



## Chapter 1

I wasn't kidnapped by aliens. That line sells tabloids, but it wasn't true.

No, I went with the aliens of my own free will.

The night it happened I was drinking in this bar I go to sometimes. The place was too far from downtown to be popular with college students, and

that's why I go there, especially when I'm feeling low. My dissertation, a semiotic study of package labeling in the United States (1946 to 1959), was bogged down in the third chapter, and I'd been avoiding my dissertation director, who also happened to be sleeping with my ex-girlfriend Anita. Spring Break would be over in one short week, which meant I'd soon be facing a roomful of freshly tanned freshmen, bored, hung over, or buzzed, who would write me papers that began, "Their are many problem's in todays American society."

Before me on the bar, the rings of water left by my beer mug arranged themselves into patterns, and as time passed, these patterns seemed to take on a profundity of their own. I had tuned out the drama of March Madness, 2007 edition, hung suspended from the ceiling nearby, the clink of glasses, and the drone of the crowd behind me, even when it rose to a roar in response to something happening on the screen. I was repressing, for the moment, my anxieties about world peace, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, global warming, the state of the economy, the nuclear weapons Korea might be developing, the nuclear weapons we had already developed, the genocide in Sudan, the proliferation of natural disasters, the threat of terrorism, and the prospect of new weapons of mass destruction. I was indulging in self-pity, luxuriating in it like a heavy fur coat.

The guy next to me leaned over an empty stool and spoke.

"Forgive me," he said.

I looked up at him. I took in the Bud Light on the bar, the cell phone he held pressed to his ear. I could hear a voice in it, chirping. Beneath the heavy odor of cigarette smoke and beer, I caught a whiff of something, soft as a whisper yet so powerfully evocative that I was momentarily knocked loose from ordinary time. Pipe tobacco, yes, and something else—an elusive scent of aftershave, familiar to me as my own heartbeat and yet, I couldn't place it. I almost missed what he said next.

“Pardon me,” he said. The cell phone chirped again.

“Excuse me,” he said.

You probably think that his eyes glowed with x-ray vision or something, but he looked like a normal guy. Actually, he looked a lot like Alec Guinness—the young Alec Guinness, with a face open and expressionless as wallpaper paste.

“Yeah?” I said.

The crowd thundered its disapproval of something, and his eyes shifted, then returned to my face. He was wearing a gray suit and narrow dark tie in a place that ran to work shirts, bowling shirts and Hoosier apparel. On the bar in front of him sat a gray fedora. I was wearing dirty jeans, a hooded sweatshirt, and sneakers. Tonight, the eve of St. Patrick's Day, the bar was awash in red, not green; I.U. was playing U.C.L.A. in the second round of the West Regionals. My neighbor outclassed everything in the joint, including the scotch.

“Could you tell me, please, what state we're in?” He spoke pleasantly with a refined but restrained accent, possibly British, that went well with the suit. I could see now that he wasn't that young, but he had the kind of face that was hard to pin down. Forties, maybe?

“I don’t know about you, man,” I said, “but I’m in a state of depression, in transit to a state of intoxication.” Bars bring out the worst in me, and depression wasn’t helping. I was a walking cliché.

He studied me a minute. “Excuse me,” he said. “I was speaking geographically.”

“Oh, geographically.” It had been two beers, maybe three, since I’d had the occasion to speak to anybody and I noticed that my tongue was getting in the way. “Let me give you a hint. See that TV set up there? The one that everybody in this place is watching except you and me?”

He glanced at the television and nodded.

“What game are they playing on that TV?” I asked. With the freshmen gone, it had been a while since I’d instigated a Socratic dialogue, and I thought I might have more success with an adult, anyway. Socrates had never faced a twenty-first-century eighteen-year-old, or he would have taken the hemlock sooner.

“It appears to be basketball,” he said, cautious.

“Very good,” I said. “Therefore, we must be in the state of —?”

He looked at me in some consternation, then muttered something into his cell phone. The phone twittered briefly and fell silent.

