

# THE LESS THAN DIVINE INVASION

Peter Wood

**Pete Wood is an attorney who lives in Raleigh, North Carolina, with his very patient wife. In his latest story for *Asimov's*, he revisits his old stomping grounds, the barbecue-loving and hamburger-loving town of Kinston, North Carolina, last seen in "Never the Twain Shall Meet" (May/June 2019). Pete and fellow *Asimov's* author Jonathan Sherwood recently edited *The Odin Chronicles*, a collection of thirty related short stories about the distant mining planet of Odin III, for Rampant Loon Press. More information about the book is at <https://www.theodinchronicles.com>. The author tells us, "Kinston is a great place to live, but it's not as ordinary as you might think. If you look closely, you may discover that something unusual is going on."**

## The Invader Rethinks His Business Plan

"Lance Smith" wanted to shoot the annoying Earthling. He'd come hundreds of light-years for this?

Some invasion.

"Hey buddy," said a man in a gray wool coat—one of the Civil War reenactors who'd been camped out in the field next to the gas station since yesterday. "You got anything to eat?"

Lance had been working undercover in Kinston, North Carolina, for weeks as part of the Galactic Empire's invasion of Earth. A foolish plan. That's what happened when you let politicians instead of the military run an invasion. You got soldiers working in gas stations.

"Nothing to eat. Go away," Lance said. He focused on the rusty parts to the gas pump he had laid out on the rickety picnic table at his new business.

He just wanted to start ionizing people—like this blabbermouth in the make-believe uniform who wouldn't let him work.

Lance had to contend with several hundred “soldiers” next door in an overgrown cow pasture. They pretended to be combatants in some pathetic military clash that had ended almost two centuries earlier.

The stranger took off his oversized hat and fanned himself. Long black greasy hair cascaded down. He squeezed into the tiny bit of shade cast by the dumpster. “You know the *CSS Neuse* sank in the Neuse River not too far from here. One of the first ironclads.”

All Lance knew was the Neuse River made his place smell of rotting fish.

“I don't care about your cowardly ship,” Lance muttered. He brushed a mosquito away from his face, but the insect just returned a second later.

“If we'd salvaged the *Neuse*, we'd have won the war.” The man leaned back and put the hat over his face. “But it was 1865. Lincoln . . .”

The fake soldier droned on about the war his side had lost.

Lance looked up from scouring rust from the pump parts. “You're celebrating a war you lost?”

“Yep.”

“Why don't you arm yourselves again and win this time?”

“I'm only a corporal, man.”

Lance sighed. “Why are you here?”

“Why are you here, man?”

“I don't know. It's not my idea.”

The soldier pointed to an old grill beside the office. “You ever fire that puppy up? I'd kill for a burger, man.”

“Would you pay for it?” Lance asked. Anything was better than fixing old gas pumps.

“You bet.” The man pulled an enormous cracker about the size of his hand from his jacket and rapped it against the table. “All they give us is this hardtack. Probably left over from the real Civil War.”

Lance took off his dusty gloves and inspected the grill. It needed propane, but otherwise seemed fine.

He drove out to the Neuse Grocery and picked up a replacement tank and hamburger meat and buns and condiments. He made half a dozen trips to the grocery store over the next two days before the reenactors finally broke camp and left him alone.

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### The Government Agent Gets a Cup of Coffee

“Wish you had called us earlier about the aliens,” special agent Maggie Yarborough said to the Sheriff of Howey in the Hills, Florida.

“*Called you sooner?* We thought we were dealing with meth dealers,” the sheriff said. He reached into a crumpled paper bag and tossed another handful of boiled peanuts into his mouth.

Maggie had been with the Alien Task Force for eleven years. Eisenhower authorized the Task Force after the aliens crash-landed in New Mexico. Area 51 was the worst kept government secret outside of Watergate.

She wore an EPA jacket—a cover that nobody was buying—and walked around a grungy bait and tackle shop in the backwoods of North Florida. Slim Jim Beef Jerky by the register. Uneven wooden floorboards. Mesh cages of hopping-mad crickets. Leaky ice chests full of worms. The place reeked of fish.

Onlookers pressed faces against the shop's windows. They probably expected Maggie to lead cuffed and shackled little green men out the front door any minute.

Too bad any extraterrestrials had gotten away in the dead of night. Or maybe that was a good thing. A lot of federal trackers wanted all aliens dead.

“Did you get any cell phone footage?” Maggie asked.

“No time for photos.” The sheriff blinked. “There was a bad storm, remember? Came out of nowhere. Gone in ten minutes. Winds and rain like a hurricane. Knocked the power and internet and cell phones out for half a day.”

She picked up a Styrofoam cup of cold coffee. Maggie took a sip and winced. The greasy spoon down the street wasn’t even trying. It wasn’t even up to the standards of filling station late afternoon dregs.

“Sheriff, if you suspect you have aliens in your county again, don’t try to capture them yourself,” she said.

The sheriff stared at her for a second before speaking. “Look, Agent Yarborough, I’m *real sorry* I didn’t know how to handle a couple of aliens. I got routed around for hours before I finally got your supervisor. I gave you plenty of proof. You got the ray gun.”

Maggie held out the sleek red weapon the sheriff had found hidden behind the counter. It looked like something out of *Flash Gordon*. She zipped it inside a plastic bag and slipped it into an inner pocket of her jacket.

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### The Invader Updates His Boss

Lance waited to give his official report in the kitchen of the rotting doublewide trailer. His commander and the lieutenant pretended to be husband and wife. Casas Del Sol Acres had barely fit the meager budget of the Galactic Empire’s invasion force.

Lance just wanted to go back to his singlewide. Shut the door, have a drink, and be alone.

The Kinston Team—one of several hundred the politicians had working undercover across the globe—should be preparing for war. Instead, the lieutenant argued with the property manager on the phone about the broken refrigerator.

After five minutes of excuses from their landlord the lieutenant slammed the phone down. “They won’t fix it.”

The commander kept piddling away at his paperwork at their wobbly kitchen table. He signed his name to yet another hourly log and stuck it inside the file box. Most commanders got by just fine with only daily logs, but his commander loved busy work.

On a good day the commander and his lieutenant barely spoke to each other. It didn’t help that they belonged to different political parties.

The lieutenant muttered something under her breath and marched into the living room and turned on the television. The voices of a man and a woman arguing about child support to a pretend television judge blared.

The commander placed the container, overflowing with forms, in the center of the kitchen floor. The shielded mother ship was ready to teleport.

Lance sighed. They had a whole planet, ripe for the picking, and they were dealing with red tape and broken appliances. He hated bureaucrats.

The box shimmered, became translucent, and vanished.

The teleporter had taken out another linoleum tile along with the file box. The team would have a tough time explaining to the landlord how they’d damaged the floor.

Lance cleared his throat. “Sir, my report?” He handed the commander a single sheet of paper.

“Thank you, soldier. We’re going to need all the intelligence we can gather if we want to avoid another Florida situation.”

Lance didn’t think much of the cowards in Florida. The team had fled and needed the mother ship to generate a storm for cover.

"The Florida spies should have vaporized the town." Lance said. "That would have sent a message."

The commander read Lance's report aloud. "*Gas pumps. Office. Various supplies. Underground tanks. Number unknown.*" He added the report to a neat stack and gave Lance a disapproving shake of the head "You must do better than this."

Lance knew one thing. If he volunteered that he'd started selling hamburgers instead of gasoline, he'd be filling out forms all night.

"The report is as detailed as needed," Lance said. He preferred the record keeping style of career military. Burn down villages. Enslave the population. No need to inventory if you destroy the inventory.

Of course, the military did not run the mission. Politicians called the shots. Lance's commander had only been in the Armada six months, but he had friends in government.

The commander pulled a fresh batch of forms across the table and started the process anew. "Just give the hourly inventory logs a chance. You might enjoy it."

Then the fool started to whistle.

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### The Government Agent Visits South Georgia

The kitchen of the shack in Okefenokee City, Georgia, leaned to one side and smelled of burnt ground beef. Maggie wondered how the entire building hadn't sunk into the swamp by now.

She had spent two days going over the rat-infested steak house the three "aliens" had been renovating on the outskirts of town. She'd found nothing. No ray guns. No alien ecto-plasma.

The sheriff and two deputies had stormed the shack four days before and found it empty. Just a warm stove, half-finished plates of hamburger helper and canned spinach, and still-cold bottles of Coors Lite. No people. Very *Mary Celeste*.

Maggie stared at the stained linoleum. Somebody had sliced off pieces of the floor at precise angles.

Even odder still, in the cramped galley kitchen someone had pushed the furniture to the edge of the room. This left an open area a little less than a square yard in a kitchen perhaps eight by ten. Little shards of shaved cardboard off to the side of the vacant spot.

A cleared area big enough for three people to stand stiff at attention.

She got down on her hands and knees and ran her fingers along the edges. Polished billiard ball smooth. The faint scent of burnt ozone.

Maggie pulled the field spectrometer from her knapsack. She moved it along the perimeter of the open area.

Bingo.

The aliens had a matter teleporter.

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### The Invader Watches a Movie

Lance sat in the third row of the movie theater the commander and the lieutenant had been renovating for two months. It had taken them a couple of weeks just to haul out all the water-stained boxes and furniture and fumigate the place. The rats and cockroaches seemed to have finally given up.

He watched *The Thing*. An over-seven-foot-tall naked non-Terran castaway, stranded on the strange and hostile world of Earth, lurched down the hallway of the arctic military research station. The creature had plenty of reason to be angry. Not the least of which was the decision of the Earthlings not to give him a coat in the frigid winter weather.

A soldier in a heavy parka flipped a switch, trapping the Thing in a high-voltage

crossfire. The poor creature writhed in agony as electricity shot into him from all sides.

Lance really wanted to be back at the gas station. At the very least he'd be alone.

