case for the 280-year timescale being a journey time, which is what a lot of people were already thinking. Besides, context and timing are everything. I'd bet good money that this is enough to convince people there's no threat, but like I said: they've always got the fourth plaque up their sleeves if it's not."

Clark was still unconvinced that the new plaque met the stated goal of appearing decisively peaceful, but Emma had been right on the button when it came to gauging the public's reaction to so many events that he didn't feel too worried. If she and Dan thought it would work, it probably would.

The immediate and hopefully representative reaction on the radio bulletin was positive. "Aside from presenting an incredible insight into the Messengers' physical appearance," the newsreader said, "this new plaque appears to suggest that the "crosshairs" seen on one of the initially discovered plaques merely marked Earth as their intended destination. The implications of this discovery could be extremely far-reaching."

"I still can't get my head around the fact that these real aliens are pretending they sent the two fake plaques," Clark said.

"Walker and Kloster wrote them into a corner," Emma said. "No one can change what's on the first two plaques, so this is the best way out. It's pretty much the only way out."

Media outlets around the world rushed out features and articles on the new plaque as well as the woman who discovered it.

It was odd for Dan to watch on from afar as Martina Brunner fell under a sudden and intense media spotlight, albeit with none of the widespread doubt Dan had faced nor any of the character assassinations from the likes of Richard Walker or Blitz Media. Dan didn't envy Martina Brunner's position as the new media darling; he'd spent more than enough time under that microscope for one lifetime.

As he had for Dan, Billy Kendrick quickly rallied behind Brunner. Despite taking a lot of flak for being the most publicly insistent

“hostility denier”, as some had termed it, Billy resisted the urge to say “I told you so” and instead called on William Godfrey and other world leaders to invest in peaceful space exploration.

Emma noted via her SMMA app that within the last hour, the percentage of Americans who supported an increase in GSC funding had fallen from 88% to 72%. More tellingly, only 9% of new posts on this topic within the same one-hour timeframe had been supportive of an increase. She expected the overall figure to plummet below 50% in no time.

William Godfrey, still in China, was yet to make an official comment. News sources suggested that he was “aware of and encouraged by” the recent developments, and Emma knew this wouldn’t have leaked out if Godfrey didn’t want it to. The fact that even Godfrey seemed swayed by the new plaque was the best news she could have heard.

Emma clicked out of her SMMA app and checked her recent calls. “Woah. My phone is going crazy with people looking for interviews,” she said. “ACN, Blitz, everyone. Do you want to do a sit-down with Maria tomorrow or will I just try to content them with a statement?”

“Why not gather everyone at the drive-in one last time, say something, and that’ll be it,” Clark suggested. “Draw a line under everything.”

“Dan?” Emma asked.

He nodded semi-committally. “If you think it would be for the best.”

“I do. And I’ll be right beside you, like always.”

“You better call Phil,” Clark said. “It’s not an empty lot anymore, so he’ll have to stop customers from parking in front of the screen like he did for the launch.”

Emma called Phil Norris as Clark suggested and asked if he would be on board for “one last hurrah” at the old media outpost.

“When are we talking?” Phil asked.

Emma looked at the GPS to see how far they were from

Birchwood. "Uh, just over an hour."

"I didn't think you meant today! Jeez. I could maybe clear half the lot..."

"As long as it's the screen's half."

"I'll try. Pretty short notice for the press, though. You want me to let ordinary folks in this time to swell the numbers?"

"Good idea," Emma said. She turned to Dan and whispered: "What else do we need?"

"We need Trey," he answered, loudly enough for Phil to hear. "For the projector and everything."

"You got his number?" Phil asked.

"We'll take care of it from here," Emma said. "Thanks."

Dan then proceeded to call Trey personally, apologising for bothering him at home and for making such a big request at such short notice. Trey, as excited by the news from Austria as anyone, said he could set everything up in no time.

An hour or so later, with Dan half-paying attention to the passing scenery just a few miles from Birchwood, Clark took an early turn off the main road.

"Uh, Clark," Emma said, looking up from her phone. "Where are you—"

Emma cut herself off as she realised which narrow road they were now driving along and which farmhouse they were now approaching.

"What the hell are you doing?" Dan asked.

Clark replied flatly: "Taking Rooster home."

