

# The Lights at Crawford Hills

by **Brendan DuBois,**

**Published: 2006**



They were on a wooded hill overlooking a ravine that the locals called Merl's Cut as the October afternoon settled into dusk. Patrolman Jay Newman sat on a moss-covered log, feet crossed, breaking small pine sticks into thumb-sized pieces of wood, which he tossed into a pile at his feet. A few feet from him Chief Frank Dow sat with his back against a white birch tree trunk, smoking a pipe. The chief wore the standard green uniform and like Jay, he also wore a green jacket with a shield and shoulder patch that said CRAWFORD POLICE. His face was red and if one looked closely, there was a tiny network of burst blood vessels that looked like a red spiderweb on one cheek. Jay looked over at the ravine, listening to the faint sound of water trickling along a stream making its way to the bottom. He was twenty-eight years old and hoped his face wouldn't look as bad as that when he got older.

„Sorry I'm tying up your Saturday night, Jay,” the chief said, gently sucking at the black pipe stem.

„It's all right, Chief,” Jay said, lying, because it sure as hell wasn't all right. Earlier, he had planned a date with a young woman who worked at the Crawford Savings & Loan. Not much of a date—a dinner in town and a movie over at Drake's Mill, which had the only movie theater in this part of the

county—but he had to cancel it all. Instead of some lovely female company, he was here, miles away from the center of Crawford village and almost everything else civilized, all because of a crazy old woman. But when you and the chief make up two-thirds of the department, and when the other third of the department is on vacation up in Maine, well, there isn't much else you can do.

The chief puffed on his pipe, letting a thin stream of smoke escape from his lips. „It'll be dark soon,” he said. „Mrs. Tate said the lights appear about an hour after that.”

Jay felt like sighing in exasperation, but decided to talk instead. He was still on probation, for another month, and this old man had his future in his nicotine-stained hands.

„Tell me, Chief, if Mrs. Tate wasn't Brian Tate's mother, would we even be here? I mean, the woman's pretty old. She's almost senile.”

„Why do you say that?”

Jay shrugged, snapped another piece of wood in his hands. „C'mon, Chief, the old lady said aliens are landing up here every Saturday night and killing people. I mean, if she was any other old lady in town, I don't think you'd be here, and me as well.”

The chief leaned back against the tree, his leather gear creaking. „Mrs. Tate may be the mother of the selectmen chairman, but she's also a taxpayer here, and she filed a complaint with the department—”

„About trespassing Martians?”

„No, about someone trespassing on her land at night.”

„You must've helped her write out the complaint.”

„Maybe I did. But she thinks someone's out here at night, and she says she finds bloodstains on the ground the next day. You've got to check it out, even if it does look like you're wasting your time.”

Jay nodded and reached around for another stick to break into pieces. They were sitting a few yards away from the town's only police cruiser, which was parked on a dirt turnabout that marked the end of Pomeroy Road. Jay had been with the Crawford Police Department for only four months and he was still trying to get used to the different pace of the job. Five months ago he had been a patrolman in one of the industrial cities near Boston, and had been on that job for five years, until the bad dreams started. Dreams of entering a crackhouse, all by himself. Dreams of doing a motor-vehicle stop in the middle of the city, with no backup. Dreams of responding to a night alarm at a bank, with his radio broken. And in all of the dreams, his weapon hadn't worked, had fallen to the ground, and the bad men had killed him, over and over again.

Even with the nightmares, he knew he was only suited for police work, and late at night, in his apartment, he would shudder with horror at pulling the pin and going to work as a security guard or armored-car driver or something equally depressing. But one day, after poring over the classifieds in a paper from New Hampshire, he had responded to an ad for a patrolman in Crawford. His pay had been reduced nearly fifty percent, but since the first day on patrol in this small town, the dreams had not once come back. At the time, it had seemed to be a fair exchange.