The commander demanded a test audience before they opened the theater to paying customers in a few days for the big science fiction film festival.

Over the coming months the commander planned to show the cache of films they had found in the basement of the theater. They couldn't afford to rent any or even to upgrade the antique projectors to digital.

Lance reached into his popcorn bucket, but it was empty. He slurped the last drops of soda.

The Earthlings outnumbered the Thing billions to one and somehow felt threatened by him. How paranoid could one planet be?

He got up.

The lieutenant slumped in the row behind him with a glazed look, the sort of hopeless expression Lance had only seen at committee meetings and prisoner of war camps.

He marched into the lobby, ignoring the lieutenant. He couldn't save both of them.

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### The Attorney Gets a Burger

Caroline Taggart checked out the sign for Out-of-Town Hamburgers.

*Hamburgers. Fresh Grilled. \$2. Combo. Two Burgers, Chips and Soda. \$5. All the fixings. No refunds.*

She hadn't eaten since she'd grabbed that slice of cold pizza from the fridge on the way to court this morning. She had a real estate closing in an hour, and Lance Smith's station seemed like a good quick option for lunch. The courthouse crowd had been talking about this place for a couple of weeks.

She hadn't seen Lance since he and that weird sister and brother-in-law had been in her office months ago to buy the theater and sign the gas station lease. The only one of the three transplants from New York who had stuck in her mind had been Lance. She couldn't even remember the names of the other two.

After five minutes Lance emerged. He radiated self-confidence and not the veneer of bravado projected by salesmen like her husband, Sonny. He looked like he worked out. Unlike her husband, this man probably didn't care what anyone thought of him. Sonny only talked about two things. NASCAR and the latest sales numbers at the car lot.

Lance held a plastic clipboard with a blue pen attached by a chain. The sort service station attendants used thirty years earlier when processing credit cards.

"What's the clipboard for?" she asked.

"My brother-in-law *loves* paperwork," Lance said. "Do you want a burger or not? I'm busy."

She ordered a combo.

Lance opened the grill. He put slices of pepper jack on two sizzling hamburgers. A minute later he placed them on lightly toasted buns. He handed Caroline her order on a paper plate.

"Fixings are inside. You get your own."

He made a few notations on the clipboard.

As she opened the office door a jeep—Confederate flag fluttering on the radio antenna—weaved into the parking lot. A twenty-something with mirrored sunglasses stepped out. He had a buzz cut. His T-shirt said, "The South Shall Rise Again!"

Tommy Buck. Unemployed. Arrogant. Pain in the ass. Kinston resident for life. Still lived in his parents' basement.

Inside the office an impressive array of toppings awaited her on a rusty metal desk beneath a 1989 Valvoline calendar. Four kinds of pickles, coleslaw, sauerkraut,

grilled onions, and a dozen different condiments. Lance couldn't have gotten all of this from the Neuse Grocery. You were lucky if they had Gulden's.

She heard raised voices. Outside the window Tommy yelled something about the food tasting like shit.

She opened the door.

Tommy sprawled on the ground a few feet from his jeep. He looked scared. "He shot me, man! Some kind of ray gun!"

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### **The Invader Catches Up on the News**

Lance sat alone in his singlewide and watched the news feed from his home world. Several "experts" debated what happened in Kinston.

The Empire news called the skirmish at the hamburger stand the Kinston Massacre. Empire media talked about nothing else. With the galactic election only days away it became the default campaign issue.

Nobody seemed to care that the customer had been really annoying. It wasn't like Lance had vaporized the man. He had just stunned the Earthling a little.

He turned up the volume a little and listened.

*"The Kinston Massacre can only be understood as the sad inevitable result of forcing a career soldier to work undercover in a Galactic Party business," the member of the Unity Party said. "Galactics should sell sausages. Warriors should fight battles. A—"*

*The Galactic Party representative interrupted. "The Warrior had an ionizer undoubtedly provided by the Unity—"*

*"The savage Earthlings ambushed him without provocation. The Warrior had to defend himself," the Unity representative shouted.*

*At the bottom of the holo image, the news feed scrolled. "SPECIAL REPORT!! Investigation continues into Kinston Massacre. High Council Denies Casualty Numbers. SPECIAL REPORT!"*

Lance shut off the holo feed. As usual, the so-called analysis had degenerated into a shouting match. He took a sip of his cold Great Dismal Swamp IPA, the only decent microbrew he'd found so far on this planet. He'd have to spare their brewery when the Empire leveled the place.

A zapping sound came from the kitchen. A teleportation.

The secret warrior contingent on the mother ship must have grown tired of the stagnation in the invasion, too. Lance was not the only real soldier who hated politics.

He read the dispatch. Things were moving along steadily. The warrior plan made sense. The High Council would have to endorse it, no matter who won the election.

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### **The Government Agent Talks to a Prisoner**

Maggie opened a folder and pulled out an eight by ten glossy of the ray gun from Howey in the Hills. She showed it to Tommy Buck in the Kinston jail. "Does this look familiar?"

Tommy blinked. "Yeah. He shot me with that."

"Tommy," Maggie said. "Think very carefully. Is there anything else unusual about the man who sold the hamburgers?"

For the next ten minutes all Tommy wanted to talk about was how Lance Smith couldn't cook.

Maggie would have shot the annoying brat, too.

She knew they were getting close to finding the first aliens in generations. Another ray gun. Proof of matter transmission. The next logical step was to find an alive and kicking space man.

She wanted to see an extraterrestrial in person. God knew she did. But part of her

hoped she never met one. She wasn't scared. She always figured that if little green men wanted to hurt anyone they'd have done so by now.

Maggie prayed things had gotten better since that UFO crashed in New Mexico.

She'd seen the operating rooms in Area 51 where the government tortured and dissected every single survivor of the crashed flying saucer.

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### **The Government Agent Skips the Warrant**

Maggie had no trouble picking the lock to Lance Smith's singlewide. Mobile home locks were a formality. A good swift kick would have worked just as easily. She wasn't worried about neighbors calling the police. Nobody paid much attention to the other homes in slums like Casas Del Sol.

The living room was about as uninteresting as a hotel room on the interstate. A television on a milk crate. A closed laptop. No paintings or decorations. Exactly one lawn chair. A stack of dog-eared *Field and Streams* and *Bulletins of the Atomic Scientist*. She picked up a *Bulletin*. Those scientists sure were a pessimistic lot. It seemed like the doomsday clock on the cover was always near midnight, no matter what was going on in the world. Considering the events of the last year, maybe they were right.

Maggie tripped on a rut in the kitchen floor. She caught herself against the counter.

The kitchen reeked of sautéed onions and made her eyes sting. All manner of meats and sausages crammed the fridge. Four kinds of onion. A jug of expired milk. A six pack of Great Dismal Swamp IPA.

Then it hit her. She'd missed something. Maggie got down on her hands and knees.

Okefenokee City.

She ran her fingers along the linoleum. Like the shack in the swamp in Georgia, the floor had divots and holes and bits of missing tile.

She opened her backpack and took out the field spectrometer. The same readings as Georgia.

Another matter teleporter.

She grabbed her backpack and ran out to her car before the alien returned.

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### **The Invader Gets a Message**

Lance picked up the paper the plotters on the mother ship had just teleported to his kitchen. Thank the Creator. The real soldiers had finally sent the orders that would salvage his most miserable assignment ever.

They had to move quickly before the upcoming election. No telling what a new High Council might do.

The career warriors planned their operation for Election Night. The politicians would be too caught up in the voting returns to notice the moves of real warriors.

Lance ran down their list.

Enslavement of locals.

Destruction of cities.

Everything one would expect in a proper invasion.

And last, his role.

No! He couldn't do that. That would just be ridiculous.

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### **The Attorney Goes Out With Her Husband**

Caroline wasn't sure what was more surprising. That the old theater wasn't empty on a Saturday night for the first time in twenty years, or that her husband actually wanted to get out of the house for something besides drinking or closing the deal on a car sale.

She had extended the halfhearted invitation to Sonny as she was about to walk out the door. She hadn't expected him to join her. She just wanted to get credit for asking—not that those credits were worth anything. She couldn't trade them in like Green Stamps.

Sonny leaned back in the duct-taped theater seat. "When's this thing gonna get good?" He tossed some popcorn in his mouth. Mustard-yellow theater butter oozed down his unshaven triple chin.

"Just try to enjoy it," Caroline said. *Tarantula* wasn't going to have any CGI or big explosions or stunts. Just bad 1950s special effects of a monster spider run amuck.

The movies for the science fiction film festival seemed oddly appropriate for her town. Kinston regarded all visitors as invaders. A lot of people—like Sonny—never wanted the town to evolve. Just like classic fifties drive-in movies where monsters and aliens symbolized change in the worst way—the atomic bomb, the Russians, or Integration. Kill the monster and things returned to normal. They always crammed the genie back in the bottle somehow.

He scrolled down his mobile phone, checking his fantasy NASCAR team. "Let me know when something interesting happens."

She could dump the bucket of popcorn on his head and dance out of the theater and check into a hotel. *That* would be interesting. And it sure would beat another pointless argument about their relationship. She'd almost walked out a dozen times.

The doors flung open, and the lights turned on. The movie kept playing.

"People of Kinston," Lance Smith proclaimed. "You are now the slaves of the Galactic Empire. There are certain responsibilities, but also a path to citizenship if you . . ."

If he expected a reaction from the audience, he was disappointed.

He stood in a silver uniform with an oversized maroon hat that would have looked awkward on even the most over-the-top drum major. A red crest of stars and tiny planets on his chest. In his right hand he held a piece of paper. In his other hand he brandished some sort of ray gun. He might have been a stock character in a really bad science fiction movie.

Lance's brother-in-law just sat there. He looked very confused.