STEVENSON FARM
EASTVIEW, COLORADO

Clark knocked three times on Richard Walker's front door while Rooster spun in excited circles.

Richard opened the door. "Well, well, well," he said. He was the only person smiling.

Rooster, seeming to understand that he was being returned, rubbed his nose against Emma's knee. She reached down to pat him on the head. "Good boy. In you go." Rooster briefly brushed against Dan and Clark then ran inside, hopping and barking like a puppy at the park.

"Tell me you're the ones who took the camera recordings," Richard said, his expression turning serious. He focused on Emma having fairly assumed that she was the brains behind their troublemaking operation.

"We are," she said.

"Good. What did it show?"

"A flash. Nothing else."

“So how much do you know?”

“We have your blue box,” Clark said. “The plaques are gone and we’re going to burn the paper, but we saw everything.”

Richard shook his head disdainfully. “I should have guessed Benjamin would spill the beans before he checked out. I knew I should have gone with Raúl. A word to the wise: never trust a coward to do a man’s job.”

“How can you be so cold?” Emma snapped. “Ben defended you to the end, right until your lie drove him to kill himself.”

Richard turned up his nose and shrugged. “Weakness has a way of weeding itself out.”

“You’re disgusting.”

“The word you’re looking for is pragmatic, Ms Ford. This was bigger than Ben. I will give him credit for going to you instead of the press, at least. He had a soft spot for all three of you. But that’s always the problem with people like Ben: too many soft spots.”

No one said anything for a few seconds. Clark didn’t know whether to punch Walker or pity him; Dan didn’t want to display any emotion that might give him the satisfaction of getting under his skin.

“Do you know anything else?” Walker asked, his voice unusually tentative.

“You mean about the hoax coming true?” Dan said. He turned his back to Richard and lowered his collar, pointing to the ever-fading mark on his neck. “About you being abducted? About how it’ll happen again if you try anything disruptive?”

Richard waited for Dan to face him again then looked into his eyes. “Touché, McCarthy. Touché.”

“When did you last see the news?” Emma asked, discerning from the surprise on Richard’s face that he quite possibly didn’t know about the third plaque. “Have you seen what they left in Austria?”

“Who?”

Dan smiled. “You’ll see that in a minute,” he said, very matter-of-factly. “But right now, before we go, I’m going to ask three

questions and you're going to answer them."

"Go on," Richard replied, sporting a patronising grin.

Dan asked his first question: "Are the people who made the sphere and the plaques definitely dead?"

"Yes. Hans saw to that."

"When you were on the craft, how long did it feel like you were gone? Days?"

Richard shook his head. "I know I was gone for four days, but time didn't seem to pass. It was like a dream; not the best dream, but by no means a nightmare. I've certainly been held by worse creatures," he mused, stroking his scar. "So... last question?"

Dan spent a few seconds thinking of the best way to phrase it. "You are by far the biggest piece of shit I've ever seen in my life," he eventually said.

"That's not a question."

Dan turned to walk away.

"McCarthy," Richard barked after him.

Dan looked back. "What?"

"You didn't beat me."

"Whatever you say."

Richard affected a shrug. "A broken clock is right twice a day, but it's still broken."

Before Dan could formulate a reply — "but still right" was on his lips — Richard Walker had already closed his door and gone inside.

"Fuck that guy," Clark said. "He's not worth it."

"Exactly," Emma chimed in. "You didn't luck out and land on the truth by accident, you tracked it down and went after it. He's just pissed because you found it."



As Clark turned the car and sped away from Richard Walker's house for the last time, Dan began to have doubts about what lay ahead at the drive-in.

Dan sat in the back seat, now spacious without Rooster. “Why did everything have to get so complicated?” he thought out loud. “I preferred it when the truth was simple.”

Emma turned to face him, wearing a soothing and patient expression. “Do you remember way back when we first met and you asked me why I always said your truth instead of the truth?”

“You said truth is a complicated thing,” Dan said.

“Right, because it usually is. But now? This truth could hardly be less complicated. You know for a stone-cold cast-iron fact that the message on this new plaque is real.”

“I know, but—”

“But nothing.”

Dan sighed. “I’m not having second thoughts, I’m just worried that I might say the wrong thing.”

“There’s nothing to worry about,” Emma said gently. “I’ll set you up like I always do. You’ve spoken live without a written speech loads of times.”