“That’s okay,” I said. “I’m just being a prick. You’re English, aren’t you? Look, we’re in the state of Indiana.”

Enlightenment smoothed his brow. “Ah, Indiana! Home of the Indianapolis Five Hundred. The Crossroads of America.” He nodded soberly. “Indiana.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” I said encouragingly. “Except the Five Hundred takes place in May, and this is March. That means it’s playoff time. Sweet Sixteen time. NCAA Championships. March Madness.”

“Championships,” he repeated. “I see. Could you tell me, please, how far we are from the state of D.C.?”

I shook my head. “D.C., man, that’s a state of mind. A whole different ballgame. Out here in the sticks, we’re light years away from D.C.”

He stared at me, then something shifted in his face and he said, “You’re making a joke, is that right?”

“Yeah, that’s right,” I said. “I’m a real comedian tonight. Sorry.”

He smiled indulgently. “Not at all,” he said.

The bartender drifted over and picked up my empty mug. I nodded at him.

“Listen, can I ask you a personal question?” I leaned closer to the Englishman. When he didn’t back away, I continued. “How can you stand to drink that light beer crap? I mean, I know you’re probably used to drinking it warm, being from England and all, but that stuff is crap.”

He frowned at his bottle and glass. “I didn’t know what to order. You see, I haven’t drunk a beer in a very long time.”

The bartender set my mug down. “Bring another draft for my friend here,” I said to him. I slid over to the stool next to the Brit, and spoke to him confidentially. “We should really be drinking a German bock or a microbrew, or even a Killian’s, seeing as how it’s Saint Paddy’s day. But they don’t have any of that here. You could get it in town, but then you’d have to put up with the students.”

The bartender set a mug in front of him. I watched him take a tentative sip. “It’s very tasty,” he said. He plucked a napkin from a nearby dispenser and dabbed at his upper lip.

“You bet it is,” I said, and slapped him on the back.

He took another swig and smiled at me. “Now, about D.C.,” he said. “How would one get there from here? To Washington, specifically?”

“You want to go to Washington?” I asked. “You a protester?”

He frowned. “I’m not at liberty—,” he began.

I flapped a hand at him. “Never mind, you want to go there,” I said. “What you want to do is take I-70 east to Breezewood—.”

“Breezewood,” he echoed.

“Town of Motels,” I said. “In Breezewood, you catch I-95 south, and it takes you right to the Beltway.”

“The Beltway,” he repeated with some uncertainty.

“That’s the freeway around D.C.,” I explained.

“Would that be the Circumferential Highway?”

I shook my head. “The Beltway.” I put down my coaster in front of him, then drew a circle around it with condensation from my mug. “It’s kind of like a semi-permeable barrier, you know, like a, like a—a cell wall. You know about cells, right? Building blocks of life?”

“Yes.” He smiled as if the question amused him a little.

“Right, well, the Beltway is like a cell wall. It keeps a lot of stuff from getting into the city where the government is.”

“You mean, I won’t be able to enter the city?”

“No, no, you’ll get in all right,” I said. “Paying customers are welcome, especially if you’re in the market for tee-shirts, Washington Monument thermometers, miniature Smithsonian reproductions of eighteenth-century chamber pots, shit like that. It’s ideas and opinions they

want to keep out. Objections to the way they're running the show. You don't have any of those, do you?"

"Yes, I do," he said.

"So you are a protester," I said.

You'll say I should have considered the other option. You'll say that in these days of vigilance against terrorism, I should have notified the FBI immediately. It never crossed my mind that he could be a terrorist. I'd read that the 9/11 guys had caroused a lot before their mission, and talked about the bevy of babes they expected to encounter in heaven. This guy looked more like a middle manager at a company that made widgets—a guy whose heaven would not be overpopulated with babes. Plus, he had a British accent, and the Brits are supposed to be our allies. But what did I know?