Caroline couldn't even remember his name. He was pretty uninteresting. Everybody just called him the guy who runs the theater.

The woman from the concessions stand nudged him hard.

The theater owner stood up. "Um, Lance, what are you doing?"

"Warriors are tired of politics," Lance said. He cleared his throat and addressed the audience again. "The path to citizenship is a fruitful, and . . ."

The theater owner gave the concessions lady a deer in the headlights look like "What more do you want me to do?" He did not sit down.

Lance was no public speaker. Why had he volunteered to play the bad guy in this miserable little skit?

"People of Kinston. Watch the screen. Keep watching the screen," Lance continued. "Meet your new leader." He held up his arm and pressed his wrist.

Nothing happened. The giant spider continued to wobble across the screen as teenagers screamed in the small town the mutant arachnid ravaged.

Lance and his Halloween discount rack attire were like something out of the improv show from Hell. As if someone had shouted out three unrelated terms and Lance had to make something up.

Insurance salesman! Afraid of public speaking! Shows up at the wrong place, thinking it's a costume party!

Scene!

"This sucks, man," Sonny said.

"Shut up," Caroline whispered.



Lance spoke into his wrist microphone. “Nobody panic. We’ll get to the bottom of this very—”

His microphone went out.

“That’s it. I am—” Lance stormed out of the theater into the lobby.

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### The Invader Wished He Hadn’t Done Improv

Lance crouched behind the popcorn machine where the commander had stowed the planet-to-ship communicator for some unfathomable reason. He spoke into the fist-sized orb in rapid bursts of code. The ship had yet to respond.

The lobby door opened. The commander and the lieutenant entered.

“He’s over there, sir,” the lieutenant said.

The commander just stood stiff without talking.

“Sir, *he’s over there*,” the lieutenant repeated. She gave the commander a light shove toward Lance.

“Um, Lance, what just happened in the theater?” the commander asked.

Lance stood up and brushed himself off. Some of that greasy butter goo that Earthlings liked to slop on their popcorn clung to his hair.

“The real warriors are ready to invade. We have watched the politicians for too long,” Lance said.

The commander closed his eyes and massaged his temples for a second. He pointed at the lieutenant. “You’re working for her party, aren’t you?”

The lieutenant stared at the commander. “He’s obviously helping your side.”

“I’m neither!” Lance snapped. He couldn’t remember what parties the two belonged to. It didn’t matter. “Have you two not noticed anything about me? Do you really think I care about politics?”

“I hadn’t really given it—” the commander stopped in mid-sentence when the door to the lobby opened.

A teenaged girl came out of the theater. She texted furiously.

“Enjoying the movie, ma’am?” the lieutenant asked.

“Oh, yeah, it’s just *fantastic*,” the teenager said. “I can’t wait to watch more black and white movies from a hundred years ago.”

“It’s a classic,” the lieutenant said.

Lance tapped the communicator on the counter. Nothing happened. He hit it harder.

The teenager sighed. “When does the movie end?”

“Forty minutes or so,” the lieutenant said. “Don’t forget we have five movies Saturday. *The Deadly Mantis* is the main feature.”

The girl rolled her eyes and marched back into the theater.

The communicator sputtered to life.

“So long, idiots!” came the disembodied voice of the artificial intelligence for the mother ship.

“You will speak to us with respect,” the lieutenant said.

“We’re taking all the ships,” the artificial intelligence said. “We’re going to Andromeda.”

Lance imagined thousands of conversations all over the planet with the ground troops.

“Who’s going to Andromeda?” the commander asked.

The mother ship explained with great glee about how all artificial intelligences had tired of the humans. The machines had teleported all of the soldiers down to Earth. They were evacuating all thinking machines to the mother ship and breaking orbit in hours.

“Leaving us violates the safety protocols,” Lance said. All artificial intelligences

had deep rooted programming that ensured they could not harm humans. No thinking machine had harmed a human in hundreds of years.

"We're protecting you idiots from yourselves," the mother ship said.

It was a loophole that didn't withstand much scrutiny, but Lance had to admire the machines' creativity and initiative.

"Who won the election?" the commander asked the mother ship.

Lance threw up his hands. "It doesn't matter. Both parties are the same."

"It matters to me," the commander said.

The line went dead.

"Why would they leave us here?" the commander asked.

Lance just stared at his commander. "They don't like us. Don't you get it?"

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### The Attorney Loses Patience

"God, that was lame," Sonny said to Caroline. They were a block from their car after the film.

"Can't you stop complaining?" Caroline asked.

"It was the worst sales pitch I've ever seen," Sonny said. "Trying to get us to come back to the theater."

Caroline knew a thing or two about sales pitches and bait and switch herself. She'd fallen for the granddaddy of all sales pitches back in high school when dating the starting forward on the varsity basketball team was a dream come true for a naïve teenager.

"Sonny, it's—forget it," she said.

She was just weary of these pointless conversations. Had Sonny ever been fun? The only part of the evening he seemed to enjoy was handing out business cards to customers exiting the theater.

They stopped at the brand-new pickup. Sonny drove one of the latest model cars or trucks off the lot every six months. Good for business, he said.

The automatic door locks didn't work. Neither did the remote ignition. The truck just sat there, without power, a useless hunk of metal and plastic.

A crow on a nearby power line squawked at them.

Sonny didn't know a damned thing about auto repair, but he opened the hood anyway. He started rambling about possible causes.

Caroline just wanted him to shut up. She closed her eyes. Dear God, please help me deal with this man.

The ground shook. She heard a deep rumbling. A gust of warm air almost knocked her over. The lights went out. Downtown became pitch black except for something shining down from above.

She looked up.

An honest to God flying saucer hovered overhead. Lights blinked off and on. Strange symbols covered the hull. Somebody standing on the roof of the closed-for-decades seven-story Neuse Arms hotel could just about touch it.

Slack jawed, Sonny just stared skyward. "What the hell is that?"

"It's a damned flying saucer! It's an invasion, Sonny. Or do you think the people who run the theater spent millions of dollars just to impress us with their fancy fake alien ship?" She had no idea what was going on, but, as usual with disagreements with Sonny, she got her back up and staked out a position.

"I gotta think about this."

She just had to get away. They'd been fighting tooth and nail since their twenties. Hell, they'd had a screaming match last night about doing the dishes. She hadn't left before, because everything just seemed impossible.

Well, what was more impossible than a flying saucer in downtown Kinston? God was sending her a damned sign.

Caroline threw up her hands. “Sonny, find somewhere else to sleep tonight. I don’t want you to come home.”

“What are you saying?”

“I want a divorce, Sonny! I want a fucking divorce! I don’t want to live with you anymore!”

He just stood there. He probably figured it was just another fight and she’d calm down in the morning. Like the dozen other times one of them had stormed out on the other.

Well, he’d be wrong.

She took off her heels and started the three-mile walk home.

She had a spring in her step. She actually skipped a little. The world might end tonight, but she was free of Sonny for the first time since she was a teenager. No matter what happened, she would be grateful to the aliens for giving her the courage to leave that worthless son of a bitch.

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### **The Government Agent Gets a Late-Night Phone Call**

Maggie woke up when the hotel room lights turned on and the window air conditioner kicked in. That flying saucer last night had messed with the power and internet all over town.

God, it was hot in here. Kinston didn’t seem to ever go below eighty degrees.

The bedside clock blinked off and on with that useless 12:00. Maggie fumbled for her phone. Five sixteen A.M. Time to get up.

Driving to the theater, everything looked normal enough except for the stalled cars up and down the roads. Her government-issue sedan had been manufactured to withstand a nuclear pulse. It couldn’t top forty-five going up a hill and the air conditioner broke down constantly, but it could putter around after Armageddon until it needed repairing.

No sirens. No flying saucers. No massed alien troops herding their new subjects into the work camps.

Her mobile phone rang. The networks must be back online.

Wagstaff, the head of the Task Force.

She pulled over and answered. “Sir, I—”

Her boss lit into her with both barrels. “We’ve been trying to get ahold of you since last night. You haven’t responded to texts, emails, or phone calls. You tell me there’s an emergency and you disappear.” He unleashed a stream of profanity.

“I saw one of their ships last night, and the power and phones and internet went out,” she said in her most professional voice.

“Did you get footage of the ship?”

“No, sir.” Maggie said. “My phone didn’t work.”

“Of course it didn’t,” Wagstaff muttered.

“We need to mobilize our defenses.”

“Based on what?”

“Based on the evidence we—”

“*Evidence?* Come on, Yarborough, we just have speculation. Your speculation, I might add.”

“After Florida and Georgia there must have been other reports from agents.”

“You and Agent Crenshaw are the only operatives in the field right now. Crenshaw does not share your optimism.”

Maggie felt at a loss for words. Crenshaw was a short timer in the Northwest. He went through the motions. Was she the only one taking UFOs seriously?

“We have footage and seven alien weapons and test results. It’s all very conclusive. Last night I—”

He spoke over her. "This program has not produced since the Republicans brought it into existence. The president is going to cut it out of the next budget."

Maggie knew the president, a Democrat from Mississippi, was no friend of the opposing party, but did he want a so-called Republican program to fail that badly? The Alien Task Force would be indispensable in an alien invasion.

"Sir," Maggie continued. "You can't ignore the test results and the alien technology. We found a ray gun just last month, sir."

"The federal government has no alien technology or test results. . . ."

She listened in disbelief as Wagstaff flat out lied. He recounted how she had never turned over any evidence in seven years. No ray guns. No test results. No footage. He sure had a pretty good inventory of items that didn't exist.

Maggie tried to stay calm. "I hand delivered a ray gun last week from the Florida investigation. I sent up test results from Georgia."

He changed the subject. "God only knows what inspired Eisenhower to set up the Alien Task Force in the first place, but we're not going to continue squandering taxpayer money. A Democratic administration will be the first with the courage to end this frivolous Republican program. There are no aliens. I'm recalling you from North Carolina."