“Yeah, but I was always telling the truth.”

“Stop the car,” Emma ordered.

The strength of her tone ensured Clark did so as soon as it was safe.

Emma turned to face Dan. “This is the truth. You know that.”

“I know, but I’m going to be thinking so much about what I’m not supposed to say. The hoax, Ben, the real aliens... all of it. I feel like all those thoughts are in my mind, ready to trip me up. It wasn’t like that before; I used to just tell the whole truth as I saw it.”

Clark butted in: “What about the letter? You kept that from everyone because you thought releasing it at the same time as the rest of the files would have distracted from them. This is pretty much the same, just with higher stakes.”

Emma glared at Clark for bringing the stakes into it, knowing that this was the last thing Dan needed to hear. She looked back at Dan. “Let’s try it this way,” she said. “True or false: a woman in Austria just found a plaque with a message engraved on it by actual,

real-life aliens who we just met on an actual, real-life spaceship.”

“True.”

“True or false: the world is going to be a better place than it was before you found the folder.”

Dan hesitated. “True,” he said, more quietly this time.

“Speak up.”

“Is it, though?”

“Of course it is,” Emma insisted. “You were happy when DS-1 was about to launch, weren’t you? Well, now we still have the benefits of all the most powerful countries coming together for a common goal, just without that tiny little existential threat hanging over us.”

“But that threat was what brought everyone together,” Dan said.

“Exactly. So looking back, I guess you could say it served a good purpose. But the GSC isn’t going to vanish just because the immediate threat does. Godfrey will adapt however he can to keep the GSC relevant. And aliens are still real, remember?”

“True,” Dan said.

“And you’re still the one who proved it.”

“True,” he repeated, more firmly.

“You’ve got this.”

Dan nodded.

“I said: you’ve got this.”

“True.”

Emma turned to face the front. “Okay,” she said to Clark. “Drive.”

D plus 56

DRIVE-IN
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

The old drive-in, now referred to by the media as Birchwood Plaza following Phil Norris's successful rebranding of the lot, brimmed with almost as many bodies as it had for the ill-fated DS-1 launch party four long days earlier.

Short notice meant that far fewer national and international news outlets were present than had been then. Nonetheless, Dan saw a Blitz News satellite truck and dozens of smaller vans. As murmurs spread through the lot that he had arrived, Dan looked over to the right-side of the lot where Maria Janzyck and Kyle Young both stood beside an ACN-branded vehicle. Trey worked busily in the back of his Blue Dish News van in the next spot, checking everything was in order with the projector and speakers ahead of Dan's speech.

Low-key wasn't the right word, but this event had a less intense vibe than any of Dan's previous pre-announced appearances. The last two had involved meeting William Godfrey and watching the

launch — neither of which Dan had been overly keen to attend — and all of the pre-Disclosure occasions had been somewhat adversarial at the core as Dan fought first to be taken seriously and then to decisively convince his audience.

This was different.

Dan knew that no one watching today was willing him to fail and also that the magnitude of the new plaque's discovery meant that he wasn't the main news, anyway. Dan had spent so long out of the public eye that his views, though still relevant, were no longer the first that the news networks and their viewers wanted to hear; that responsibility once more fell on the Godfreys and the Slaters of the world.

In place of the many news crews who attended the launch but weren't there today, scores of ordinary citizens congregated in the lot. Dan recognised many of the faces.

Phil Norris unlocked the stair-gate leading to the scaffold stage, which Dan McCarthy and Emma Ford proceeded to ascend one final time. Through sheer force of habit, and despite the relaxed atmosphere, Clark guarded the bottom of the stairs with his arms folded and his eyes on the crowd.

"We've had some requests for a comment," Emma said, "so Dan is going to give one now, while you're all here. But before he does, there are a few things I want to say first."

Emma hadn't shown or told Dan exactly what she was going to say, but he knew it was intended to segue into his own comments and make everything as easy as possible for him. He listened carefully.

"It's been a long road. A lot of you have been right there with us from the start, through the ups and the downs and the twists and the turns. We thank you for that. XPR sent me here five months ago to make the most out of Dan's story before it unravelled, but that's not what happened."

Clark turned briefly to view the screen, spotting Trey's Blue Dish Network logo in the corner.