The woods were fairly quiet, and he had to concentrate to hear what was going on. There was the small rustle of leaves and branches being moved by the wind, the soft sighing from the chief as he smoked his pipe, and the gurgling of a hidden stream down towards the bottom of the ravine. A tree-covered hill rose

up on the other side of the ravine, and in the dimming light he could make out the distant mountain peaks. The town of Crawford was nestled right in the heart of the White Mountains, and the national forest was only about ten or so miles away. This part of the woods was called the Crawford Hills, and the nearest house was the one owned by Mrs. Tate. From Mrs. Tate's house, the homes were scattered every half-mile or so, until Pomeroy Road linked up with Mast Road, which was one of the few main roads in Crawford.

The chief startled him by speaking. „Where do you think the lights might be coming from, Jay?”

He suddenly realized how much darker it had gotten, just in the past few minutes. In the city, it was never really dark, because of all the lights from the cars, buildings, and streetlights. Even at midnight it was easy to get around without a flashlight. But here, there was nothing. The light gradually faded away until you realized you couldn't even make out the color of the parked cruiser, just a few yards away.

„Could be almost anything,” he finally said. „Kids playing, Boy Scouts camping.”

„And the bloodstains on the ground?”

„Christ, Chief, the lady's almost ninety. Who knows what she's been seeing.”

„That's right, who knows.” Now it had gotten so dark that Jay could only see the chief's face from the glowing ember of his pipe. „From where we're sitting there's probably only a few hundred people within fifty miles. These woods stretch all the way into Maine and up through Quebec, for hundreds of miles. You could hide a lot up here, Jay, quite a lot. You know, I've seen some things up here... especially at night... things that, well, I don't know.”

Jay thought the chief was trying to spook him with the old-timer's talk, so he tried to bring the topic back to ground. „Funny you should mention hiding. I've read some stories about farmers out in California and Oregon growing and hiding marijuana in the national forests. We just might have something like that going on right here, Chief.”

„The lights, then?”

„They might be moving the stuff out, bringing it out to Pomeroy Road or one of the old logging roads.”

„The bloodstains?”

A stick snapped in his fingers, and his hands suddenly felt moist. „Well, if they're into drug smuggling, maybe...”

„Yeah, I know. They gotta protect what they're growing.”

The chief tapped out his pipe on a tree trunk, the noise sounding like he was tapping something hollow. Even though it was now completely dark, he knew what the chief was doing, just from the sounds. The scritch-scratch as he cleaned the pipe's bowl with his penknife. The rustle of paper as he refilled the bowl with tobacco. And the scratch-growl as he lit a match and the sucking noise as he puffed the pipe back to life. It was a comforting sound, and even though it was going to be a cold night—it was a week until Halloween—he felt quite warm. But then he shivered, remembering a news photo he had seen of some captured marijuana growers from out West. They were all armed with automatic weapons. Now he wished he had worn his bulletproof vest.

„Chief,” he said, his voice sounding loud in the dark. „Do you want me to get the shotguns from the cruiser?”

There was a pause, and Jay wondered if the chief hadn't heard him, and then he said, „Nooo, I don't think so, Jay. I think we're all set.”

„All right.”

The log he was sitting on was suddenly uncomfortable. It felt as though a piece of broken-off branch was now jutting into his right thigh, but as he started to move, he stopped. His feet were rustling the leaves and branches on the ground and it was making too much noise. Someone (or something, a part of him thought) might hear him, and he didn't want that, not at all. It had gotten so dark that he had a hard time making out the shape of the chief sitting near him, even with the glow from the pipe's ember, and the police cruiser was a dark bulk in the shadows. He suddenly remembered all those childhood stories, the tales told around Boy Scout campfires, of terrible bears and creatures in the forests, the abandoned mines that held crazed hermits, and the ten-foot-tall Windigo, which ate human flesh.