"Well, more power to you," I said. I was feeling light-headed. I'd been keeping to myself, avoiding my friends. And after all that solitude, I was warming to the company of this British stranger.

"It's not power I want," he said.

"Just an expression," I said. "Anyway, don't listen to me. Just get on the Beltway and follow the signs into the city."

"Oh," he said. "And this I-70 and I-95, those are interstate highways?"

"Yep." I picked up the salt shaker and made a long line of salt on the bar in front of us. "We're here," I said, tapping the bar with my fingertip below the line, "and Indianapolis is here." I touched the line of salt. "You follow that all the way through Ohio and West Virginia and Pennsylvania." I made another line of salt perpendicular to the first line.

"Breezewood?" he asked, pointing to the intersection.

I nodded.

He followed the new line of salt to the end. “Washington?”

I beamed at him. How I’d missed intelligent adult conversation!

“I am extremely grateful to you,” he said, licking the salt off his finger. “I hope I haven’t bothered you.”

“Nah.” I waved away his gratitude. “I was just sitting here, drowning my problems.”

“You have problems?” he said.

I signaled the bartender for another round and told him. He hadn’t finished the last round, so maybe I was buying his time. He was a good listener. Some of his questions were pretty basic, but others were truly sensitive and profound—or at least, they seemed so at the time. He wanted to know what a dissertation was, and a dissertation director, and once we got that squared away, he asked if it was customary to have sex with one’s dissertation director, since my dissertation director also happened to be Anita’s as well. That was a hard question to answer; it took a lot of explaining.

“Perhaps that is why you’re having difficulty with your dissertation,” he ventured.

“When you work on your dissertation, you are reminded of your former girlfriend, and you become angry and sad. Then you have difficulty concentrating.”

I know now that the reason I got stuck on my dissertation was that I’d picked a lame topic, but in the alcoholic haze of my melancholy that night, what the Englishman said struck me like an epiphany. I barely noticed that his consonants were starting to liquefy from the beer he was floating them in. The guy was definitely not a hardened drinker.

“Jesus!” I said. “I bet you’re right!”

Then he asked me to explain what my dissertation was about, and I started in on that, but I hadn't gotten far when he asked me to explain what semiotics was. So I blathered on about signs and representation and meaning, and did a few semiotic interpretations of the labels on the whiskey bottles lined up behind the bar, and the bottle of ketchup on the bar in front of us.

"It's rather like mathematics, isn't it?" he said. "But—well, more amusing and less practical."

"I wouldn't call it impractical," I said, but I hadn't taken offense. If he'd pressed me, I would have admitted that the primary use of semiotics, as far as I could see, was to provide me with a dissertation topic and afterward, if I was very lucky, a university teaching job in an American Studies department, preferably west of Dubai. But in the interest of demonstrating its practicality, I turned on my stool to look around for something else to interpret. That's when I spotted the new arrival.

He was the tallest human being I'd ever seen, on or off a basketball court, but broad-shouldered, like an offensive lineman. He had just walked in, and stood with his back to me, so I could see only his silhouette. He stood with his legs apart, scanning the room, and the pose seemed familiar to me somehow. Then he turned in my direction. He was wearing a sport coat that looked like it had been cut from a charcoal plaid tablecloth, an open-necked gray textured shirt, and black pants. Wavy dark hair combed back from his forehead gleamed under the artificial light. He wore long sideburns. Deep-set eyes drooped sleepily under long lashes, until he saw us, and then they opened wide. He smiled, the left side of his upper lip lifting like a lopsided stage curtain over a nice set of teeth and a full lower lip. Semiotics would be wasted on him. The King had returned as Bigfoot.



I rapped the Englishman on the elbow with my knuckles. “Hey, man,” I said, watching the tall man advance toward us. “You got a friend? Tall dude looks like Elvis Presley on growth hormones?”

## Chapter 2

The tall guy reached us as the Englishman turned around. The Englishman didn't seem all that happy to see his buddy, which dimmed the wattage on the tall guy's smile. Now that he was close, he didn't look all that much like Elvis Presley. Or rather, he looked more like an Elvis impersonator than like the King himself. His crooked smile pushed his cheeks up under his eyes and gave him kind of a goofy look.

