

# Summit City Lights

The Journal Gazette's summer fiction serial

## *About the author*



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# CHAPTER 1

**STORY BY BRIAN FRANCISCO • ILLUSTRATIONS BY LARA NEEL**

*The Journal Gazette*

Jake peered at the thing in the crater. He wondered whether it could see him.

Dozens of people circled the big, grassy divot in Smith Field – soldiers from the nearby National Guard armory, Homeland Security officials, FBI, police, airport personnel, engineers from local defense contractors. And Jake.

They had been prepared for this night.

Firetrucks and ambulances were arriving at the airport. Police put up barricades on Cook Road on the north side of Smith Field and on Ludwig Road on the south side. Nearby homes were evacuated. Cars and trucks traveling along Coldwater and Lima roads were directed past the area, producing bottlenecks of gawkers hoping to glimpse what had happened. They had been prepared for this night, too.

Jake felt smug, vindicated, relieved. Several years earlier, he had joined the fight to try to save the general aviation airport on Fort Wayne's north side. Citing low use, high costs and safety concerns, the Fort Wayne-Allen County Airport Authority board had decided to close Smith Field. But less than a year later, after protests and lawsuits from pilots and other airfield supporters, the board recanted.

Jake had been just a face in the crowd among the protesters. He did speak against the planned closing at an aviation board hearing, and his brief remarks were reported the next day in a newspaper article.

Jake wasn't a pilot or aviation hobbyist; he was rarely an airplane passenger. He never much cared for commercial flights, taking them only when his destination – a wedding, funeral, vacation, job interview – was too far away to drive in a day or two. He wasn't afraid of flying, he liked to tell people – he was afraid of crashing.

But as a homeowner living along Ludwig Road, he liked having Smith Field as a neighbor. The long, wide patch was flat, open and mostly green, leaving



**Photo by Samuel Hoffman and illustration by Lara Neel | The Journal Gazette**

a huge chunk of sky stretching overhead. Except for the occasional hum of a small, single-engine prop, the airstrip was quiet, although the buzzing was welcome because it gave Smith Field its purpose, its life. This sure beat living next to an apartment complex or a shopping center or a big-box store. There were enough of those in the area as it was.

Jake had made a habit of sitting in a lawn chair in his driveway in the evening, watching the Cessna and Piper Cherokee planes take off and land as he tried to sort out why his life hadn't turned out the way he had expected or hoped.

He was working another dead-end job, his goals and ambitions abandoned a long time ago. Now well into his 40s, he despaired at what he saw in the mirror: His black hair had thinned considerably and was nearly as much salt as pepper. His once-wiry frame was starting to slouch, and he'd grown a paunch. Occasional reading glasses had become full-time bifocals. He was living alone, talking to the walls, taking regular counsel from tall glasses of vodka and orange juice. At least he was getting lots of vitamin C.

Smith Field had gone the other direction. Not only had the airstrip been rescued, it had been revived. Indiana's oldest airport – it opened as Paul Baer Municipal Airport in 1925 – had rebuilt a runway with more than \$1 million in federal stimulus funds. A \$2.3 million maintenance hangar went up as a lab for students at Fort Wayne Community Schools and Ivy Tech Com-

munity College. More improvements were in the works. And plane traffic had increased dramatically at the airport renamed for local aviation pioneer Art Smith, known as “Bird Boy” nationally for his stunt-flying skills in the early 20th century.

But Smith Field would close for sure now, Jake realized as he looked into the crater. It no doubt would be

the scene of a federal investigation first and a research site later. Perhaps even a monument or memorial someday – although Jake didn’t know whether the thing in the ground had ever been alive or was now dead.

But whatever it turned out to be, it was the answer to Jake’s prayers.

## CHAPTER 2



Photo by Samuel Hoffman and Illustration by Lara Neel | The Journal Gazette

Two weeks before the crash, Jake was sitting at night in his lawn chair along Ludwig Road, swigging his vodka and orange juice in the summer heat, when he saw lights flickering over Smith Field.