Jay tried to push the dark thoughts out of his mind, and he touched his holstered pistol, but it was small comfort. He looked all around him, seeking a light, something warm, something familiar, a streetlight or a headlight or a lit window from a house miles away, but there was nothing save the darkness and the faint shapes of the trees. He remembered what the chief said, of hundreds of miles of woods stretching all the way into Canada and beyond, and he thought again of what type of people just might live in those woods, hiding themselves and everything else from the outside world. He had a feeling that he and the chief were outnumbered and exposed, being watched and evaluated, and he wished they were in the cruiser, the engine running, the radio playing, and the doors locked. He looked up at the sky and saw a few stars and the darker bulk of the nearby hills, and he was about to make up his mind to ask the chief if they could go into the cruiser.

Then the lights came.

\* \* \* \* \*

About six hours earlier they had stopped at the home of Agatha Tate, who had called the chief about the lights and who was also the mother of Brian Tate, the chairman of the three-member board of selectmen. He had gone with the chief and as they drove in the old Ford cruiser (the odometer was on its second trip to one hundred thousand miles) the chief explained the complaint.

„Sure, she might sound nuts, Jay,” he had said, steering with one hand and holding his pipe in the other. „Martians landing in her backyard and killing people. But she is a taxpayer, and she is the mother of Brian Tate. Brian's got a lot of power here in Crawford, and my budget's coming up for review next month. Brian and I get along all right now, but come budget time, he's also gonna remember that we helped out his momma, and that might help us get a new cruiser. This is Crawford, Jay, not Brockton or Medford. People take their police work seriously up here.”

Which certainly was true, Jay thought. Complaints here in Crawford that wouldn't have even been logged in at his old job in Massachusetts—like bent car radio antennas or broken mailboxes—not only were they reported here, but the people in town actually expected you to go out and investigate them. And follow up with a phone call or a visit a week or so later, to give them an update.

Mrs. Tate's house was the last one on the dirt road, a two-story wooden structure that looked as if it was at least two hundred years old. Any paint on the thin clapboards had faded away to a dull gray, and the yard was full of a

mishmash of old barrels, rotting boxes, piles of rusting chicken wire, and scraps of wood. Cats and chickens prowled and pecked around a rust-colored 1940s-era Ford with no wheels and no roof.

Inside the house it was tough going, with piles and piles of yellowed newspapers and magazines, tied together with twine, blocking the floors and hallways. The floors were made of wide, rough-hewn planks, and even more cats had the run of the house inside. Mrs. Tate was sitting at a wooden kitchen table, puffing on a cigarette. She was in her late eighties, thin and stooped over, wearing a shapeless flowered dress. Her skin was wrinkled and looked dry, and her eyeglasses had thick lenses. Her hair was so thick and blond it had to be a wig. She was hard of hearing, and the chief had to almost yell at her to be understood. Mrs. Tate shouted back, as if she thought everyone had the same level of hearing as she.

„It’s been like this, Frank,” she yelled, her hands quivering as she moved an ashtray closer to her. „Every goddamn Saturday night the past month they’ve been landing up there in the ravine. I seen the lights, every Saturday night. ‘Course, I ain’t dumb enough to take a peek up there at that moment, so I goes up Sunday morning, before my son Brian picks me up for church. Sure enough, there’s bloodstains up there on the ground. It’s a scary thing, Frank, to think of what they’re doing.”

„Who do you think’s up there, Aggie?” the chief asked, his voice still loud, his hands politely folded in front of him on the table.

„Hmmp,” she grunted. She reached behind her on a cutting bench and pulled down a few newspapers. Jay recognized them instantly as the tabloids one saw at the supermarket checkout line. One headline read: UFO ALIENS KIDNAPPED MY TWINS. Jay felt like rolling his eyes. What a way to spend a day.

„It’s all right here, Frank,” she shouted, opening the papers. „I read ‘em every week, though Brian doesn’t like it when I buy ‘em. Aliens are all around us, and they’re gettin’ ready to make their move. It says here in one of these papers—I’m not sure which one—that the aliens have agents here, people who are renegades and who are workin’ for ‘em. Well, this story says that sometimes the aliens get mad at their agents and kill ‘em, but you never find the bodies. That’s why so many people are reported missing each year and they’re never found. Well, hell, this is as good a place as any to take ‘em and kill ‘em, right up there on Crawford Hills.”