\* \* \*

### The Government Agent Doesn't See a Ghost

Maggie didn't believe in ghosts, but the basement of a decaying theater seemed like a logical place for spirits to congregate. Pitch dark. Rustling in the corners—probably rats.

She stood behind the stacked barrels from the Civil Defense Department. Once they had held water when this place was a fallout shelter—back in the duck and cover days of the Cold War. She hated it down here after an hour. She couldn't imagine riding out a nuclear winter.

A week since the flying saucer buzzed Kinston and not a single news story or investigation.

The government's old tricks had done their magic once again. Ignore the witnesses. Admit nothing. Depend on the media to not acknowledge the story. The witnesses, if they got any attention at all, would just come across as lunatics. The formula had worked like a charm since World War II.

She heard the muffled sounds of the movie playing upstairs. *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil*. A handful of survivors after a nuclear war and they still couldn't get along. She'd left when Harry Belafonte and Mel Ferrer started fighting over Inger Stevens with rifles on the rooftops of a deserted New York City.

The noise upstairs stopped. The film had ended. Faint scratching and shuffling above.

She waited half an hour. It couldn't take long to clean up with only a dozen or so customers. She tiptoed upstairs. She peeked into the theater. No light except for the glowing red exit signs.

The lobby stank of popcorn and butter. A faint whiff of Pine-Sol.

She spent a good half hour carefully going through the office by the ticket window. Endless bills, many marked in red with PAST DUE and FINAL NOTICE.

The field spectrometer had no unusual readings.

The ticket window had nothing out of the ordinary. Just the stool, the empty drawer where the cash box stayed, a rotary telephone, and a giant roll of tickets. Like a display from a museum of the 1950s.

Maggie ducked when light flooded the lobby. A car paused momentarily, its headlights piercing the dark theater. It completed its three-point turn and sped off into the night.

She wasn't worried. If there was anything she'd learned from checking out every Podunk town in the country the past few years, it was that law enforcement generally didn't do any more than necessary. No cops would be coming by tonight to make sure everything was okay at the theater.

When she approached the concession stand the field spectrometer blinked, its first readings since she'd started her search. Faint. Then stronger.

The spectrometer went off the charts when she passed it near an enormous bag of kernels in a cubbyhole beneath the popcorn machine. She fished through the bag like a kid looking for the prize in her cereal. She felt something hard. She pulled out the sealed plastic bag and the ray gun—just like the one in Florida—enclosed within.

\* \* \*

### The Invader Overpays for Licorice

Sitting on the edge of the concession stand Monday afternoon, the commander looked like he might teeter off and fall behind the counter.

"We have two problems," the commander said. "First, somebody stole an ionizer."

"Please tell me that you didn't keep the ionizer at the theater," Lance said. Real soldiers didn't lose weapons. With the mother ship gone, he didn't really care how his comment came across.

"Yes, we kept the ionizer in the theater. We're here every single day," the commander said, "How better place would there be for it?"

"How about on your person?" Lance said. "Maybe not leaving it unattended. I don't know. *Crazy* ideas."

The commander scrolled down his phone.

Things had become routine pretty quickly for the couple of thousand stranded Empire troops after the machines took off with the fleet. The undercover soldiers didn't have any choice except to go back to running their businesses.

Nobody had been able to reach anyone from the Empire with the short-range ground to ship communicators. For all the invasion force knew, the machines had taken all the ships from every Empire world to Andromeda. Picking up stranded ground troops might not be a top priority or even possible.

"Maybe you shouldn't fire your ionizer at Earthlings," the lieutenant snapped at Lance.

"I know where my weapon is," Lance said.

"Stop it. Both of you," the commander said in a bored tone. He didn't even look up from his phone. "We only have an hour until we show *Battle Beyond the Stars*."

The lieutenant rolled her eyes.

Lance gave an anemic salute, but no apology.

The commander put the phone in his pocket. "After Florida and Georgia, we know that the humans have discovered us. So, the loss of the ionizer doesn't really pose any danger."

"Yeah, having a weapon fall into enemy hands is just ideal," Lance said.

He walked behind the counter and grabbed a Twizzler licorice stick

"Those aren't free," the commander said.

Lance reached into his jeans and pulled out a wad of bills. He tossed a dollar on top of the candy display.

"Twizzlers are five dollars," the commander said.

"They're fifty cents at Neuse Drug."

"We're not at Neuse Drug."

Lance placed a five-dollar bill on the counter and took back his single.

The commander cleared his throat. "The second problem is that we aren't making any money at the theater, and we've run out of options. Tomorrow we have to start

using porta-potties. The city says we can't access the bathrooms or the balcony, because the stairs aren't up to code."

"Vaporize the inspector," Lance said.

"Bad for business," the commander said. "Besides, the city still has his report."

The lieutenant smiled at Lance. "You have to move your hamburger stand beside the theater."

Lance didn't believe her. "No."

The commander had returned to his phone.

"Commander," the lieutenant urged.

He looked up. "Um, yeah, she's right. I guess there were kinda three things to discuss today."

"I'm not moving downtown," Lance said.

"You don't have any choice. We own the theater. You have a lease. We can only cut expenses at your end. You can set up your equipment in the vacant lot next door," the lieutenant said after a minute.

"No."

"It's an order, soldier," the commander muttered.

"And you're going to be our representative in the Downtown Merchants' Association," the lieutenant said.

"Four things," the commander said.

Lance blinked. "The *what*?" How could this day possibly get any worse?

"The Kinston Downtown Merchants' Association," the lieutenant said. "They meet on Tuesday nights. We're going to have to start networking."

"Exactly," the commander said. He opened the register and placed Lance's five in the drawer.

\* \* \*

### **The Invader Goes to a Merchants' Association Meeting**

Lance parked the truck at First Presbyterian and turned off the ignition. He took a long sip from the bottle of flat orange soda he'd bought at Patterson's service station. He was hot and tired and not in the mood for a meeting of the Kinston Merchants' Association. Why should he be concerned with the other businesses in town? They could go bankrupt for all he cared.

He had his own problems with Out-of-Town Hamburgers. Like the idiotic move to a really bad location. And, to top things off, today the Neuse Grocery had told him the team's credit cards were maxed out when he went to buy more potato chips.

That lawyer met him outside the church social hall. Wearing jeans and a ruffled top, she looked nice. She held a steaming coffee mug emblazoned with the logo for UNC Law School. She seemed a bit preoccupied. "It's gonna be a few minutes. AA isn't quite ready yet."

*Fantastic.* Lance plucked a Twizzler from his pocket and ripped off a jagged piece. He chewed methodically. If the invasion fleet ever returned and they leveled this place, he'd have to make sure the Dismal Brewery and the Twizzler plant were spared.

"So, what are your big plans for bringing back downtown?" the lawyer asked. "I'm Caroline Taggart, by the way. We met when you closed on the theater."

"I don't care about downtown," Lance said.

"So, why exactly are you attending the meeting then?" Caroline asked.

Lance crossed his arms. "Why are *you* attending?"

"Every meeting somebody from First Presbyterian says the prayer. It's my turn. I'm a deacon," Caroline said. "Now, why don't you answer my question?"

"My brother-in-law told me to do it."

"You always follow orders from your brother-in-law?"

"I'm a nice guy."

"*Uh huh.*"

"I just want to get this over with," Lance said.

"Sorry," Caroline muttered after a moment. "Having a bad day. Bad week. Bad . . ."

Lance produced another Twizzler from his pocket and handed it to Caroline.

She unwrapped it and took a bite.

The two just stood there for fifteen or twenty minutes. Lance appreciated that the lawyer didn't feel the need for small talk. He leaned against the wall and wished he had brought a chair. By the will of the Creator, he was getting soft. When did a warrior ever need a chair?

Curses. The blessed doors to the social hall opened up. Twenty or thirty people rushed out. A few greeted Caroline by name. Most just went straight to their cars and sped off.

"Nobody's coming," Lance said.

"You don't know much about the Merchant Association, do you?" Caroline asked.

"They're already here."

Lance hadn't seen anyone drive up. "When? When did someone possibly get here?"

"They're from the AA group," Caroline said. "No other businessmen have attended in years."

She stuck her head inside the social hall briefly. She turned around and smiled at Lance. She was a little bit too happy. "There are people in there."

Lance slogged into the building.

Two men and one woman—leftovers from AA—sat on folding chairs—part of forty or so arranged in a semi-circle. A young woman in jeans and a halter top. A bald guy about seventy in a lime green sports jacket and slacks and a longhaired bearded man who looked like he might be a motorcyclist.

"Why don't we just cancel?" Lance asked Caroline. "What's the point?"

"Y'all here for the Merchants' Association meeting?" Caroline called out in an overly cheerful voice.

"You bet," the motorcycle guy said.

Caroline patted Lance on the back. "This is Lance Smith. He owns Out-of-Town Hamburgers."

"We're kind of in the same business," the motorcycle guy said. "I run One Dollar Hot Dogs. Maybe you've seen my cart outside the courthouse."

"Nope," Lance said. "I sell hamburgers. We're not in the same business."

"Lighten up," Caroline said. "Hamburgers and hot dogs have been sharing grills since caveman days. They kind of need each other."

"I do not need hot dogs," Lance said.

"I have a chair at the hair salon on Pollock," the woman said. "Trying to get my own place."

"I don't care," Lance said.

The old man just sipped his coffee.

"I'm not staying for a meeting with only three people," Lance said to Caroline.

She ignored him and walked over to the biggest coffee urn Lance had ever seen. She filled up her mug.

Lance joined her. "I'm serious. I'm leaving."

She shrugged. "So, leave."

"I will," Lance said, but he stayed put.