"I've been waiting a long time," he said to the Englishman, a little reproachfully, I thought. "I came to find you."

"That's my fault," I said. "He was letting me bend his ear. Tell you the truth, we're both a little bit soused."

The tall one's smile wavered, and he glanced at the Englishman's ear.

"My traveling companion," the Englishman said with a gesture in the tall man's direction.

"Elvis," the tall man supplied and shook my hand. He had to bend over, like a gorilla greeting a flea. "I'm real pleased to meet you."

He had an odd accent, too. His words were stretched out in a drawl and then snipped off at the ends, like sausage links. I began to wonder if these guys were from some former British colony—New Zealand, maybe, or Newfoundland or the Falklands—someplace with its own quirky dialect and accent.

"Henry," I said. "Go by Hank." I offered my hand to the other stranger as well, and he took it, though he almost missed the opportunity because he was glaring at Elvis.

“My name’s Smith,” he said. “Lawrence.”

“Mr. Henry,” Elvis repeated.

I shook my head. “Just Henry. Hank.”

“Like Henry Wadsworth Longfellow,” Elvis said. “By the shores of Gitchee Gumee—,” he recited. “And Henry Ford! And the bald boy in the funny papers—the funniest living American.”

“Plenty of Henrys,” I agreed. “Plenty of Lawrences. But not many Elvises.”

“I know,” he agreed happily. He slid onto the barstool next to me, tucking his long legs under the bar by bending his knees. “What are we drinking, cats?”

I ordered him a draft.

“Did you tell Lawrence how to find D.C.?” he asked.

“S all right here,” I said, and tapped my fingertip on the bar. But the lines weren’t as straight as they had been, and Lawrence’s elbow was white. “Hey!” I pointed at his elbow. “You’ve wiped out Breezewood. You can’t get there without going through Breezewood! You can’t get anywhere without going through Breezewood.”

Lawrence squinted at the bar. “And where, I might ask, did Indianapolis go?”

He had a hard time with “Indianapolis,” but that was understandable under the circumstances. There were a few syllables left over when he finally got it out.

“Aww, Indianapolis isn’t worth bothering about,” I said. “Best thing is to go around it.” I saw his syllables and raised him two. I leaned down and blew away the remains of Indianapolis, then traced the quarter-circle of I 465 in pepper.

Elvis took a sip of beer. “Very delicious,” he said. “It appears to contain a great deal of air.” He looked down the bar. “Do they have Cracker Jacks?” he asked hopefully.

There was a commotion all around us. Lawrence, who, from his expression after two beers, showed all the signs of sliding into depression as well, didn't even look up. Elvis did, and noticed the television screen suspended above the bar to our left.

"Basketball!" he said. "I love this game. Bill Spivey is swell." He produced the last word like a parlor trick.

A short, stubble-studded dark-haired man sitting at the bar on our right made a noise. "Bill Spivey was arrested for point-shaving," he said to the fly-specked mirror behind the bar. "Him and his pals cost the Wildcats their next season."

"No!" Elvis turned to look at him. "When did this happen?"

The man regarded him with amusement. "Couple years before you tried on your first blue-suede shoes, Sonny," he said. "Nineteen fifty-one."

"I find this difficult to believe!" Elvis declared. "What is this 'point-shaving'?" he asked me.

Down the bar to our left, a youngish guy wearing a bowling shirt and a blond ponytail said, "Spivey was framed, man. He wasn't even convicted. Fuckin' shame he never made it to the N.B.A."

I started to explain, but I couldn't be heard now above the din of Hoosiermania.

"Who's playing in this game?" Elvis shouted in my ear.

"Hoosiers and Bruins," I said. Then, recalling how clueless his sidekick was, I added, "Indiana and U.C.L.A."

But he surprised me. "John Wooden's team," he said, nodding. "He is a swell coach."