Jay nodded his head and looked around the cluttered kitchen, at the sink overflowing with dishes, the half-opened cans of cat food on the floor, the piles of newspapers. A black-and-white cat with one gray paw jumped up to the sink and started licking from a water-filled casserole dish. He wondered if Mrs. Tate had any thought, any inkling, when she was young, that she would end up here, old and alone, living in a big house at the edge of a wilderness, huddling in fear some nights because of aliens in the backyard. He could see how her mind might have started slipping. She was almost a mile from her nearest neighbor, with only a thin electrical line and telephone cable connecting her to the outside world. He wondered what it was like up here when the winter storms started, when the electricity failed, and when the town plows couldn’t make it up the steep hills.

„What do you think, young man? Jay, that’s your name, ain’t it? Do you believe in aliens?”

Jay coughed, trying to think of a polite answer. „Well, ma’am, I don’t think I’ve ever seen one.”

Mrs. Tate giggled. „When you get to my age, young man, you won’t believe what you’ve seen over the years. Where are you from, anyway?”

„Newburyport, originally.”

„That’s in Massachusetts, ain’t it?”

„Yes, it is.”

She frowned. „Now, Frank, he seems like a nice boy, but wasn’t there anybody local you could hire? I mean—”

The chief interrupted her. „Oh, come on, Aggie, don’t pick on him. He was the best qualified and he’s doing a good job. Listen, do you have any of your cider around? I’m a bit thirsty.”

Jay declined the offer of a drink from Mrs. Tate after he saw the old woman dump gray water out of a glass in the sink and then fill it up with cider from a jug in the refrigerator. Jay’s stomach did a slow roll, but the chief drank it down in one long swallow.

„Ah, good stuff, Aggie. Still make it from the apples out back?”

„Of course I do. I won’t have store-bought cider in my house.”

„Deer still stealing your apples?”

She waved a wrinkled hand at him. „Oh, of course, especially now winter’s on its way, but I don’t mind. There’s enough for all of us.”

The chief got up from the kitchen table and Jay joined him. „Don’t you worry now, Aggie, we’ll be out there tonight.”

And Jay thought, Great, a date with great potential stopped in its tracks by a UFO-believing old lady.

\* \* \* \* \*

The lights were a chain of bright dots against the sky, arching about in a semicircle and settling down against the bulk of the hill on the other side of the ravine. The lights flared up for a moment and then they started moving, like a lazy snake, down the side of the hill, a chain of ten or eleven. Jay watched them, his hand on his pistol, and he realized he had been holding his breath.

„Chief?”

„Yeah,” he said. „I see ‘em.”

There was a rustle of leaves and branches, and he saw the form of the chief standing up. Jay stood up as well and joined him. When he got to him, he could smell his pipe. It was a comforting feeling.

„Looks like flashlights,” Jay whispered.

„Could be. But they sure move awfully fast. Let’s go at them, Jay.”

The chief started making his way down the side of the ravine, to the stream and the slope of the other hill. Jay followed, keeping an arm out to fend off low branches and brambles, but even then he felt an occasional sting on his face as a branch whipped at him. It was slow going and his back felt tingly, as if something was drawing a target on him. God, he thought, as he struggled to keep his balance, if this had been happening at his old job he’d have at least two or three cruisers for backup, but this was it, the entire on-duty Crawford police force, heading towards God-knows-what. He supposed the chief could have called the county dispatch for a deputy sheriff or a state trooper to swing by, but he was sure the nearest unit was at least a half-hour away.