“And I’ll tell you why that didn’t happen,” Emma continued. “Dan’s story didn’t unravel because it wasn’t a story: it was the truth. Everything Dan ever said was the truth. He didn’t choose to find the Kerguelen folder, but he chose to leak it. And that choice — that action — is ultimately what led us here. We all know that a plaque was just discovered in Austria containing a message of peace from an intelligent alien race. Without Dan’s decision to leak the folder and without the context it provided, that plaque would mean nothing.”

Emma tapped her foot twice, signalling that she was almost finished.

“In five months, the road to this moment has taken us through more secrets and more lies than I’ve seen in an almost a decade of PR work. But as far as the IDA leak goes, there’s only one truth that counts: the reason we know that aliens exist, and the reason we know they are peaceful, is standing right beside me. The reason is Dan McCarthy.”

Through everything that had happened since the day he found the folder, Dan had never cried in public. The rapturous cheers and applause that followed Emma’s words pushed his resolve to new limits and ultimately got the better of him.

“I don’t know what to say,” he said, clearing his eyes as furtively as the big screen close-up of his face allowed.

This show of emotion drew another loud response from the crowd. Dan saw Mr Byrd and Phil Norris beside Trey and the ACN crew, all of them cheering and clapping along with everyone else.

“I just want to say thanks to Martina Brunner for doing the right thing by handing the plaque in right away and I want to thank the Austrian authorities for doing the right thing by making it public. I know a lot of people have said that I should have gone to the police in the first place, too, but I did what I did and I wouldn’t change it; things might have turned out differently if I hadn’t gone to the library that day and put the files online, so I don’t regret it.”

Amid lighter applause, one man shouted “Woooo!” loudly

enough to provoke laughter from the rest of the crowd.

“This guy gets it,” Dan said, smiling and drawing further laughter. “But seriously: I hope Martina can go back to her normal life, and I hope I can get somewhere close to mine. I hope the last few months have shown us that we don’t need to spend billions of dollars every day on war and I hope the GSC can adapt to make the best of the cooperation it started. It took what we thought was a threat to bring the world together, and it would be a damn shame to throw away the progress we’ve made just because that threat is no more.”

This was Dan’s final written line, so Emma took over. “That’s the end of Dan’s comment,” she said, “and that’s the last comment he plans to give. Thank you all for coming out. We appreciate the support from everyone who’s been with us since the beginning.”

“I want to thank some people, too,” Dan blurted out. Emma’s expression told him to go for it. “First of all, Maria and Trey were both great with respecting my privacy on the first night and they both helped with other stuff later on. Plus Kyle, who was there with Trey to document the raid when I was in Italy; that was pretty ballsy.”

Kyle Young smiled and raised his hand to welcome the recognition.

“Then there’s Phil Norris who has bent over backwards to help us with everything here, and Mr Byrd for everything he’s ever done. Timo and Billy, too. I could never thank Timo enough for everything he did for us in Italy, and Billy was the first guy to stick up for me. We might have disagreed on a few things along the way, but we were always on the same side of history.”

The crowd applauded the mention of Billy, who many respected for the way he had carried himself even when the public mood turned against him.

“And I better not leave out this big idiot,” Dan said, leaning over the stage and pointing to Clark as the camera followed. “He knows how much he’s helped but he never looks for thanks; he just does the

right thing, every time. And finally, last but not least: Emma Ford. I've only had to deal with the things Emma told me about, and I wouldn't even know where to begin telling you how much she's done for not just me but all of us. She can stand there and tell you that I'm the reason the world knows the truth, but I could say the same about her. She kept me afloat when the water was rough, and I wouldn't be with you all right now if she hadn't been there for me."

The crowd applauded, but less enthusiastically than before given the sober nature of Dan's acknowledgement.

Emma leaned towards his ear and whispered a suggested sign-off to end on a high note.

"From truth comes hope," Dan said, relaying Emma's words. "So here's to the truth."

Cheers and applause resonated throughout the lot as Emma and Dan made their way down the stairs towards Clark.

"It's over," Emma whispered to Dan. "You did it."

As Dan looked out at the sea of cameras and smiling faces, he felt a kind of peace he hadn't known in far too long.

It's over, he thought. I did it.

SUNDAY

McCARTHY RESIDENCE
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

“You’re going to have to help me with this part at least,” Emma said, looking impatiently at Dan as he sat on the couch watching the news. “I can’t reach high enough to pin the banner up.”