They were dim and bluish. They hovered and darted, lifted and fell, skipping from the east side of the airport to the west side. Then, they disappeared.

They looked nothing like the movement of the small airplanes and helicopters Jake had been watching for years. Perhaps the lights along airport runways were reflecting off something – maybe the thick, dark clouds that were blanketing the city tonight. Jake decided to take a closer look.

He walked west along Ludwig, scanning the airport for signs of a landing or takeoff. And there it was again, a ring of blue lights climbing and sinking and spinning in the dark, perhaps 300 feet off the ground at the southwest end of the airfield. Then the lights vanished.

Jake jogged down the road in the direction of the lights. He nearly trotted into the path of a car; the driver honked his horn, and Jake scooted away, believing it was his concentration on the sky and not the liquor that had caused his carelessness.

He arrived at the area where he believed the lights had come from and stood by a fence, catching his breath.

He watched the sky for a while, then the field, then returned his view to the sky. Nothing stirred in the field and the air but insects.

Jake walked back to his house, frequently glancing over his left shoulder, the whisper of traffic on Lima Road behind him. If he'd seen anybody outdoors on his way, he would have stopped and asked about the lights. But the mosquitoes had been bad tonight, and Jake knew few of his neighbors by name or by sight, so he didn't bother hunting for a witness behind the wall of oak trees guarding Ludwig's front yards.

When he got home, Jake's teenage daughter was standing in the driveway. He had half-expected her. Jake told her about what he had just seen, jabbing a finger at the clouds over Smith Field.

Chelsea was hardly surprised. She always figured that sooner or later, her father – alone and lonely, drinking or drunk, lost in his memories – was bound to see something weird in the sky as much as he looked there.

Her parents had divorced several years earlier in a slow-motion breakup. Chelsea's mother had been married to her career as much as she was to Jake. Chelsea's father was the opposite, drifting from one job to another.

He was an architect who had little trouble finding work, but keeping it was a different matter. He felt confined working for small firms, and he was lost when he joined the staff of a bigger company. He was always ready to leave town for another job. His wife had lived in Fort Wayne all her life and had no intention of moving.

There were other problems along the way, of course – she wanted more children, he didn't – and while they insisted they still loved each other, they'd "fallen out of happiness together," Jake would say. So they split

up, and Jake moved to the Ludwig Park neighborhood south of Smith Field.

Chelsea lived with her mother but visited her father often. He made sure of that, buying Chelsea a car when she turned 16 and got her driver's license (it wasn't a popular purchase with her mother). As long as the girl stopped by to have a snack, help her father pick up around the house or talk about what her mother was up to these days – "baby-sitting duty," father and daughter called Chelsea's role – she could keep the car. Her father would even pay for gas, insurance and repairs.

Chelsea attended nearby Northrop High School, so it was convenient for her to see her father in the evenings after marching band practice. She sometimes coaxed him to the backyard for a cookout; she figured his neighbors thought it strange that a man would sit in a lawn chair by the road at night, and she was correct.

"So you believe that I saw what I said I saw," her father stammered.

"I believe **you** believe it," Chelsea said.

"I'm not saying I saw a UFO or a flying saucer or an angel or anything like that," Jake said.

"I'm not saying you did," Chelsea replied.

"But I had been looking for them," her father said. "Looking for the lights, that is."

He grabbed binoculars from under his lawn chair, where he also stored his vodka, orange juice, a thermos of ice and a can of mosquito spray.

"How long have you been peeping around with those?" his daughter wanted to know.

"Since I heard about this stuff on the radio," Jake said.

## CHAPTER 3

Jake once told his daughter that if she Googled "quiet resignation," she'd find a picture of him.

"I don't know about the 'quiet' part," she teased him.

Jake battled depression before his divorce. It had just

gotten worse since. He barely slept. He saw a doctor, ate pills, jogged, lifted weights. He quit caffeine and sugar. Nothing worked, not even increasing amounts of vodka.