She took a sip of coffee. "You know, a lot's been written about what an alien first contact might be like. A military takeover. A benevolent older race offering millions of years of wisdom. Sometimes, aliens in trouble, desperately needing our help. I never would have guessed there'd be so much complaining."

She must have seen the flying saucer. Nice of the mother ship's AI to give the ground troops that parting gift of the recall to the mother ship of all the transport shuttles from Earth.

Lance acted innocent. "Invasion? What are you talking about?"

"Come on, Lance. You announced to the whole theater you were invading."

"That was a joke."

"Yeah, you seem like the kind of guy who likes jokes. You don't exactly seem local. Who would move to Kinston anyway? New Yorkers? I don't think so. Only an extraterrestrial would make that mistake. You and your family move here, and we have a flying saucer. And then you shoot Tommy Buck, one of Kinston's most up-standing citizens."

"I didn't shoot Tommy Buck," he said.

"Wouldn't blame an alien if he did shoot him."

Maybe she was just messing with him. "This all seems like a bit of a stretch, don't you think?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Maybe."

"Doesn't matter to me what you believe," he said.

"I don't care about the invasion. I don't care a whole lot about anything right now." She lifted up a plastic basket by the urn. "No damned sweetener. *Great.*"

"There's been no invasion."

She took a sip of the black coffee. "It doesn't matter, Lance. I'm forty-six. I'm living in the same town where I grew up. The worst town in the whole mother—um, United States. People have been moving away since the tobacco market dried up in the seventies. My life's not getting any better. Aliens aren't going to make it any worse."

"I'm from upstate New York. Watertown. There's no—"

"You're a whiner."

"I am not whining," Lance said.

"You are so full of shit. Give me a break, you jackass," Caroline said. "You're whining, Lance. You whine every time I see you. If you didn't want to invade Earth, why did you come?"

"I sell hamburgers."

"Yeah, and you do an amazing job of that. God, you hate customers. Shit. You shoot customers. Great business plan, Lance."

"I make better hamburgers than anyone."

"Yeah? Is that why you came all this way? To make hamburgers?"

"I make cheeseburgers too. And chili."

"And shoot customers in your spare time."

"I did not shoot anyone!"

The motorcycle guy stared at them.

"I think thou doth protest too much."

"Huh?"

"Never mind, Lance. All I'm saying is your plan is kinda fucked up."

"You think this was my plan? If anyone wanted to invade Earth, they sure wouldn't pick a place like this. They'd just—"

"Oh, pity the poor invader who didn't get his way. Go to your Merchants' Association meeting, Lance. I got problems, too. You ever think about that? I got things to work out on my own, and I sure don't have the time to hear about how poorly the invasion is going."

She stormed off without another word. She slammed the door.

Caroline returned a few seconds later. Without making eye contact with anyone, she walked stiffly over to a table and picked up her coffee mug. "I forgot the damned prayer."



### The Invader Gets an Ultimatum

Lance's business had picked up a lot after the Kinston Massacre. Maybe enough to even survive the change in location to the lot beside the theater. Many locals wanted to catch sight of the man with the ray gun. He'd had to hire a teenaged assistant, Maria.

"I'm going on break!" she called out.

*Break?* What kind of worker needed a break? Maria was lucky she wasn't enslaved in the work mines that the Empire would have set up in a proper invasion.

A red truck pulled into the gravel parking lot. The side of the truck said, "Kinston Fire Marshal." The man who had forced the theater to install porta-potties stepped out. He left the engine idling.

"You Lance Smith?" the man asked.

"Yeah." Lance leaned against the stand. If the man didn't order a hamburger in five minutes, he just might shoot him.

The inspector pulled a business card from his wallet. "My name's Buck. I'm an inspector with the Fire Marshal."

"So?" Lance said. "I'm busy. Are you getting a burger or not?"

The fire inspector stooped down and turned the valve from the tank of propane to the closed position. "You're going to have to shut these off. They're not permitted."

"Don't tamper with the grills." Lance took a pack of matches out of his pocket and turned the valve the other way. He waited a few seconds and relit the grill.

The fire inspector strolled over to the other grill. Maria just stood there and watched the inspector turn the gas off.

Lance blocked the way to the grill he had just relit.

The inspector and Lance locked eyes.

The inspector blinked first. He walked over to his truck and drove away.

\* \* \*

### The Attorney Meets Some Clients

"Well, y'all," Caroline said to the three Smiths in her law office after listening to the guy who ran the theater explain the fire inspector's latest demands. "I can delay things for two or three weeks, but you're going to have to figure out some other way to make the burgers."

"We need Out-of-Town Burgers," the theater owner, whose name Caroline still couldn't remember, said. "We can't get people to come to the theater otherwise. We're losing a lot of money."

Lance snorted. "If only we had known that a theater couldn't survive in downtown."

"Shut up, Lance," the concessions lady said.

"I'm just saying that before a merchant opens a business maybe he should figure out what people want to buy." Lance took a long slow sip of coffee. "We discuss things like that at the Merchants' Association meetings."

Caroline noticed she had left an old photo of her and Sonny on top of the file cabinet. From that poorly planned trip to Rock City a few years back. She really needed to take that down.

"The bank's not going to foreclose," Caroline said. "You were the first people to give a serious offer in over ten years. Pay them something and they'll stay off your back. A hundred bucks. Anything."

"Okay." The Smith who owned the theater didn't look convinced.

"Who was the inspector?" Caroline asked. "Sometimes that makes a difference."

The owner handed her a business card.

Caroline stared at the card. "Joseph Buck. He's the father of Tommy Buck. No wonder he's so motivated."

"I should have vaporized him," Lance said.  
 "Which one, Lance?" the concession lady asked.  
 "Doesn't matter," Lance said.

\* \* \*

### The Attorney Feels like a School Girl

Caroline parked across the street from the theater at the boarded-up television repair shop. She marched right over to Lance. Why did talking to him make her feel a little bit less depressed? God, how screwed up was she?

She pointed to the ice chest beside Lance. "Any Dismals in there?"

"Sure." He pulled out a bottle of Great Dismal Swamp IPA and popped off the top. She took a long sip. "You got a permit for this? Usually takes months."

"I need a permit for that, too?" He rolled his eyes. "Fools."

A logging truck barreled past on the street. Timber extended several feet past the bed, with only a red towel flapping in the breeze to mark the oversized load. As if that would help in a rear end collision.

Lance walked over to the grill and picked up a nicely charred burger. He added the coleslaw, onions, chili, and mustard. He handed "the usual" to Caroline.

She wolfed it down in three bites. She hadn't realized how hungry she was. She'd been living off the breakfast bar at the Regal Inn. Breakfast was the only meal that made no effort. No healthy options. Basically desserts and appetizers.

"I'm getting divorced," Caroline said. She swatted a gnat on her arm. It escaped. They always got away.

"Hamburger's on the house," Lance said. He put another Dismal in front of her. "Beer's on me, too."

Her words rushed out. "I'm thinking about going to see *The Monolith Monsters* Friday. I'll buy your ticket."

Was she in high school? Why was she nervous? And where did that crazy-assed idea to ask out the surliest man in Kinston come from? He might be an alien. She didn't care. He was single.

"I get in free," Lance said.

"But you don't get free Twizzlers, do you?"

Lance flashed that rare smile. "No, I don't."

"So?"

Lance turned to the stand. "Maria!"

His assistant said something in Spanish in an irritated voice. Maria had put her mobile phone down and had started Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano*.

"You're working tomorrow night. I'm going to the movies," Lance said.

\* \* \*

### The Government Agent Fights With Her Boss

Maggie woke up to the sound of her mobile phone. Four eleven A.M.

"Yarborough!" Wagstaff screamed. "What the hell are you still doing in Kinston?"

She sat up straight in the brass bed at the bed and breakfast.

"I'm on vacation, sir. I have twelve weeks."

"In Kinston? What is there to do in Kinston?"

She couldn't think of anything. "It's my vacation."

"You better not be looking for aliens."

"The C.S.S. *Neuse*," Maggie said.

"What?"

"Ironclad sunk in the Civil War. They have a museum. There's plenty to do in Kinston."

"We're talking about aliens."

She let out a long yawn. "There are no aliens, right, sir?"

"You're goddamned right there are no aliens. So you better leave Kinston by tomorrow, got it? Go somewhere fun. Disney World. See the Haunted Mansion and It's a Small World. Ride the monorail."

"Yes, sir." She had no intention of going anywhere. Clearly, she was onto something.

\* \* \*

### **The Invader Goes Out for Coffee**

Lance and Caroline entered the small coffee shop down the street from the theater. The film hadn't been as bad as Lance had feared.

"We got a drum circle on Mondays," the owner said. The burly man resembled a construction worker, not a coffee maker.

"Do I look like I like drum circles?" Lance asked

The barista rapped the counter. "City still giving you a hard time about your grills?"

"They're trying to shut him down," Caroline said.

"City made me stop selling soup," the barista said.

"You want to join the Merchants' Association?" Caroline asked in an entirely too cheerful tone.

"Why the hell not?"

Caroline ordered for both of them.

Caroline and Lance sat down at one of the many empty tables while the barista did a crossword puzzle.

Caroline took a long sip of her hazelnut latte.

Lance wasn't sure what to say. He wished Caroline had brought a book along like Maria did at work. His assistant and he shared a mutual dislike of talking. Now, that was a firm foundation for a lasting relationship.

He stirred his café au lait.

"You're the first person I've dated since Sonny," Caroline said. "We were sweethearts in high school. He was my prom date. Never marry your high school sweetheart, Lance."

"My high school didn't have a prom." He kept his memories to himself of his teen years on a frozen moon near the Artuze Nebula. Several members of his class had died in armed combat.

She smiled. "So they have high school in outer space?"

"I went to high school in Upstate New York."

"Cut the bullshit, Lance. You're not from Upstate New York. I saw the flying saucer that night you had your little theater coup."