“I just want to see this one last thing. It’s Alessandro and everyone else from the observatory in Italy.”

Emma placed the “WELCOME HOME!” banner on the floor and took a seat next to Dan; Clark and Henry weren’t due home for another ten minutes or so, and she was far more interested in seeing these familiar Italian faces than the tenth repeat of Godfrey’s landmark speech that had just finished airing.

William Godfrey, by any sensible measure the most powerful man in the world, had three hours earlier addressed a livelier-than-normal room of reporters in China. Tellingly, he used the term “post-hostility world” five times in as many minutes.

The GSC’s Chairman began his speech by confirming the provenance and authenticity of the Austrian plaque, which had

already been subject to further extensive testing and material analysis under the watchful eye of British and French officials.

“While I take my responsibilities as head of this Commission extremely seriously,” Godfrey said, “my responsibility to be candid and open is just as important. For that reason, and without regret, I stand here before you to admit that the decisions we made in New York were made with incomplete information. To be blunt: there was not and is not an immediate threat to our planetary security. And I understand perfectly the sentiment that now, in this post-hostility world, the kind of Shield we came together to develop no longer seems necessary.”

Emma hadn’t expected quite this level of candour from Godfrey, but from a PR perspective she appreciated both the timing and the strength of his speech. Like all effective politicians, Godfrey saw that the tide had turned in an instant and wasted no time in turning with it.

He continued: “But to echo the words of my personal friend Dan McCarthy — words he shared just a few steps from the spot where I shook his hand and thanked him for his selflessness several months ago — it would indeed be a crying shame to throw away the progress we’ve made since then. That said, it’s abundantly clear that much has changed with the Austrian discovery. Our priorities must change, too, and change they will.”

Godfrey went on to announce that the DS-2 project would continue, albeit with a more narrow focus on asteroid interception and the “increasingly serious issue” of satellite-threatening space junk. He also touched on the importance of being able to decisively protect vital satellites from radical non-state actors, an ability previously hamstrung by treaty-based restrictions which were no longer an issue now that the project was collaborative.

As Emma had directly predicted, and much to Dan’s delight, Godfrey then announced that the GSC would be proactive in adapting to the Austrian discovery. Step one was a change of name: the GSC acronym remained, but Shield gave way to Space.

“As Chairman of the newly rechristened Global Space Commission,” Godfrey beamed, “it is my great honour to announce a groundbreaking agreement between the GSC’s member nations which commits us all to the development and launch of Research Station One, humanity’s first truly international space station. Details will be revealed next week regarding RS-1, a new space station for the new space generation.”

Dan had no doubt that Godfrey and his colleagues were motivated by a pathological drive to retain and entrench their own positions of power rather than any real commitment to scientific progress, but he didn’t let that bother him; investment in peaceful and collaborative space science was good news whatever the motive of those who announced it.

President Slater spoke soon after Godfrey, lauding the number of American jobs that would be created to meet construction needs for the “gargantuan structure” that was RS-1. Slater vowed that the United States would remain at the forefront of space exploration and called on the nation’s students to rise to the occasion and set themselves up for a rewarding career in what was sure to become the boom industry of the coming years and decades.

Clark had heard both speeches on the radio on his way to bring Henry home from the hospital. He called Dan immediately after Slater’s, relieved and ecstatic that “everyone bought it.”

“That’s because it’s real,” Dan had told him. “Those aliens are real, they wrote that message, and they left that plaque in Austria. No one bought anything, because there’s nothing to buy.”

Clark, surprised by Dan’s reaction, promised not to say anything else about it. “I’m just glad everything worked out,” he’d said. “That’s all.”

Dan now sat with Emma on the couch listening to his friends from Timo Fiore’s Italian observatory as they tried to put into words how it felt to know not only that the Messengers were peaceful but also what they looked like.

A brief replay aired of the observatory’s staff jumping around

with Dan and carrying him on their shoulders in celebration of the moment the Kerguelen sphere was first lifted from the ocean in Argentina.

Seeing those scenes made Dan feel more emotions than he had the words to describe.

“Do you think that feels like it was more or less than four and a half months ago?” Emma asked him.

“Try four and a half lifetimes,” he replied.