They reached the stream, and Jay’s boots sank into a stretch of mud, making a squishing noise as they forded the shallow stream. The lights were now above

them, up near the peak of the slope. They were white and wavering, and occasionally one would dart out, like a thin searchlight beam. He tried hard to swallow, to clear his throat, but his mouth was very dry and his tongue seemed to stick to the roof of his mouth. All he could hear was his own harsh breathing and the snap and crunch of branches being broken and leaves being stepped on as he and the chief made their way up the hill. He reached down to his weapon more than once, but each time his hand touched the cool metal of his pistol he would draw back. This was no time to draw out his weapon, not here, where a trip or a fall could fire off an accidental shot.

The chief stopped, an arm out at his side. Jay came up to him, smelling the stench of sweat. He wondered what was going on in the chief's mind.

„Jay, what do you think?” the chief whispered.

„Not sure, it might be—”

The world seemed to explode.

A line of three or four lights suddenly blazed forth in an orange flare above the other lights, and the ravine echoed and reechoed with hollow booms. The chief grabbed at him and Jay fell to the ground with him, scratching his face and hands in the process, and he thought, We're being shot at, first time ever in our job, we're being shot at. Someone is trying to kill us both, and a rational part of him listened to a whiz-scrape-scrape as a bullet flew over them, passing through the tree branches.

Everything seemed to move too fast. He got up on his hands and knees, trying to decipher what in hell was going on, and there was another barrage of gunfire. The chief tugged at his holster belt.

„Down, you idiot!” the chief whispered. „We're way outgunned.”

He went back on his stomach, the cold ground seeming to suck away the warmth from his body. He held his right arm out straight, the pistol grasped tight in his fist, and his heart was pounding so hard it was like a muted hum in his chest. He was breathing so fast he was scared he couldn't hear anything coming closer to him, so he tried to hold his breath every few moments, but that didn't work. All he could see were the lights, way up on the slope of the hill, and a twisted tangle of shadows and shapes on all sides. He was trying hard to make out what was in front of him when the chief slid over.

„Look,” he said. „The lights are gone.”

So they were. Jay stood up with the chief and they resumed their fast walk up the hill, and after a while, the chief switched on a small flashlight. He cupped the end of the flashlight with his fist, so only a little light leaked out. Jay was clambering over a large branch that had cracked off an evergreen when part of it snagged on his holster and he fell, scratching his hands yet again. It was wet where he had fallen, as if he had tripped into a muddy spot. The chief flashed his light at him.

„All right?”

„Yeah,” he said, sitting up. „But it's wet over here. Looks like I fell in some mud.”

The chief knelt down and pointed the flashlight to the ground, his hand still blocking most of the beam, and Jay felt his stomach tense up. His hands were smeared with rust-brown stains.

„Blood,” was all the chief said.

Jay got up, rubbing his hands furiously on his pants. Blood. The chief moved his flashlight and Jay saw a pool of blood as wide as a bathtub on the ground.

He said, „Chief, the old lady’s right.”

„Yeah, looks that way, don’t it. I’ve seen enough. Come on, we’ve got some ground to cover.”

„Where? The top of the hill?”

„Nope.” The chief took his free hand away from the flashlight, and Jay blinked hard against the bright glare. „Back to the cruiser.”

\* \* \* \* \*

As the chief sped the cruiser down the dirt road, the flashing from the light bar on the cruiser’s roof lit up the surrounding woods with a bright blue glare. The chief said, “Look at it this way, Jay. If whoever was up there wants to get out, the only place they can use is Mast Road. We’re gonna get there first and cut those suckers off.”

The cruiser roared by Agatha Tate’s house and Jay nodded a greeting as they went by. Well, lady, he thought, we found your lights and we found your blood, but we didn’t find your aliens. But what in hell did we find?

„Execution,” he said aloud.

„What?” the chief asked.

„You know, she was almost right, people were being killed up there. Not aliens. Hell, not that. But I bet there’s pot being grown up there, Chief, and I bet you a breakfast at Dino’s that if we look hard enough, maybe get the DEA involved, you find some serious crops up there. And you know what they do out in California if you trespass on those pot fields? Bang. Taken care of.”

