

Aliens. It had come to this. I had been hired to find creatures from outer space. I accepted the assignment for two reasons. One, I had absolutely nothing else to do. Two, I had absolutely nothing else to do. Nothing had come out of my recent visit with Constable Darren Kirsch. Yes, the dead woman had a scrap of paper with my name and phone number on it, but I had no idea who she was—other than the faint suspicion that she was my mysterious after-midnight caller who'd hung up on me several days earlier. Curious, but ultimately it led nowhere.

Don Dubeer came to PWC a frazzled man. Normally, after hearing a story like his, I probably would have kindly but firmly escorted him out of my office directly into Beverly's (our resident psychologist) but for two other reasons. First off, Mr. Dubeer was not some crackpot off the street. He was an architect, the president of the local United Way and a family man who coached his son's junior hockey and soccer teams. Secondly, he had corroboration.

It went like this. On his way home from working late at his office one night, Mr. Dubeer alleged that he had been abducted by aliens, transported to what he believed was their spaceship, disrobed down to underpants, prodded a bit and then returned to earth—still naked. At first he told no one (which I can understand), except for his wife who of course couldn't help notice when her husband came home nude from work. It ended up being the understandably worried Mrs. Dubeer who found the corroborator to her husband's tale. The corroborator was a woman, a friend of a friend, to whom, somewhat coincidentally, the same thing had happened only days before, and who wasn't shy about talking about it. Although Mr. Dubeer wasn't up to going to the cops, the knowledge that it had happened to someone else gave him the courage to seek out a detective—me—to

find these other-worlders to prove he wasn't ready for the loony bin or, at the very least, get his trousers back.

After interviewing both abductees in depth, I was able to ferret out some key similarities between each instance of *ET* gone wild. In both cases the abduction took place right after the victim had walked away from the same quiet suburban neighbourhood ATM and just before they got into their vehicle. The abductions took place very late at night, well after midnight, when foot and vehicle traffic were almost non-existent; not very smart on the victim's behalf and ripe pickings for potential bad doers. And, not only were the victims stripped of their clothes, but also their cash. I was pretty confident that if these so-called alien raiders did exist, they were much more interested in the latter than the former; I just had to catch them at it. I still wasn't entirely convinced both my client and his fellow abductee weren't a couple of cuckoo birds with similar delusions, but what was the worst that could happen? I spend a couple sluggish evenings hanging around an empty parking lot? Could be worse. So I took on the case with tongue planted firmly in cheek and planned an alien fishing expedition with my friend Jared as the meaty earthworm.

Jared Lowe is Anthony Gatt's long-term partner. Jared's successful career as a fashion and runway model had all but ground to a halt since recently turning the model-death-knell age of thirty five...see, it is a cursed age...and he was in a state of flux as he figured out what it was he was going to do with the rest of his life. Which was lucky for me, because I needed a decoy and he had the time and willingness.

So that was the reason I found myself that Friday night lurking behind a blooming caragana bush dressed in cat-burglar-black like Robert Wagner in a *Hart to Hart* caper.

The plan was this: Every half hour, beginning at midnight, Jared would pull into the parking lot of the strip mall in question, walk to the ATM, withdraw twenty bucks, return to his vehicle, then circle the block for another thirty minutes—while I hid and watched. Two hundred dollars and one grass-stained sore butt later we quit. On Saturday we did the same thing all over again, like a bad play on an endlessly repeating loop. And on the 3:30 a.m. performance...they came.

The initial blast of light was so blinding, even I, some distance away, had to cover my eyes with my arm to shield myself from the starbursts threatening to sear my cornea. As quickly as it came, it disappeared, leaving the parking lot black and forlorn as before, except that now, instead of just Jared alone walking back to his car, there were two dark, ghostly figures standing before him. They were wearing some type of robes, black with hoods that fell low over their faces and sleeves that dragged on the ground. Very spooky looking. For a fan of David Eddings and *Lord of the Rings* this was a treat. Or was it a trick?