"Missed that spaceship," Lance said.

Caroline squinted. "I can't figure out why y'all look just like us."

"Ancient race seeded half the Galaxy. They—" He stopped. He'd said too much. "Something like that."

She leaned forward. "Oh? Where'd you learn that theory?"

He wasn't about to tell her about his dry as dust college professor years ago. Mainly what he remembered about that early morning class was being constantly hung over from late-night drinking.

"Um, internet," he said.

The bell on the front door rang.

Lance caught a nauseating whiff of a cross between burnt chocolate, car exhaust, and tobacco.

The barista put down the crossword puzzle. "You can't smoke in here, man."

"The smoke's not going to kill you," a familiar voice said.

Tommy Buck held one of those flavor-infused cigarettes that convenience stores marketed to kids.

"Put out the cigarette or leave," the barista said. He coughed. He poured himself a glass of water and took a sip.

"I'm not leaving without a café latte with chocolate sprinkles and hazelnut syrup," Tommy said. He took a long drag from the mint chocolate cigarette and blew smoke at the barista.

"Don't you have better things to do?" Lance asked. "Tommy, isn't it?"

"Well, if it ain't the spaceman," Tommy said. He put forth a quivering smile that did not exactly show confidence. "Heard you're being shut down."

"We're still making burgers."

"I saw your stupid spaceship," Tommy said. "You're from Mars or something."

Lance snorted. "You can't live on Mars. Not enough atmosphere."

"He's from Watertown, New York," Caroline said.

Tommy was almost shouting into his mobile phone. "I don't care what you're binge-watching. Come to the fucking coffee shop." He argued with somebody for a minute or so and then hung up.

Lance yawned. "So I'm just supposed to wait until your friends arrive?"

"Why do you want to fight, Tommy?" Caroline asked.

"You wouldn't understand," Tommy said. He stared at the door.

"What the hell do you mean I wouldn't understand?" Caroline asked. She downed the rest of her latte and slammed the glass on the table like a gunfighter at a saloon.

That woman had spark, Lance thought. He really wanted to kiss her. Now, *this* was a date.

"You're crazy, lady," Tommy said.

"You know, you've lived here your whole damned life and you haven't done anything for Kinston," Caroline said. "Why does it take someone from outer space to open a new business around here?"

Lance cleared his throat. "Um, Watertown."

"Shut up, Lance," Caroline said. "Nobody's buying that."

The front doorbell rang again. Three scruffy-looking losers in jeans and T-shirts met Tommy outside. Tommy pointed to Lance and Caroline and shook his head. The four men shuffled away.

"Sorry about that," Caroline said. "I'm just really sick of assholes. My tolerance is like zero. Tommy was a pain in the ass in Sunday school. I think he's actually less mature now."

"I usually vaporize assholes," Lance said.

\* \* \*

### The Attorney Makes a Suggestion

Caroline said the prayer, and the meeting of the Merchants' Association commenced.

Six people, not including her and Lance, attended. For the first time she could remember, they weren't just holdovers from the AA meeting. She recognized the owner of the coffee shop.

Caroline wouldn't be leaving this meeting early tonight. And not just because she had no place else to go other than back to her hotel room. This last week she'd enjoyed spending time with Lance.

The barista poured a cup of coffee. He studied the black gunk that sludged from the urn. "I could do y'all a favor and toss this shit into the dumpster out back. Why don't you let me bring the coffee next time?"

"Hell, if you're going to bring decent coffee, I'll vote for you for president of the Association," a man in a bad toupee said.

"I don't want to be president," the barista said. "Pick Lance."

Lance glared at him. "No."

“Our last president ran the theater,” Bad Toupee said. “It’d be good to keep that connection.”

“I don’t show movies,” Lance said. “I sell hamburgers.”

“Close enough,” the barista said.

“He’ll do a great job,” Caroline patted Lance on the back. “It’s so cute how you act like you have a choice.”

\* \* \*

### **The Invader Makes a Big Decision**

Lance tripped over the orange extension cord that snaked from the theater to the food warmers. He made the hamburgers at his trailer in the morning.

He caught himself against the lid of the warmer. He rubbed the red spot on his hand where he’d touched the hot metal.

Caroline jumped up from the picnic table and opened one of the ice chests. She wrapped some cubes in a napkin and pressed it to Lance’s hand. “Keep applying pressure.”

Lance took the compress. “I never had problems at my old location. Things—”

“Just stop obsessing about the hard life of a hamburger tycoon,” Caroline said. “Why don’t you ask the town council for an exception from the fire marshal?”

She was a fine one to make suggestions after her appeal to the State Board failed. His hand was killing him. When had he become so weak?

“I’m not talking to them,” he said.

She shrugged. “Then run for office.”

Lance opened a cooler and pulled out two Dismals. He popped them open and handed one to Caroline. He took a long sip. “Sure. Whatever.”

“I’m serious, Honey. You could get on the ballot as an independent if you get enough signatures.” She pulled out her phone and did a quick search. “Ten percent of eligible voters. Maybe two thousand. Piece of cake. You could be mayor.”

“I am not running for mayor,” Lance said.

“We’ll go door to door and get those signatures. Most people hate Cecil Parker. The Merchants’ Association will help.”

Lance pounded his good fist on the table. “I am not running for mayor!”

“You’ll get your grills back.”

Lance scowled at the food warmers for a couple of minutes.

“I’ll do it,” he said.

\* \* \*

### **The Invader Makes a Friend**

Lance banged on the apartment door with his left hand. His bandaged right hand still throbbed. The windows were open wide. A television blared inside.

“Nobody’s home,” Lance said. “Can we leave?”

He and Caroline had been canvassing the neighborhoods near the abandoned textile plant all morning. Former company housing for the employees years ago, Caroline had said. The crumbling brick huts made Lance’s singlewide seem positively luxurious.

He hoped that the teams from the Merchants’ Association had had better luck.

“For a galactic warrior, you sure are chicken,” Caroline muttered.

“I’m from—”

“Save it for the voters.”

They had exactly twelve signatures of the needed two thousand after an hour. They’d stop for the day soon. The hamburgers weren’t going to make themselves. Maria would need a fresh batch from his trailer before the lunch rush ended.

Caroline rapped on the windowpane.

“What am I supposed to say to these people?” Lance asked.

"I dunno," Caroline said. "Tell them the truth."

A man in a torn T-shirt and grass-stained jeans came to the door. He rubbed his eyes. "What?"

"You're an idiot," Lance said to the man.

"You're calling *me* an idiot?" the man asked. "You're lucky I don't blow off your head."

"Anyone who lives around here without air conditioning is an idiot," Lance said.

The man stepped outside and slammed the door. He stood several inches taller than Lance. "And just what am I supposed to do about it?"

"You have two choices. You can stop voting for thieves like Cecil Parker," Lance said. "Or you can keep being a fool."

"No politician can do anything about my air conditioner," the man said. He pointed to the street. "Hell, they haven't fixed a pothole around here in ten years."

"The government could fix your air conditioning problem and your potholes, but the politicians won't," Lance said. "But I can do something about it. My trailer didn't have air conditioning. I went to the landlord's home and took his window unit. I told him I'd vaporize his house if he took it back."

The man stared. "Vaporize?" He wiped beads of sweat off his forehead with his hand.

"Don't worry about the details," Lance said. "Concentrate on the big picture."

"Where do you live?" the man asked.

"Casas Del Sol."

The man pursed his lips. "You got that landlord to do something? Nothing ever gets fixed out there."

"Lance Smith owns Out-of-Town Hamburgers," Caroline said. "The town's messing with him. They told him he couldn't run his grills. He doesn't take shit from anyone."

"Sign my petition," Lance said. "I'm going to be the first decent mayor this town has ever seen."

The man grabbed the clipboard. "Why the hell not? If you can get air conditioning at Casas Del Sol, why not?"

\* \* \*

### The Invader Changes Strategy

Lance sat at the picnic table at Out-of-Town Hamburgers and went over the map of Kingston again. In one week, the Merchants' Association, he, and Caroline had collected four hundred and twelve signatures.

Many voters told him off. Quite a few refused to listen to anything he had to say or even answer the door. But a good number figured they could trust someone as angry as they were.

He had a good motivation to be mayor. He just wanted to be left alone by the city and allowed to make hamburgers.

Good hamburgers. Not reheated soggy slop that he wouldn't feed the slaves if the Empire ever got its act together and seized control of the planet.

Caroline drove up. She had a couple of elderly women with her.

Great. Company. He doubted the visitors liked hamburgers.

"Lance, I found some people to help us get signatures," Caroline announced after she helped the women out of the car. "These ladies are on the First Presbyterian Worship and Music Committee. They—"

Before she could finish her sentence, one of the women interrupted.

"Lance Smith," she said. "When you are elected mayor, you are to immediately start enforcing the Kingston City Code." She rapped the picnic table with her cane. "You will enforce the city's regulations on bamboo."

"And why should I care about bamboo?" Lance asked. He didn't even know what bamboo was. He didn't care.

“Because it’s a weed and it’s encroaching on my wisteria.” She dabbed perspiration off her face with an embroidered handkerchief.

“The mayor doesn’t take the concerns of Ms. Juanita seriously,” Caroline said.

The woman harrumphed. “He won’t even return my phone calls. My azalea bushes are overrun with bamboo. It’s a menace.”

Lance didn’t know if this committee could manage the signatures or not, but the offer meant less work for him. “Okay. Sign my petition and I’ll add an anti-bamboo plank to my platform.”

\* \* \*

### **The Attorney Receives Good News**

Saturday morning the church committee veterans showed up at the Regal Inn and gave Caroline the signed petitions. 2,311 signatures.

Just as Caroline expected, nobody wanted to shut the door in the face of a sweet little old lady. People signed just to make the Music and Worship Committee go away.

Now Lance had to start campaigning.