Every night after watching the sky for hours, Jake

would finally go to bed. He'd lie awake reading a book – often a Cormac McCarthy novel to suit his dark, dreary mood – or listening to the radio on the nightstand, hoping to doze off for a few hours. He'd tuned in to music, sports and news; lately he had tried a nationally syndicated call-in show that solicits reports about aliens, ghosts and monsters. Jake realized the creepy tales he heard on “Coast to Coast AM” probably did more harm than good for his insomnia.

“Now we go to Fort Wayne, Indiana,” the show host said on a recent night.

The caller said he was Zach, a student at Indiana Tech in Fort Wayne and a member of a local astronomy club. The club on Saturdays sets up telescopes at Fox Island County Park southwest of Fort Wayne to study stars and planets.

Zach described strange blue lights that danced over Fox Island one evening. The Indiana Tech student had never seen anything in the sky that bounced around like these lights. They were low in the air, just above a tree line; he'd seen them with the unaided eye as he was packing up his telescope to leave the park, long after everyone else in the club had departed.

Jake turned up the volume on his nightstand radio. He'd never heard anybody from Fort Wayne call the show.

“I think I might have been the last person in the park that night,” Zach told his invisible audience. “I was wondering if anybody else has seen lights like those.”

People responded from around the country, telling about flashes and orbs in space they'd been seeing – in Carlsbad, Calif.; Tucson, Ariz.; Pittsburgh; and a week's worth of strange lights over Lake Erie in Cleveland.

A woman calling herself Marian came on the line to say that she, too, was from Fort Wayne, and while she hadn't seen anything – she was blind, she noted – she had been hearing static, beeps and buzzes on the single-frequency radio provided to her by Northeast Indiana Radio Reading Service. The noise was especially bothersome on the night the Indiana Tech student saw the lights over Fox Island.

Jake turned up the volume more. The NEIRRS station was in an office park on the other side of Smith Field



Photo and illustration by Lara Neel | The Journal Gazette

from his house.

Marian told the radio show she had complained to NEIRRS about the static. What could be causing it? Could she obtain another receiver?

“The station manager said she didn't know whether that would help,” Marian reported. “The reading service had gotten other reports of static from listeners on that night and at other times, and so far none of the receivers had been at fault.”

NEIRRS staff members had inspected their broadcasting equipment and studio gear, Marian said. Everything worked as it should. They checked with the commercial radio station that carries the reading service subchannel; no problems there, either.

“People are seeing blue lights in the sky **and** they are hearing weird beeps and buzzes on their special radio receivers,” the show host said curiously. “What in the world is going on in Fort Wayne, Indiana?”

The blind caller continued: The only thing the NEIRRS manager could think of was signal interference coming from aircraft at the nearby airport, Smith Field. The manager would check with airport officials, she had told Marian.

“There's also a radio telescope at the nearby high school,” Marian told her audience. “Maybe it is receiving signals that are leaking into my radio frequency. Or maybe the static is from the Fox Island lights, whatever they are.”

Jake didn't sleep a wink that night.

# CHAPTER 4



Photo by Dean Musser Jr. and illustration by Lara Neel | The Journal Gazette

The Allen County Homeland Security director made a point to drive past ITT Corp. around Memorial Day or the Fourth of July.

ITT dresses up for patriotic holidays. The defense contractor at Lima and Cook roads puts up a straight, proud row of American flags along the edge of its grounds.

But the Homeland Security director didn't take much notice of the flags today when he approached ITT. He was as interested in what might be going on inside the plant as outside it.

He had called ITT to say he was running a bit late for his appointment. His interviews with Smith Field personnel had taken longer than expected.

At ITT's two plants along Cook Road, guides walked the Homeland Security director around labs, testing rooms and manufacturing spaces where the company makes battlefield communications devices, and cameras and radio-wave sensors for weather satellites. He talked with executives, engineers, researchers and technicians. He already was well-versed on ITT and other defense contractors in the city – Raytheon Systems, General Dynamics, Northrop Grumman and BAE Systems. He would have the same question for officials at each of the plants that day:

“Are you testing any products in the Smith Field area that might emit bluish lights or interfere with radio signals?”