At first nobody moved.

“What’s going on?” I could hear Jared ask, his voice impressively calm.

The two black figures were quiet, they just stood there and looked at him, swaying ever so slightly, and although nothing was said, their whole manner was menacing, oppressive...just really, really weird. All we needed was a good *X Files*-haunting-melody-type soundtrack. I resisted the temptation to jump up and confront the...the...the whatever they were, but I knew I shouldn’t. We needed to catch them red-

handed at robbery. The big question was: would I be able to keep on their tail without my own spaceship?

“Come on, guys,” Jared tried to josh with the two. “What’s with the costumes? What do you want? Can I help you?”

Then, in perfectly timed Olympic-worthy synchronicity, the pair raised their webbed hands to their heads and folded back their hoods.

Oh Keeeeee-rist! I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. From my position I was only getting a partial side view obstructed by bush leaves, but even at that these guys were awesome. In the dim lighting of the parking lot’s sole light standard, their skin appeared a mottled blue and their hairless heads sprouted several stubby, tentacle/sucker-looking thing-a-bobs sticking out every which way.

“Oh,” was all that my brave consort managed to say as he stared, no doubt dumb-struck, at the vision.

Again in practiced unison, the two lowered their hands, only to raise them again, but this time there was something in their hands and they were pointing them at Jared, no doubt some sort of stun gun or phaser pistol. Not very nice. Alien number one circled around Jared and, after putting away his weapon, indicated that he was going to place a blindfold on him, which Jared allowed, even though I was certain his normal inclination was to bop the space creature in the face. As soon as that was done the other alien scampered away around the corner of the building and came back dragging what looked like a makeshift gurney and some sort of canister. What the hell? He laid the items next to Jared’s feet and then together they manipulated Jared until he understood that they wanted him to lie down on the gurney. I could see his chest pumping up and down and I

could only imagine how fast his heart must have been racing at that moment. One of the two took hold of the canister and pushed on a nozzle which released some kind of vapourous cloud over Jared's body. I thought it might be dry ice or something like that which would give Jared a cool, wet sensation...maybe even make him think his atoms were being de-materialized in preparation for transport to a starship?

Jeepers. How cheesy.

But these guys were smart. And organized. They knew they had to work fast to reduce the chance of someone witnessing the whole charade. The original flash of light stunned, disoriented and probably frightened their victim. Once the person was blindfolded, they could make-believe so many more things. It was easier to manipulate smell and feel than sight. And the whole alien abduction thing gave them a really good chance of never being caught...or the crime never being reported in the first place. Like Mr. Dubeer, most people would be too embarrassed or worried about being labelled a freak to ever take it to police. Especially if the loss of goods wasn't great—a few measly bucks out of an ATM—it was worth the maintenance of reputation.

The two dark force wannabes took hold of the gurney, one at each end, and began transporting their earth specimen away from the scene. I followed them at a safe distance, around the corner of the strip mall building, down a back alley, and finally into the backyard of a nearby 1950s era bungalow. Handy. I waited at the rotting, half-off-its-hinges back gate while they stumbled their way through the back door. Once they got inside, I rushed to the back of the house and plastered myself against it, hoping I wouldn't run into any alien dogs. After half a minute I braved a peek through the back door window, but a

curtain obscured my view. I slowly began to circle the house and noticed light coming from basement windows. They had Jared down there.

Most houses in Canada in 1950 did not have air conditioners, but instead of installing screens or having to raise windows to let in cool air (and lots of mosquitoes) during summer months, some smart builder had come up with the idea of drilling three silver dollar size holes along the bottom of the window frame with a flap cover. After lying myself flat in a bed of sad-looking marigolds and thriving dandelions, it was through a set of these air holes that I was able to see what was going on inside the basement suite of the house.