Emma stood up to get back to work on decorating the house for Henry’s imminent arrival. Dan and Clark had both told her over and over again that their dad didn’t like anyone making a fuss over him, but Emma said that a few balloons and banners to welcome him home after spending so long in hospital was just common decency. “It’s not like we’re throwing him a surprise birthday party,” she said.

Dan got up to help her with the final banners.

“Shit,” Emma said, turning towards the front of the house as she heard a car slowing up outside. “Hurry up, that’s them!”



Dan finished pinning up the last banner. “We’re not telling him,” he said, realising only now that he’d forgotten to share this crucial point with Emma. “Me and Clark both decided it wouldn’t be fair to expect him to keep it quiet. It’s different for us, with everything we know and everything we’ve been through, because we went through it bit by bit. Could you imagine someone dropping everything on you at once? Walker, Ben, the cornfield, the forest... everything. It wouldn’t be fair. Besides, he would literally kill Richard Walker. We’re not telling him.”

Emma hadn’t even considered the dilemma facing Dan and Clark over whether to tell Henry about everything that had happened recently, but she both respected and fully supported their decision. “Okay,” she said, and nothing more.

The next voice either of them heard was Clark's: "I said no balloons!"

Emma laughed at how annoyed he sounded as he put Henry's bags in the living room. "They're not for you," she said. Clark pretended to rip the small banner from the front door when he walked past on his way back to the car to help Henry into his wheelchair.

Dan watched quietly. It would take some getting used to.

"There he is," Henry boomed as Clark pushed him up the recently installed ramp. "Dan McCarthy, hero of Birchwood! You know, it's funny. They told me the town put up a sign about one of my sons..."

"That's joke's almost as old as you," Dan said.

Emma expected them all to hug or something. They didn't. Henry turned to address her.

"Welcome home," she said, preempting his greeting. "It's nice to finally meet you."

"And you," Henry said warmly. "Thanks for keeping my idiot boys alive all this time. God knows it's hard enough at the best of times! So I hear you bought old Mrs Naylor's place next door?"

Emma nodded. "I like it here."

"Hard not to, huh? Hell of a lot of change since I left, though. The drive-in, the sign, the gate... honestly, you fall asleep for a few months and the world goes crazy!"

The doorbell rang. Clark opened the door to reveal Mr Byrd and Phil Norris.

"Phil! Walter!" Henry said. "Get your sorry asses in here."

Walter, Emma thought, realising only then that in five months and countless meetings she'd never heard or asked Mr Byrd's first name.

"What the hell have you done to the drive-in?" Henry fired at Phil.

"Turned it into money," Phil said. "With a little help from these three."

"Is the Kerguelen folder still locked in your vault?" Dan butted in.

"Yup. Safest place in the world," Phil said. "You want it out?"

Dan nodded. "Take it for New Ker-grillin'. Frame it and hang it on the wall or put it in a display case or something. You'll make even more money."

"For real?"

"The leak's over and the truth's out," Dan said. "It wouldn't be the end of the world if something happened to the folder now so if people want to see it and you can get a little something out of it, you might as well."

Henry cleared his throat. "You can keep Dan's folder on one condition," he said to Phil.

"What's that?"

"I want one of those free-meal cards like the one you gave Clark."

"So you're literally using me as a meal ticket?" Dan laughed.

Henry laughed, too. "I knew I'd find a use for you one of these days."

Phil pretended to think it over. "Deal," he sighed, extending his hand to Henry.

Walter Byrd's phone then rang in his pocket. He answered it, spoke for only a few seconds to confirm Henry was home, and put it away. "Terry's on his way," he announced. "Some of the other guys will be here a little later."

"We'll leave you to it," Clark said, well aware that Henry's colleagues from the fire department and probably half of the local police force would be there to toast his return home well into the night.

Emma followed Clark to the door. Dan, often slower to pick up on such social cues, didn't realise he was also leaving until Clark called him.

"Emma," Henry yelled. "Before you go."

She stopped at the door. "Yeah?"

“Thanks for the balloons.”

“That’s okay,” Emma said, gloatingly prodding Clark in the back as they walked through the front door.

HAWKER'S HILL
BIRCHWOOD, COLORADO

"I think I'm going to try to be a cop," Clark announced, breaking a long silence.

"Yeah?" Dan said, looking away from the stars and towards the bench Clark was lying on.