He hoped one of them was, if for no other reason than to quell the fears of people calling his office with sightings of UFOs on the north side of town. Of course, it might not explain the lights over Fox Island. Also, there had been a couple of calls to the sheriff's department about blinking blue lights over farmland east of Fort Wayne. A few people reported what they claimed was a hovercraft early one morning over the Old Fort along Spy Run Avenue near downtown. McMillen Park produced sightings, too.

None of the defense contractors was conducting such experiments, the Homeland Security director learned. Each company was in fact fielding calls about the various sightings. The businesses were willing to cooperate and participate in any investigation.

ITT officials in particular were curious; Smith Field was a stone's throw away on Cook Road. Although ITT conducts outdoor tests of its military communications devices – checking the range of the wireless gear, for example – it was nothing that would cast lights in the sky or cause static on a radio channel.

The Homeland Security director had another stop to

make while on the north side. He drove back by Smith Field, to the Ludwig Park neighborhood, to meet the guy who had been bugging airport personnel with questions about blue lights.

Jake welcomed the director into his ranch-style house. Jake was working from home that afternoon, he explained; he'd had a doctor's appointment in the morning. **Good thing**, his guest thought. Jake looked like he hadn't slept in a week – his eyes sank into his head, dark circles underneath, his salt-and-pepper hair tousled and tangled.

They made small talk. Jake introduced his guest to his daughter, who was just leaving for band practice at Northrop High School.

“What instrument do you play?” the Homeland Security director asked.

“Trumpet,” Chelsea replied.

“I played trombone many moons ago,” the official said.

Chelsea smiled and excused herself. She rolled her eyes at her father on her way out the door.

“What time,” she asked him, “are the little green men coming over tonight?”

“Kids got no respect these days,” Jake said.

“I know; I've got teenagers myself,” Jake's guest said. “Now, tell me about the lights you saw the other night.”

## CHAPTER 5



Photo by Jak Wonderly and illustration by Lara Neel | The Journal Gazette

“Reporting for duty, sir,” the ITT engineer said with a smile.

The base commander shook her hand.

“Welcome to the 122nd Fighter Wing,” he said.

“Homeland Security told me to expect you. I understand we're all part of a team now. What do you hear about our little operation out here on Ferguson Road?”

“Word has it the Blacksnakes are testing hovercraft for the federal government,” Cindy said. “It's going to be a huge contract and bring hundreds of jobs to the Air

National Guard in Fort Wayne.”

The commander returned the smile.

“That would be a hell of a deal if it were true,” he said.

“But no, it's just a rumor. There have been quite a few rumors lately about the 122nd.”

The engineer nodded.

“Same thing with ITT,” she said. “People see lights in the sky over a city with defense contractors and an air base, and they start speculating. Like when you threw a scare into Kokomo a couple of years ago.”

F-16 jets from the 122nd had produced sonic booms over Howard County. People said they saw fireballs in the sky.

“Those were flares during a training exercise,” the wing commander explained.

The commander said the 122nd Fighter Wing was in fact planning training maneuvers for a couple of “Warthogs” – A-10 Thunderbolt jets that were replacing the F-16 fleet at the base. The A-10s would be flying at times and places that Fort Wayne’s mysterious blue lights had been reported. The commander told the ITT engineer she’d receive reports on anything that was spotted.

That evening, four pilots flew their Warthogs from the base, adjacent to Fort Wayne International Airport, west over Fox Island, north up to Smith Field, back down the east side and across downtown, scanning the city with night-vision goggles.

There was no shortage of lights – from houses, restaurants, stores, streetlamps, broadcasting towers. Coliseum Boulevard glowed along much of its length. There were the spotlights beaming from Piere’s, the big nightclub on the northeast side. And the Three Rivers Festival lit up Headwaters Park.

“It’s a wonder anybody saw anything with all these lights,” one pilot radioed to others as they prepared to return to the south-side base.

Jake sat on his lawn chair in his driveway, just off Ludwig Road. He had watched the shapes of the A-10s as they passed over Smith Field. There was a full moon, and the summer days were getting longer. It was light enough that he could still see a crowd of people milling around by the Smith Field maintenance training hangar.