I had to give them credit. These guys had done a masterful job of creating another world. Obviously they were sci-fi geeks who'd mined their ideas from *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* movies, right down to very impressive minutiae detail. The basement walls were transformed into magnificent star charts with rows of computer panels that beeped and binged and peeped and ponged. There was an area that looked remarkably like the *Enterprise* transporter room and a massive video screen at one end of the room which, with its speeding star clusters and colourful celestial bodies zooming by, made it appear as if this basement rumpus room was actually a space ship travelling through the galaxy at great speed.

“Click click, snerooga doff ban,” the one blue-skin said to a still blind-folded Jared after they helped him up from the gurney.

“What’s that?” Jared asked.

“Click click!” the thing repeated, sounding a little impatient.

“Click, click yourself,” Jared repeated back.

From my awkward position and through the trio of eyeholes I could only see Jared's back—from the shoulders down—and I wondered if he was smiling or frowning. Observing the performance from my point of view, the whole thing seemed preposterous, but Jared had been blindfolded through most of it and had no idea whether or not this was real or whether or not I'd actually been able to follow him as had been our plan. If his imagination worked the way these guys hoped it would, he could have begun to believe he really had been abducted by aliens.

One of the creatures reached over and pulled off Jared's blind fold. Here's where they really got their victims; give them a chance to see the impressive setting now that they've been kidnapped, blindfolded and most likely scared out of their wits (assuming they had any to start with). Not everybody would fall for this, but many would under these extreme circumstances.

“Asta com yanna shting shting doob,” gurbled the other guy at Jared.

They were obviously trying to impress Jared with their knowledge of nonsensical words. Next they began using their *Man from Atlantis* hands to take Jared's clothes off. As a model, Jared was used to being disrobed in front of others, but he did an admirable job of protesting nevertheless, although not too strenuously. I hoped that meant he was on to these dudes and expected I was still on the job not far away and ready to jump to his aid if he needed it.

Blue skin #1 put Jared's blindfold back in place and while my friend stood their looking gorgeous and tanned and super fit and naked—except for his 2(X)ist Contour Pouch briefs—the aliens began rifling thorough his jeans for a wallet. Bingo. They didn't even bother with the poking and prodding routine reported by their other victims. With

Jared's sculpted physique you'd think that would be the first thing they'd do. Although my inner voyeur was having a ball, it was time for me to move in. In a flash I lifted myself off the ground and, without bothering to dust myself off, circled back to the rear entranceway. I slid inside through the unlocked door (stupid aliens) and stealthed down the stairs where I came to a closed door. I put my ear against it, heard nothing except for a few beeps, pings, clicks and snerroogas, and burst through it with *Magnum PI* flourish.

“What the hell...!” this came from one of the space creatures who all of a sudden knew English.

Jared flipped off his blindfold and stepped backwards towards me.

“Sniffle gloog dar bonga bonga dee?” said blue skin #2 going for a desperate recovery of the scam.

I gave both he and his partner an incredulous-give-me-a-break eyebrow raise that said, “Oh give it up.”

Blue skin #1 pointed a phaser at me.

Okay, enough fun and games. I reached into the back waist band of my black jeans and pulled out my own non-ray hand gun and pointed it at the phaser holder. I rarely use the thing, preferring to play detective with my mind, wit or a good shove in the solar plexus, but in this case—not sure who (or what) I was dealing with—I'd brought my piece along.

Blue skin #1 kind of whimpered and dropped the phaser to the floor where it made that hollow clatter sound that cheap plastic makes.

I glanced at Jared, but kept my pistol pointed on target. “You okay?”

“Oh yeah,” he said. “Can you believe all this stuff?”

I turned back to my captives and said, “Okay guys, off with the masks.”

And knowing the gig was up, they peeled away their masks to reveal two innocent, university-aged, average Joe faces.

I shook my head and said to Jared, “Call 9-1-1.”

“Can I put my clothes on first?”

I shot him a wicked smile. “Snerooga doop puff puff.” Oh he knew what I meant.