Indiana's Stemler hit a three-pointer and the room was on its feet.

"Your friend doesn't seem much interested in basketball," I said to Elvis.

He leaned down again to shout in my ear. “He’s missing his family. He hasn’t seen them in millennia. He’s always like this when he drinks alcohol. He forgets to remember to forget.” He turned his attention back to the television. “But why did that team get three points for that basket?”

I explained about the three-point line, rather pleased to be asked a question I could answer. Inspired by the stranger’s interest, I was finally beginning to catch some of the enthusiasm around me. Indiana was trailing, but the game was close, with less than two minutes to the final buzzer.

U.C.L.A.’s Afflalo hit two free throws. Amid the groans and the curses, one voice with a Southern drawl was heard to say, “Oh, he made both of them! That was swell!”

A few heads near us turned, but with thirty-eight seconds to go now, most eyes were glued to the television. In front of the Indiana bench, Stemler was struggling to get the ball in-bounds, when U.C.L.A.’s Collison got a hand on it and stole it, drawing a desperation foul from Calloway.

“Oh, look!” Elvis had risen from his bar stool in excitement. His height seemed to give added volume to his voice. “A steal! Wow!” In the silence that dropped like a guillotine, he was the only one clapping.

I took one look at the faces turned in our direction, and got a grip on the big man’s elbow. “Come on,” I said. “Time to go.”

“But the game isn’t over, Hank,” he protested.

“It is over,” I said. “Trust me.”

With my free hand, I set Lawrence’s hat on his head and took hold of his sleeve. “Time to go, Larry,” I said.

I nearly lost my balance as Lawrence slid off his stool and crashed into me. I got an arm around his waist and hoisted him, still tugging on Elvis. The silence had yielded to a menacing rumble, and I was counting off the seconds in my head like an in-bounder on the sideline. Elvis's size would discourage any sober man, but this mob wasn't sober. They were disappointed and angry, and they were looking for someone to take it out on. The blond ponytail on our left had picked up his beer and edged away from us.

A burly six-footer in a green work shirt with "Duffy" stitched over his heart looked the type to throw the first punch. "Whatta you?" he bawled. "A fuckin' Bruin? You look like you could be a fuckin' Bruin."

"Don't have a cow, man," the big guy protested. He made a placating motion with his hands, except that his palms were turned toward him.

Lawrence was more or less on his feet now, and appeared to have taken in the situation. He spoke sharply—something that sounded like "Yarp!" Then he said something else I didn't catch.

To me, Elvis said, "Hank, I am only exercising my First Amendment right to free speech, isn't that right?"

"Not the best time to be doing that, big guy."

There was another exchange between Lawrence and Elvis as I dragged Lawrence toward the door. Elvis, a giant redwood to my sapling, wasn't druggable. The language they used wasn't a language I spoke or recognized. Turkish? Icelandic? Duffy moved in and gave Elvis a belligerent shove. It was a challenge to get in the big man's face, but Duffy was trying, dancing on his toes.

“You a fuckin’ Bruin *and* a fuckin’ foreigner?” he growled. “Or is that the way they talk out there in Los Angeleez?” His buddies were closing in behind him.

Elvis turned in apparent bewilderment. “Hank, why is he so frosted?”

Lawrence spoke again and I said, “Come on, before you start a riot.”

Elvis turned then and headed for the door. That was when Duffy lowered his shoulder and charged. It must have been like trying to tackle a bridge pylon. Duffy slammed into Elvis and crumpled, which did nothing to endear Elvis to the home crowd.

I hit the parking lot running. Lawrence, to my relief, was keeping pace with me. Elvis brought up the rear, still protesting in that peculiar language. A cream-and-crimson mob of drunken Hoosier boosters was close on our heels. Luckily, we’d gained some time when they’d all stumbled over Duffy in their rush for the door.