Jake recognized one man as the Homeland Security director. And, of course, he knew the mayor by sight.

“Are you certain?” asked The Journal Gazette reporter standing next to Jake’s lawn chair. “How do you know those people are over there? They’re too far away, and it’s getting dark.”

“Here,” Jake said, “look through these binoculars.”

She did.

“You’re right; it’s no wonder airport personnel wouldn’t let me in the gate earlier,” she said. “Good thing I spotted you in your driveway.”

“I’m here nightly,” Jake replied. “All week, every week.”

The reporter had heard about the strange lights over Smith Field and elsewhere, and Jake told her about what he’d seen. An hour later, the reporter, the Smith Field gathering and the F-10s were long gone, and Jake went inside his house. Nothing more to look at tonight but the pages of a book, he decided.

Jake heard a car pull into his driveway. He looked out the picture window. His daughter was bounding up to the front door.

“It’s kind of late for you to be here,” Jake said to Chelsea.

“We went out after band practice for ice cream,” she said.

Jake started to tell Chelsea about his night.

“There’s something going on,” Jake said, “unless I’m just plain crazy.”

“Then that makes two of us,” Chelsea said.

# CHAPTER 6



Photo by Dean Musser Jr. and illustration by Lara Neel | The Journal Gazette

Chelsea had been sitting on the hood of her car in the parking lot at Northrop High School. She was tired, and her feet were sore; she wasn't in marching band shape yet.

On the nights after practice that she didn't visit her father, Chelsea usually went out for a pizza with a few of her band mates. Sometimes they'd go to somebody's house and watch a DVD. Tonight they had gone to Zesto for ice cream.

Chelsea was the last person left in the Northrop parking lot. She leaned back on the car hood and gazed into the sky. She wanted to imagine what her father felt like, all alone, staring into one starry night after another.

Chelsea resembled her mother. Both were short and thin, with brown doe eyes and black hair. But while her mother was cautious and analytical, Chelsea was impulsive and restless, like her father.

Her parents seldom saw each other after the divorce.

Jake had had a few first dates, but he usually ended up blathering on about his ex-wife, so second dates were rare. (For her part, Chelsea had done her best to chase off at least a couple of her mother's suitors.) Most of Jake's male friends were married; if he saw one, it was typically over lunch. Even then, he tended to brood.

Jake had told Chelsea all this, but she hadn't told her mother. Neither had Chelsea told her mother that her ex-husband had said he'd seen a UFO.

## **Did he really see something in the sky that night**

Chelsea wondered, surveying the sky herself.

Chelsea gasped. South of the school parking lot, over a meadow that stretched almost to Ludwig Road, a hazy ring of blue lights hung in the air.

She blinked twice, and they were still there, maybe a few hundred feet above the ground.

The lights began tilting and turning, like a midway ride at a summer fair. Chelsea was at least 200 yards

away from them, but she could see they formed an oval several feet in diameter, perhaps bigger. It was hard to be analytical like her mom – her heart was racing. Then the lights dropped from sight.

Chelsea jumped off the car hood, dived into the front seat, turned the ignition and sped off for her father’s house. She drove south on Coldwater Road and then west on Ludwig, pressing her face near the windshield as she passed the meadow where the lights had floated. She was excited and scared at the same time.

Jake listened to Chelsea’s description. It was the same one he had given earlier in the evening to the newspaper reporter.

The lights had been too far away to see from his neighborhood, and there were too many houses and trees obstructing his view, anyway.

“If only the fighter jets had still been around,” Jake lamented. “They say the Warthogs are really nimble at low altitudes.”

“I couldn’t have been the only person to have seen the lights,” Chelsea said. “Anybody driving south on

Coldwater would have, and maybe people driving north, too. It might not have been rush hour, but it wasn’t the middle of the night, either.”

Her father suggested Chelsea call the newspaper reporter he had talked with, but she begged off. It was bad enough that her father might be in a story about flying saucers. What would her mother think if both of them were? What would Chelsea’s friends think?