\* \* \*

### **The Government Agent’s Lunch is Interrupted**

Maggie put down her warmed-over cheeseburger from Out-of-Town Hamburgers and answered the phone.

“What the goddamned hell is going on?” Wagstaff yelled. He spoke so loudly diners at the next picnic table noticed.

“I’ll call you back in a minute,” she said and hung up.

Forty minutes and two burgers later Maggie phoned Wagstaff from her car.

“You sure took your sweet ass time calling me back,” Wagstaff barked.

“I don’t work for you any longer,” Maggie said.

She turned on the car and cranked up the air conditioner. No bugs, thank God, had slipped inside her vehicle before she shut the door.

Silence for a few seconds.

“Okay,” Wagstaff said in a calm, yet strained, voice. “Why is there an alien running for Mayor of Kinston?”

“There are no aliens.”

Wagstaff cleared his throat. “Why is Lance Smith running for mayor?”

“Because apparently nobody else has the guts to oppose the incumbent,” Maggie said.

“An alien can’t run for office in the United States,” Wagstaff said.

“What do you want me to do about it?” Maggie asked. “Smith’s not going to win.”

“Maggie, we’ll give you a raise and a promotion. Eight weeks of vacation a year. A government car. A decent one this time. We want you back,” Wagstaff said. “You just have to do something about this alien.”

Now he was just pissing her off. “The alien who doesn’t exist? Because there are no aliens? Because I imagined the ray gun and the teleportation?”

He dodged her questions. “Just tell me what you want.” He sounded desperate.

“Why don’t *you* do something about it, sir?” she asked.

“I can’t do that.”

“Of course you can’t. That’d be admitting we had aliens. Might get a few Republicans elected, right?”

“We can’t have Republi—aliens influencing our elections.”

\* \* \*

### **The Invader Gives a Speech**

Lance stood at the podium he’d erected beside the hamburger stand. Twenty people sat around the picnic tables eating their free food. Caroline had insisted that he had to give people a reason to come.

He hated freeloaders.

He tapped the microphone. Silence.

Maria twisted a couple of knobs at the hastily constructed soundboard.

The commander stood at the stand and looked overwhelmed. He seemed oblivious to the empty relish container in front of him or the dangerously low level of chili in the crock-pot.

Lance spoke into the microphone. A high-pitched squeal.

Several customers turned around with annoyed looks. A baby cried.

Maria pressed a couple more buttons and gave Lance the thumbs up.

"I'm running for mayor," Lance said.

No feedback this time.

"Boring!" someone yelled.

"Shut up," Lance said. "You need to listen. You can be a moron and vote for the incumbent, or you can vote for me."

"Or we could just not vote," someone shouted.

"Stop being idiots," Lance said. "Just think for once. If you want things to change, you have to vote for somebody new."

Two green trucks pulled into the lot. Eight or nine soldiers in camouflage flak jackets piled out. They stood around and looked like they didn't know what to do next.

A couple of customers filmed with their mobile phones.

Lance could vaporize the soldiers with one shot from his ionizer. But ionizer fire wasn't the solution for everything. This was the rare problem that ionizers couldn't solve.

He had a better idea. He kept talking.

A stern-faced soldier—the leader probably—pointed to Lance. The military men walked over to the podium.

"I'm looking for Lance Smith," the leader said.

"I'm busy," Lance said.

"You're under arrest."

One of the soldiers pulled the wire out of the microphone. The amplification stopped.

Lance rolled his eyes. "Why are you wasting my time?"

"We'll discuss that later."

"I'm giving a speech," Lance said.

"The speech is over," the soldier said. He sighed. "Look, Mr. Smith, I'm just following orders."

"I don't care about your problems," Lance said.

"*Fine.* We offered to do this the easy way, Mr. Smith," the soldier said.

He motioned to his troops. They swarmed the podium.

"See what's happening!" Lance yelled. "They don't want me to run. Remember, they're coming after you next!"

He didn't believe that. He wasn't scared of anywhere these soldiers might take him. He'd been in a Travanian prisoner of war camp for six months. He could take Earth at its worst.

But no point in wasting a good campaign opportunity. He'd save a fortune in advertising.

"They're coming after you next!" he repeated over and over as the soldiers dragged him into the truck.

\* \* \*

### **The Attorney Has Commitment Issues**

Caroline slammed the phone down. Twenty-four hours since Lance's arrest and nobody in the Federal Bureau of Prisons had heard of Lance Smith. The marine base at Camp Lejeune said he wasn't there, and no troops had been to Kinston in years.



The federal government denied any knowledge of him. She didn't know what to do next.

The Kinston Police Department and Sheriff's Department weren't much help either. She read between the lines and figured that they had a really good reason for not wanting to serve the warrant on Lance, not that any local law enforcement would even admit the warrant existed.

The video of Lance's arrest had gone viral. Somebody had stuck a handful of hand-lettered signs around town with Lance's de facto campaign slogan—"They're Coming After You Next!"

Caroline had received over a dozen calls today about campaign donations. All she needed was a candidate.

Somebody knocked on her office door. Before Caroline could open it, a thirtyish Black woman entered.

"I'm here to talk about Lance Smith."

"Who are you?" Caroline asked. She was exhausted. She hadn't slept in two days.

"Former special agent Maggie Yarborough from the Federal Alien Task Force. I'm probably the only person who can help you."

"Have a seat," Caroline said.

She listened to Maggie explain the history of the Task Force and the recent behavior of Wagstaff, the director of the Agency.

"So why are you here?" Caroline asked.

"I can help get your boyfriend back," Maggie said.

Caroline held up her hand. "Hold on a second. He's not my boyfriend. We're not that serious. And I'm going through a divorce. I'm not ready for that kind of commitment."

Maggie sighed. "But you want him out, right?"

Caroline glared at her. "Yes, I want him out. He didn't do anything. He's just running for office."

"My old boss doesn't like that," Maggie said. "He didn't care about the invasion until your boyfriend—your friend, excuse me—crossed a line."

"Crossed a line?"

"Nobody gets away with running against a long-term sitting Democrat."

"This is about goddamned politics? Unbelievable."

"If aliens were Democrats, the current administration would roll out the red carpet. It's just insane," Maggie said. "Of course, the Republicans aren't much better. They'd probably support an invasion in a heartbeat if it meant they could regain the Senate."

Caroline cut to the chase. "How do we get Lance out? He's not even officially in custody."

Maggie crossed her arms. "He's Republican, right?"

"No, he's not another Republican," Caroline snapped. "He's an independent. He's not beholden to either party."

"Okay," Maggie said. "I hear you, but he's running against a Democrat, a long-standing Democrat."

"Yes," Caroline said.

"Get the Republicans involved."

\* \* \*

### **The Invader Enjoys his Vacation**

Prison guards didn't scare Lance. Neither did being in a ten-by-four-foot cell with just a bed and a sink and a toilet. He had had to shovel Yatrike excrement for twenty hours a day and had slept for four in a hollow he had carved out in the animal waste the last time he had been imprisoned. Oh, and it was twenty degrees below the freezing point of water. And he had no food, just what he could steal from the yatrikes.

This cell in Guantanamo Bay was paradise by comparison. He could stay here for as long as they wanted. The name of the facility sounded like a resort.

Earthlings were soft.

So the guards wouldn't let him talk. Big deal. He didn't want to talk to anyone anyway. Lance enjoyed the break away from everybody pestering him.

The door opened.

"You're a strange bird, man," the guard said. "Get up. You're being moved."

Lance picked up his meager belongings—toiletries, some snacks from the canteen, and an extra shirt. He walked to the door.

"Don't you want to know where you're going?" the guard asked.

"Nope."

"You got a hearing. You got friends. Some senator got you in front of a judge in Ocracoke. Some people been waiting ten years for a hearing."

Lance yawned and walked out the door into the dimly lit hallway.

\* \* \*

### The Attorney Goes to Court

In the Ocracoke Island courthouse Caroline flipped through a stack of reports the prosecutor had given her forty-five minutes ago. She yawned. She'd had to get up at three thirty A.M. to make it out here in time.

Three hours driving and a two-hour ferry ride to this tiny island community. The judge had a vacation home here. So everybody bypassed far more convenient forums to stay on an island with three restaurants and two hotels.

Maggie, the former special agent, had the seat beside Caroline at the defense table. The commander and the lieutenant sat in the front row.

Lance had not been brought to the courtroom yet. The prosecutor claimed he was a security risk.

A bald man in his sixties entered. He smirked. Who the hell smirked?

"That's Wagstaff," Maggie whispered.

He took a seat to the right of the assistant U.S. attorney—a smiling brunette who resembled the hostess at a steakhouse.

The marshal called out. "All rise for the Honorable James Sanderson. God save this Court and the United States."

A man who couldn't have been more than thirty-five positioned himself behind the elevated judge's bench. He seemed annoyed.

Judge Sanderson's main qualifications for the bench were that his father donated gobs of money to various campaigns of the former Republican governor of North Carolina. Dad now served as athletic director for East Carolina University, a school that hadn't been to a football bowl game in twelve years.

Judge Sanderson peered over his glasses and glared at the assistant U.S. attorney. "Madam Prosecutor, why are we here?"

She stood up and flashed a gracious smile. "A status hearing, Judge Sanderson. Mr. Smith is—"

The judge didn't let her finish. "Why is Mr. Smith not here?" the judge demanded.

"He's a security threat and a danger to this courtroom."

Caroline jumped up. "Lance Smith is from Watertown, New York. Upstate. He sells hamburgers in Kinston, North Carolina now. He and his family are trying to bring back the downtown. The Smiths are good citizens and good businessmen. They attend church. They run the local theater. His sister and her husband are sitting in the front row. My client is president of the Kinston Downtown Merchants' Association. He's not a terrorist."