The chief just nodded. Jay spoke up again, reaching down to the radio microphone. „Should I put a call in to county for backup?”

The cruiser made a sharp corner and he could hear gravel being kicked up by the tires.

„No,” the chief finally said. „It’ll take them too long to get here, and I think we can take care of it by ourselves. Honest.”

Jay drew his hand back and bit his lip in frustration. A few minutes ago he had been playing George the Groundhog, burrowing in the dirt, trying to get his head blown off while World War III nearly broke out, and now the chief wanted to play small-town hero. He looked down at his hands. From the dashboard lights he saw the brown flecks of dried blood still sticking to his skin, and he rubbed his hands again on his pants legs.

But the blood remained.

He said, „Chief, look, there are at least four or five guys up there, all with guns, and you want to take care of it by yourselves?”

They came to the Mast Road intersection and the chief slid the cruiser to a stop, and then made a hard left turn. The blue strobe lights lit up the intersection.

„Chief? Don’t we need backup?”

The chief gave him a quick look, his face tight, as they roared up the narrow country road. „Jay, look, I’m trying to drive the goddamn cruiser, so will you please shut up?”

Jay grabbed the armrest as the cruiser made another tight curve and he thought, That’s it, I’m going back to bad dreams in a big department. Better than being held hostage to a small department with a chief who has a hero complex. This night’s probably the most excitement he’s had all year, and he has to make the most of it by playing Super Chief. No doubt the old geezer



imagined his picture and an approving story on the front page of next week's Crawford Chronicle.

The road was narrow blacktop, with no yellow line down the middle, not much of a shoulder on either side. There were no streetlights, few houses, and every now and then, the cruiser's headlights would catch the quick gleam of an animal's eyes glowing by the side of the road.

The chief switched on the side spotlight, and Jay wondered what he was looking for. He was going to ask, but no, screw it, this was the chief's show.

They passed a car on a straight portion of the road, a late-model Ford Taurus with New York plates. Jay turned in his seat to look at the car as the cruiser flew by.

„Chief, we just passed that car. It had New York plates.”

„Yeah,” the chief said.

„Well, don't you want to check it?”

„Nope.”

Fine, he thought.

Another car was pulled to the side, a Volkswagen with Vermont plates. Nothing. Jay squirmed in his seat. What in hell was going on?

Then, a pickup truck, coming from the opposite direction. The chief swore under his breath and slammed on the brakes. The cruiser skidded to a stop and the chief swung the steering wheel about and made a sloppy U-turn, almost losing the cruiser's rear wheels in a drainage ditch. The chief slapped a switch on the console and the siren screamed into life, and they bore up fast on the pickup truck, which quickly pulled over to the side. There seemed to be three men sitting in the cab.

The chief snapped open his holster, took out his flashlight, and turned to Jay. „Just play along, Jay, you'll see what's up soon enough.”

Jay nodded and joined the chief outside. The air was dramatically cooler. He had his hand on his service pistol—a Glock 10mm—and found himself drawing it out and keeping it close to his leg as he walked up to the truck. In the rear window of the cab was a gun rack, with three hunting rifles stretched across. So that's why the chief stopped them, he thought, walking up to the right side of the truck and switching on his own flashlight. But how could the chief have known the truck had a gun rack when it was heading towards us?

The chief walked up to the driver's side of the cab and started talking to the guys inside. He played his flashlight across the interior of the cab. Jay stayed at the rear, towards the right, keeping an eye on the two passengers. All three looked to be in their late twenties, early thirties. The truck was a black Ford, dented and dirty, with oversized tires and a tarpaulin pulled over the truck bed. He stepped closer to the rear of the truck to check the license plate, and he—

Froze.

Blood was dripping from the truck bed, through the bottom of the tailgate.

„Chief!” he yelled, stepping back, pistol held up high, and pulling the tarpaulin off with his other hand, looked down in shock at the jumble of bodies, the brown eyes, their limbs stiff and protruding.