I was headed for my vintage Escort, but Lawrence said, “This way.” His tone of command reached my feet first, and they veered off to follow him as he cleared the gravel and plunged into a thicket. I was gasping for air, but neither of my companions seemed the least bit winded. Elvis quickly outpaced us with his long strides. Behind us, the boosters were baying for blood.

We were in the woods now, feet pounding on ground softened by leaf mold and spring rain. Twigs crackled underfoot, branches snapped as we plowed through them. A startled owl added to the ruckus. Blinded by the dark, I couldn’t see anything when I felt Lawrence’s hand on my arm. “In here,” he said.

I heard a rustle, and then a faint whirring sound. A powerful paw lifted me into the air and set me down. Underneath me, the ground sloped up. At the top of the rise Lawrence plunged through a lit doorway, and I followed. When I turned around, Elvis was gazing back into the

darkness from which we'd emerged, a glint in his eyes which must have been a reflection off the interior lighting. He stood with his feet apart, grasped his lapels and flexed his shoulders.

“Yarp,” Lawrence said, in that commanding voice of his. Then he said something that sounded like, “Deglet orosco.”

Elvis turned back to us with a grin, and blinked at me in such a meaningful way that it could have been meant as a wink. The glint was gone. He put a hand on my shoulder and guided me down a hallway.

I thought that my panic must have been causing me to hallucinate, because we seemed to be inside a submarine of some kind. What I saw was seamless metallic walls curving into a ceiling—kind of like a stretched Airstream camper. It was lit by a glow from a source I couldn't spot. I followed Lawrence until we came to a large semicircular room that appeared to be a control room of some kind—all gleaming metal and instruments and screens. Not a submarine, then, but some kind of experimental military aircraft. Maybe Lawrence and Elvis were engineers, because they didn't seem like military types. I could still hear a hum, and feel a faint vibration through the soles of my sneakers. The air in the room faintly held Lawrence's own bouquet of pipe tobacco and aftershave, and, fainter still, a fruity scent I couldn't place.

“Welcome to our pad, Hank,” said Elvis.

“Sit here,” Lawrence instructed, and I did.

Before I could figure out how to fasten my buckle-less seatbelt, though, I heard a whoosh and we were airborne. Elvis was bracing himself with one hand on the back of my seat, but he swayed ominously as we rose. If he falls on me, I remember thinking, he'll flatten me. But he held his balance, still grinning at me. On one screen in front of me, I saw a receding image of



angry Hoosiers crashing around in the underbrush; they were curiously outlined in red light, as if through night-vision lenses.

“This heap can really burn rubber,” Elvis said.

The odd thing about our ascent, apart from its suddenness, was its verticality. This realization confirmed my suspicions that I was in some kind of experimental craft, since I’d read about an air force jet that could rise vertically and even hover above the ground and fly backwards. But I couldn’t believe how big the cockpit was. It had to accommodate Elvis, of course, but this place could have accommodated a regional gathering of Elvis impersonators.

“Can we drop you off somewhere, Hank?” Lawrence asked politely.

To my relief, he didn’t appear drunk, but I was pretty sure he was above the legal limit for piloting an aircraft. I hoped this thing had an autopilot.

“Why don’t you come to Washington, D.C., with us?” Elvis said. He had removed a comb from his pocket and was combing his hair. He gave me his lopsided smile. “It will be fun. Like Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady.”

“I’m still on Spring Break,” I admitted. I thought of my apartment, conspicuously empty now that all Anita’s stuff was gone, forlorn. I thought of the freshman research papers piled on my desk, full of feigned and grammatically suspect outrage over such transgressions as steroid use and music piracy. I thought of the barricade of dissertation books between me and my bed, and my laptop open accusingly on the kitchen table.

“To Breezewood, then?” Lawrence said, passing his hand over the panel in front of him.

“To Breezewood,” I said.

I was feeling lightheaded and overheated. I’d left a jacket in the bar, I now realized. “I don’t suppose they serve alcoholic beverages and peanuts on this flight?” I said.

“We can pick some up on the way,” said Elvis.