



Proudly Presents

THE STAR-GAZER

WRITTEN BY JAKE BARTON

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ISBN 978-1-942109-69-3

I'm not a liar. Despite what anyone may think, I'm not. Sure, I've told the occasional white lie. *No, that outfit looks good on you. No, I don't think you're gaining weight. No, Mom, the chicken isn't dry at all.* But I've never had a reason to lie about things that really matter—like being abducted. Why would I lie about something like that? I wouldn't. That's the bottom line. I wouldn't.

I work at the local grocery store in town. I mainly stock the shelves, but they also have me work as a bagger up front when the cashiers are overwhelmed. The truth is most of the cashiers aren't 'overwhelmed.' They simply hate bagging the groceries. I guess, picking up twenty or so items and scanning them, too, is simply too much. Then, there are always the customers who say *'I forgot to get a gallon of milk' or 'I forgot to get an onion for tonight's meatloaf. Would you be a dear, and go grab that for me?'* I want to scream, "There are things called *lists*, people. If you're going to the store, make a list. Write down what you need. Go down the aisles and check off the items as you place them in your carts." Of course, in reality, I don't say this. Instead, I go get the customer the gallon of milk or onion. I don't mind retrieving forgotten grocery items for customers. I don't. It just baffles me how everyone I meet seems to overlook the obvious. I mean, if your cupboard is bare and you decide to make Hamburger Helper tonight, go to the store and pick up a box of Hamburger Helper. Don't, however, forget to pick up a pound of hamburger *for* the Hamburger Helper. I don't know. Maybe this whole town is overwhelmed.

I got the job this summer. When school started again, the manager said he would accommodate me—giving me enough time to do my homework and such if I'd stay on. It was a no-brainer. Money's tight, and my parents can't afford to pay for my gas and insurance. So I work thirty hours a week after school and on weekends, maintain an A-B average, and plan to go to college after graduation. You might have noticed my collegiate vocabulary. I do all of this, and yet, ironically, I seem to be the only person in

town who is *not* overwhelmed.

It was a Thursday evening. I had been bagging groceries for the overwhelmed 19-year-old, Cathy, and I had just finished retrieving the umpteenth item for the umpteenth absent-minded customer. Finally, I clocked out, walked to the parking lot, jumped in my car and was driving home, where I still had to finish two calculus worksheets and write a three-page essay over *Gulliver's Travels*. My parents and I live about sixteen miles from town. It's almost a straight shot, so it doesn't take long to drive down the desolate farm road. I remember it was dark, and there was a new moon. This made the stars shine even brighter for some reason. That's the one thing I've always enjoyed about living in a small town—watching the stars. Three years ago, my family took a vacation during spring break to visit relatives in Chicago. Chicago was impressive, but you couldn't really see the stars at night. Not like you can see them out here.

Anyway, I was driving home and had just tuned into my favorite radio station, when I saw a flash of light zoom directly over my car and then veer to the left. At first, I thought it was a falling star. I was trying to think of a quick wish to make, when I looked out through my driver's window and saw this object hovering in the sky. There isn't an airport within a hundred miles of where I live. In fact, you rarely see an airplane—except the occasional crop duster—flying over our town. This wasn't a helicopter either. It was way too big for that. Plus, there wasn't that helicopter sound—that staccato beat permeating the air. No, this was different. And then there were the colors—blue and green lights that made circular patterns—almost creating a light show of sorts. It was mesmerizing—almost hypnotic.

I stared at the object for about thirty seconds. It was scary because I wanted to watch non-stop, but I still had to keep my eyes on the road for fear of running *off* the road and into a field. The object then—almost as if in slow-motion—flew towards me and stopped directly over my car. There must have been some sort of strong