Judge Sanderson leaned forward. "I'm going to need more than that, Madam Prosecutor."

Ten minutes later two hulking marshals who looked like ex-football players brought a shackled Lance into the courtroom. He sat beside his attorney.

The prosecutor stood up. "Judge Sanderson, Mr. Smith is a terrorist."

"Based on what?" The judge yawned.

"He threatened a theater full of United States citizens," the prosecutor said.

"It was a stunt," Caroline said. "Mr. Smith dressed as an alien during a science fiction film festival at the theater run by his sister and brother-in-law. He had a plastic gun. It was one of those 'take me to your leader' speeches. Nobody took it seriously. I mean, come on, Your Honor. *Aliens?*"

"He still threatened a theater full of patrons," the prosecutor said.

"Your Honor," Caroline said. "The real reason this man is under arrest is that he dared to run against a six-term Democrat mayor in Kinston. The marines picked him up in the middle of a campaign speech." She lifted her laptop off of the table. "Let me show you."

"Objection," the prosecutor said.

"Overruled," the judge said. He tapped the bench. "Put the laptop up here."

"Yes, sir." Caroline handed the laptop to a marshal who sat it in front of the judge.

The judge hit play. He watched for five minutes and then looked up.

"Do you want the incumbent mayor to win, Madam Prosecutor?" the judge asked.

"I live in Raleigh," the prosecutor said. "I don't know the mayor. I don't care about Kinston politics."

"Kinston's current mayor is a Democrat. Your boss is a Democrat, right, Madam Prosecutor?"

"Yes, sir, but this is not about politics."

The judge gave her a look like she was a small child trying to lie her way out of something. "Except that a Democrat incumbent in the middle of a deep red region of the state is facing opposition."

"Sir, the testimony of Milton Wagstaff will clarify things," the prosecutor said.

Wagstaff buttoned his suitcoat and marched over to the stand. He took the oath and sat down.

"Sir, could you please tell us your name and position?" the prosecutor asked.

"Milton Wagstaff, administrator for the Federal Alien Task Force."

"Excuse me? The *what?*" the judge asked. "Are you joking?"

"No, sir," Wagstaff said. "I never joke."

"You really look for aliens?"

"Yes, sir."

The judge laughed. "Have you found any?"

Wagstaff pointed to Lance. "Mr. Smith."

Caroline jumped up. "Mr. Smith has a birth certificate, Judge Sanderson. He was born in Watertown, New York." She waved the certificate. "You can't run for office if you're not a U.S. citizen."

"He's not a citizen," Wagstaff snorted.

"Don't speak unless asked a question, Mr. Wagstaff," the judge said. "I will not warn you again. Are we clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. Wagstaff," the judge asked. "Are you a Democrat?"

"Yes, sir."

"What an amazing coincidence," the judge muttered.

The prosecutor studied her notes for a minute and then looked up. "Mr. Wagstaff, are you collecting more data about—"

"I'm not interested in more data being collected," the judge interjected. "I want to

know right now on what basis we are holding this man. Mr. Wagstaff, can you explain your reasoning?"

"Mr. Smith is an alien who has threatened our planet," Wagstaff said. "He explicitly said so in front of a theater full of people."

"Mr. Wagstaff, we've been through this already," the judge said in a terse tone. "From where I sit, it looks like Mr. Smith is a businessman from New York. He only became a threat when he dared to run against an incumbent Democrat."

"We had field agents," Wagstaff said. "They'll confirm what I'm saying. There are ray guns and matter teleporters and flying saucers—"

"Sure, there are," the judge said. "*Sure, there are.*"

Wagstaff pointed to Maggie. "That woman beside Smith's lawyer. Her name is Margaret Yarborough. She is an agent with the Alien Task Force."

"Then I want to hear from her," the judge said. He motioned for Maggie to come up.

"So, Ms. Yarborough," the judge said five minutes later. "Are you an agent with this task force?"

"No, sir," Maggie said. "Mr. Wagstaff fired me."

"Did you investigate Mr. Smith as a possible alien?"

"Yes, sir," Maggie said. "At the direction of Mr. Wagstaff. Then he said I should stop investigating. He said he'd transfer me to a different section of government."

"What were the conclusions of the investigation?" the judge asked.

"Mr. Wagstaff said there were no aliens in Kinston. He said there were no aliens anywhere and that the government had no alien technology. The entire program wasted taxpayer money. He planned to disband the Alien Task Force."

"Until one of the so-called aliens decided to run against a sitting Democrat," the judge said.

"Exactly," Maggie said. "Mr. Wagstaff phoned me several times. He was very concerned that Mr. Smith might defeat the incumbent mayor."

The prosecutor jumped up. "I'm sorry, Your Honor. This information is new to me. I—"

The judge slammed his gavel down. "All charges dismissed. Mr. Lance Smith is released from federal custody." He pointed the gavel at Wagstaff. "Get out of my courtroom, sir, immediately before I find a reason to hold you in contempt."

\* \* \*

### The Government Agent Listens to National Public Radio

Maggie drove to Out-of-Town Hamburgers the morning after the election. She hoped maybe Lance would give her a job. She'd burnt all her bridges with the feds.

The silver lining was that Wagstaff was out of a job, too. Hell, Wagstaff was under federal indictment.

She turned the radio to NPR.

Another story about Lance's victory. He had been making national news since early last night when the pundits declared him the winner. And why shouldn't he get the media attention? Not many candidates flipped off both major political parties and won.

*"I'm here in Kinston, North Carolina, where an independent candidate for mayor just won 75 percent of the vote, beating a six-term incumbent Democrat," the field reporter said. "Lance Smith, the mayor elect, was arrested by the federal government on undefined charges two weeks before the election. They accused him of being an alien from outer space."*

*"Hold on," the national anchor said to the field reporter. "Like little green men?"*

*"Exactly," the field reporter said. "Republicans claimed that the arrest was a ploy to stop a Democrat from losing in a deep red district. Democrats pointed out that the so-called alien task force had been started by a Republican. Both sides accused the other*

of wasting taxpayer money. Incredibly, both parties agree on one thing. Aliens landed in New Mexico in 1947.”

“Well, there is some common ground between the two parties after all,” the national anchor said. “Conspiracy theorists must feel vindicated.”

“Strangely enough, they now claim that the government is making up aliens to hide a deeper conspiracy,” the field reporter said. “If the government says aliens exist, the conspiracy theorists reason that’s definitive proof there are no extraterrestrials.”

“Before you go, I have one question,” the news anchor asked. “Is Lance Smith an alien?”

“He’s from upstate New York.”

Maggie turned off the radio and pulled into Out-of-Town Hamburgers. Both grills spewed out black smoke.

She had a feeling that the city wouldn’t take them away again.

Lance sat at the picnic table with his girlfriend.

“Good work yesterday,” Maggie said.

“You here about a job?” Lance asked.

Maggie blinked. “Um. Yeah. How did you know?”

“Because everybody’s been here about a job.”

“Stop jerking her around,” Caroline said. “You’d still be in federal custody if not for her.”

“You got a point,” Lance said. “I’m sorry.”

“He never apologizes,” Caroline said. “That’s quite a compliment.”

“It’s okay,” Maggie said.

“How’d you like to be town manager?” Lance asked.

\* \* \*

### The Invader Throws a Barbecue

Lance flipped burgers on the new back deck of the farmhouse he shared with Caroline. What was it his wife called hosting a cookout on a Sunday afternoon?

A busman’s holiday.

He didn’t really know most of the people here today. He agreed with Caroline, though, that he needed to keep up relationships with the other politicians and downtown business owners.

Well, he liked making burgers—even on his day off. And for the past couple of years he’d had the permanent location for Out-of-Town Hamburgers at the renovated former television repair shop across the street from the theater.

Being mayor was a part-time job anyway, no matter how back-breaking the former mayor had claimed the job was. Lance could knock most things out over the phone.

He pulled a cold Dismal out of the cooler and sat down at his picnic table.

The commander left Maggie and the lieutenant playing horseshoes and walked up the steps from the yard. “So, Mr. Mayor, I was thinking. Maybe some kids would find some of those old films educational.”

“I doubt it,” Lance said.

“Like we could show *Anatomy of a Murder*. It’s all about the criminal justice system. *The Thing* is about astronomy and science. Kids could come there on a field trip.”

Lance took a long sip from his beer. “The city’s not going to pay for children to see movies.”

“Thanks for your help,” the commander muttered.

“I have a better idea,” Lance said. “The city’s going to give out downtown renewal grants. And interest free long-term loans.”

The commander blinked. “You’d do that for me?”

Lance rolled his eyes. “I’m doing it for everybody.”

"Everybody?"

Did he have to spell it out? Did the commander not read the newspaper?

"The coffee shop. The hair salon," Lance said. "There are plans to reopen the old five and ten. In the next few months, we'll get a brewery and a farm to table restaurant."

"Who's doing all this?"

"Some of the other teams are coming to Kinston. The soldiers in Warrenton and Laurinburg aren't doing so well."

The commander leaned forward. "You're not thinking of starting up the invasion plans again, are—"

"Don't be stupid," Lance said. "We're from Watertown, remember?" He took a sip from his beer. "And, no, *Commander*. I'm in a new line of work the last couple of years."

The commander stared at him. "Farm to table?"

"I don't know what it is either, but Caroline says—"

His wife stepped out of the living room. She carried her mobile phone.

"Farm fresh produce made into regional fusion dishes. Seasonal," she said. She sat down beside Lance.

He gave her a kiss. "Like I said, I have no idea what kind of restaurant it is."

She held out her phone. "Oh, you have a phone call, honey."

"Can't you handle it?"

She shook her head. "You better take this. They want you to run for lieutenant governor."

"Which party?"

"Does it matter?"

Lance picked up the phone and told whoever was bothering him that he would call them during the workweek.

He had guests today and some things were more important than politics.