When the arrest and the bookings were completed, Jay and the chief went to Dino's Diner, where the chief had his usual four-scrambled-eggs-and-sausage breakfast, but where Jay made do with a cup of coffee and a couple of slices of toast. The memory of what he had seen a few hours ago was still fresh in his mind, like an open wound.

Deer.

Dead deer.

All those shots, all those lights, all this fuss, over dead deer...

The chief looked over, chewing, and said, „You see, Jay, those guys from Albion were up there every Saturday night, jacking deer.” The chief swallowed, sawed off another piece of sausage. It was five-thirty in the morning and the diner was crowded with mill workers, farmers, and lumber truckers. The only women were the two waitresses, a mother-and-daughter team who both had tattoos on their arms.

„Jacking?” he asked.

„Yeah. Fish and Game are going to have a talk with them soon, just you wait and see. It’s illegal as hell, and besides, they were doing it out of season. They get in the woods at night, at a place where they know deer tend to congregate, and then they hit ‘em with lights. A strong flashlight is good enough, and the deer freeze and stand still, every time the light hits ‘em. They’ll stand there long enough so even a grandpa with palsy in his hands can shoot ‘em, which is why it’s against the law.”

Jay took a bite from his toast and picked up his coffee cup, and then quickly put it down.

„Hold it,” he said. „You knew right then, back at the house, you knew what was going on, didn’t you?”

„Hunh?”

„When you asked Mrs. Tate if the deer were still coming to her apple orchard, you were checking to see if deer were around, right? And no wonder she didn’t hear any shooting. She was stone deaf. You knew right then we were dealing with illegal hunters.”

The chief winked at him and ate another piece of sausage. „Let’s just say I had a suspicion... a pretty good one.”

„So why didn’t you tell me anything?”

„Well...” The chief chewed some more, swallowed. „Jay, something you should learn is to try to keep your feet on the ground a bit, especially around here. I mean, look at you and Mrs. Tate. You both take a little blood, some lights, and one of you has aliens landing up there and the other has drug dealers involved in ritual executions. I just took the same info, kept my feet on the ground, and worked with it.”

„How come you didn’t stop that first car, the one with the New York license plates?”

The chief shrugged. „Only one person in it. We saw more than one light. And the rear of the car was riding too high. If there were two or three deer in the trunk, it’d be riding low. You’re talking a few hundred pounds. No, I knew I was looking for a pickup truck or an SUV, and I just stopped the first truck we saw.”

Jay finished his coffee and the chief mopped up the last of his eggs with a piece of toast. After their waitress—the daughter—dropped off their check, Jay said, „That simple, then. It was that simple. But those lights, Chief, you must admit they were scary at first.”

The chief was silent for a bit, and then he said slowly, „Funny thing about those lights. How many did you see?”

„About ten or eleven.”

„Yeah, that’s about right. And those three boys were by themselves. That’s it. Even if they were carrying a flashlight in each hand, that only adds up to six. Where do you think those extra lights came from?”

Jay rubbed at his tired eyes, feeling the weariness sinking into his bones. The inside of the diner was getting lighter as the sun crawled its way up from the horizon.

„I give up, Chief. Where did those extra lights come from?”

The chief winked again, his face worn but happy-looking. „I don’t know. One of the older boys, he said that those lights flew right over their heads as they were coming over the crest of the ridge, and then disappeared. They didn’t make any sound. They weren’t in any particular shape. They were just there.”

Jay looked at the chief, to see if there was any humor in those eyes, and there wasn’t. Just a straight-on look. He said, „What are you saying? That there really were flying saucers out in Mrs. Tate’s backyard?”

„I’m not saying anything. All I know is that I saw those lights, and that’s enough for one night. Except for one thing.”

„Which is?”

The chief reached over, picked up the check, and dropped it in front of Jay. „Which is the bill, which is yours. Or don’t you remember the bet you made?”

Jay picked it up, reached for his wallet. „How the hell could I forget?”

---