Her father was quoted in the story – under the headline “Summit City lights: Mysterious flying object spotted on north side” – in The Journal Gazette’s print and online editions. Other people were, too. Both the newspaper and the police department had received several phone calls from motorists and neighborhood residents who said they saw blue lights in the sky along Coldwater Road south of Northrop High School.

The Homeland Security director confirmed in the story that authorities had been investigating a similar, earlier sighting in the area. And the mayor said he wanted answers.

## CHAPTER 7

“Are these people nuts, or is there a flying saucer zipping around Fort Wayne?”

The WOWO talk show host expected a flood of calls. Radio listeners had had all day to mull over the “Summit City lights” story in the morning paper.

The flood began.

“That guy on Ludwig Road is making this up. He just wants to see his name in the paper.”

“Other people saw the lights; total strangers couldn’t be in on the same fabrication.”

“They’re testing drones up there at Smith Field again. You know the military secretly built wood drones there during World War II, don’t you? They used them as guided missiles in the Pacific.”

“ITT, Raytheon, the Air National Guard – the whole bunch, they’re in cahoots.”

“It’s a hoax; remember the balloon boy out in Colo-



Photo and illustration by Lara Neel | The Journal Gazette

rado?”

“Aliens are in Fort Wayne; they’re flying around in a silver spaceship the size of a Volkswagen Beetle. I saw it myself.”

“Whether it’s aliens or the government, you’d better have your guns ready.”

A couple of people who saw the lights while driving along Coldwater Road answered questions from the talk show host. Their accounts were similar: a circle of blue lights that seemed to spring up and down in the air south of Northrop High School. One witness said he took a picture with a cell phone, but the image was too dark and blurry to distinguish anything.

WOWO had found Jake and asked him to be on the broadcast. He declined, saying he didn't have anything to add that wasn't already in the newspaper.

Jake was at work. He didn't have a radio in his cubicle; he didn't need one. He'd heard all of this once already today when colleagues at the architectural firm teased him about the "Summit City lights" story, then debated the credibility of "Jake the flake," as one worker called him, and the other people quoted by the newspaper.

He could have talked about the blue lights his daughter had seen, but he wouldn't have done that to her. She hadn't even told her mother yet. As it was, Jake was second-guessing himself about speaking with the reporter, afraid he had embarrassed Chelsea even if she now knew he hadn't been hallucinating or imagining things.

"Talk to the Fox Island guy," Jake had suggested to WOWO. "It's not just the Smith Field area where lights have been spotted, you know."

And that's what the Indiana Tech student told the show when his call got through. Zach talked in detail about the blue lights he had reported earlier to the late-night radio program.

"Whatever it is, it is an engineering marvel," Zach said. "It's the most agile aircraft I've ever seen. But it's far too small for a human to fit inside."

Jake's co-workers gathered at a radio in one corner of the office and listened to their earlier debate repeated by other voices.

"It's a government cover-up," one caller insisted.

"It's a business promotion; everybody's got those LED signs now," another said.

"It's fireflies. They're turning blue from all the mosquito poison that's sprayed around this town."

"It's the jets from the 122nd Fighter Wing – they're shooting lasers these days."

"It's the heat."

"It's the humidity – this is an atmospheric phenomenon."

The mayor called the show.

"The time has come for a fact-finding mission," he announced.

The mayor had contacted Homeland Security, the defense contractors, the Air National Guard, Smith Field, Fort Wayne International Airport and others. He wanted to assemble their representatives for a town-hall meeting.

"Let's hear from them and from the public," he said. "Six o'clock Thursday night at Anthis Career Center."

## CHAPTER 8



Photo and illustration by Lara Neel | The Journal Gazette

Not everybody was alarmed about UFO sightings over Fort Wayne.

Bars and restaurants advertised alien specials on their signs. Radio DJs played the themes to “The X-Files” and “The Twilight Zone.” Readers at Northeast Indiana Radio Reading Service – which was fielding new complaints about static – began recording H.G. Wells’ “The War of the Worlds,” Arthur C. Clarke’s “Childhood’s End” and Carl Sagan’s “Contact.”