"Yeah. I probably couldn't go back to the security work in Iraq even if I wanted to, but I'm pretty good at that kind of stuff."

"What about your breathing thing?" Emma asked. "Is that not why you had to leave the army?"

Clark shrugged. "That was three years ago. I don't think the health requirements for police work are anywhere near as strict, anyway. It's not like I'm not fit."

"You just want free donuts to go with your free meals," Dan said.

Clark laughed and sat up, quickly regretting the way he'd been lying as a pain ran up his left shoulder. "Speaking of meals... I'm going to head down to the grill. You two coming?"

"I'm not hungry," Emma said.

"Me neither," Dan added.

"All the more for me. Uh, Emma, can I get the key for your place? I want to give my dad a chance to catch up with all the guys."

Emma took the key out of her pocket and tossed it to Clark. "I don't think I locked it, though. See: can't do that in New York."

"I don't think you want to start a game of things you can do in New York versus things you can do in Birchwood," Clark grinned, setting off down the hill towards the red neon letters of New Kergrillin' Bar & Grill.

Hawker's Hill fell silent once more as Clark's footsteps faded into the distance.

"I think Clark would do okay as a cop," Dan thought out loud after a while. He'd spent a few minutes remembering some of the times Clark had gotten into trouble as a kid — many of them starting on Hawker's Hill with a dare to roll something down or shine his laser pointer at certain targets — but Clark grew out of all that pretty quickly and proved everyone wrong by cutting it in the army until his lungs let him down. "He's good at protecting people."

"Have you thought much about what you're going to do now?" Emma asked.

"Not really."

"I reckon you could maybe go back to the bookstore in another six months or so when no one is talking about you anymore. Everyone will still know who you are, but it won't be insane like it has been."

Dan shook his head. "Nah. I liked working for Mr Wolf, but there were never enough shifts to go round and the other staff need the money. I've been thinking about ghostwriting some new articles." Dan's tone rose as he expanded on this idea. "I used to have to try to pick subjects that would sell to decent markets, but now I'll be able to pick what's interesting. What do you think?"

"Why ghostwrite?"

"I'd want it to stand on its own," Dan said. "Because right now I could probably smash my face against a keyboard and sell whatever

it spelled as long as my name was at the top.”

“Probably,” Emma laughed.

“So what about you? What are you going to do?”

Emma thought for a few seconds. “Maybe manage some campaigns for local politicians. Jack always said I was cut out for that.”

“I don’t know if I could see you doing that stuff.”

“Well, unless you still need an agent...?”

“I don’t know if I could see you doing that stuff,” Dan repeated, using exactly the same tone to mockingly pretend he hadn’t heard the reply.

“Seriously, though,” Emma said, sitting up. “I could get you work as the face of a recruitment campaign for young scientists and engineers. It wouldn’t pay like the ads did, but it would still pay. What do you think?”

“I would do that,” he said. “I’d do that for free.”

“But let’s say they offered us more than nothing...”

“Keep it.”

Emma lay back down on the dry grass. “I knew I was right to like you, Dan McCarthy.”

Dan groaned. “I remember when you used to always call me that. I’d open the door and you’d be like “Hello, Dan McCarthy!” I mean, even I know that’s weird.”

“The info XPR gave me before I arrived here said you were an egotist,” Emma explained while laughing at the memories, “and an egotist always likes hearing his own name.”

“Why would they think I was an ego—”

“Shooting star!” Emma yelled.

“Where?”

“Another one! It’s like a show!”

Dan followed Emma’s finger and focused on an area of the sky to the northeast. “Yeah!” he said excitedly. “I saw one! There must be a meteor shower tonight.”

“You really need to hurry up and buy a telescope,” Emma said.

“First thing tomorrow. Don’t let me forget.”

“Deal.”

As the heavens danced overhead, Emma Ford and Dan McCarthy lay quietly together for the rest of the show; all by themselves, but far from alone.

Author's Notes

Thanks for reading Not Alone!

I enjoyed writing this book more than anything else I've ever written, and I hope that came across. Not Alone has been a huge part of my life for a long time during the writing process and it's great to finally see it out there in the world finding an audience.

If you enjoyed reading Not Alone and could spare a few moments to leave a review on Amazon, that would be incredibly helpful. Reviews are a great way for readers to find books that might interest them and every kind word really does help. Thanks!

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