Nobody had more fun with the reported sightings than the merchants along Wells Corridor northwest of downtown. Antennas sprouted from the heads of sidewalk statues – the mouse, the soldier and the American Indian brave. Tattoo shops featured ink drawings of E.T. and oblong-headed aliens in their front windows. The cityscape mural painted on the side of Hyde Brothers Booksellers was revised so that blue flying

saucers floated above local landmarks.

Even the ITT engineer was tickled when, during a TinCaps baseball game at Parkview Field, the grounds crew raked the base paths while wearing masks of characters from “Star Wars” movies.

“This is all your fault,” Cindy told her ex-husband. “Why did you have to talk to that reporter?”

“If you hadn’t left me, I never would have moved to Ludwig Park and seen those lights,” Jake said.

Cindy winced.

“Let’s not go there,” she instructed. (She had once wrongly accused him of stalking her by moving so near her employer.)

They sat on the lawn overlooking the outfield at Parkview Field. Their daughter’s high school march-

ing band had performed before the game, and Chelsea made her parents promise to attend and sit together.

Her dad was happy to be there. Chelsea knew he would be. She was pleasantly surprised that her mother agreed. But then Chelsea had not learned until tonight that her mom was investigating the lights and wanted to hear Jake's account. Yet given that, Cindy was wearing her blue sundress, a favorite of Jake's from several years back.

"Please tell me you won't talk at the mayor's town-hall meeting," Cindy pleaded with Jake. "After all, I'm going to be one of the panelists."

"Don't worry," Jake said, "I don't plan on going. Somebody's got to guard Smith Field in case the aliens come back."

Chelsea approached. She had been sitting in the stands with the Northrop band, but she said she needed money for a snack. It was her way of checking up on her parents.

"You're not the only one who can keep a secret," she told her mother. "I saw the same lights Dad did, but on a different night. It creeped me out."

## CHAPTER 9

Jake's phone rang. It was almost 3 a.m. He was still awake, of course, as always.

He picked up the receiver, thinking it might be Cindy. She had been unnerved by the Parkview Field stampede.

"Hello," Jake said.

"Have you seen the lights again?" a woman's voice asked.

Jake sat up in bed, coughed, cleared his throat. He turned off the radio on his nightstand.

"What lights?" Jake asked. "You mean the meteorites?"

"You're Jake, from the newspaper story," the voice said. "You saw the ring of blue lights over Smith Field. Have you seen them again yet?"

Jake smiled in the dark.

Cindy grinned.

"I'm hearing a lot of that lately," she said.

Cindy listened to Chelsea's account for an inning, then announced she was heading home. She had to prepare for the town-hall meeting.

Jake walked her out of the ballpark. They had just left the main gate when thick ribbons of silver streaked across the southern sky, dissolving almost as fast as they appeared.

People froze on the sidewalk around Cindy and Jake. Somebody shrieked.

"Don't worry," Cindy told them. "That was just a meteorite shower. A good one, too."

And then Cindy was facedown on the sidewalk. Jake kneeled over her as people raced out of Parkview Field, shoving their way along Brackenridge Street to get to the parking lots and their cars.

The TinCaps and the Peoria Chiefs played their last two innings before a mostly empty house. Only the Northrop marching band stayed until the end of the game.

"So," he said into the phone, "we finally meet, Marian."

There was a long pause.

"How do you know me?" she finally asked.

"From the all-night radio show," Jake replied.

" 'Coast to Coast AM.' You're blind, and you keep hearing static on your special radio. I've heard you on that show three times now. I recognize your voice."

"I dreamed about you after they read the newspaper story on my radio," Marian said. "I dreamed you were looking for the lights again."

"It's sure nice to be the man of a woman's dreams," Jake cracked. "Sorry to disappoint you, but no, I haven't seen the lights except that one time."

"I'm betting you will," Marian said.

"Do your dreams come true, Marian?" Jake asked,

switching on a lamp. “What do you see in your dreams if you’re blind?”

“I haven’t been blind all my life,” Marian said. “I still see images and colors when I dream.”

“You don’t know what I look like,” Jake said. “How do you know it was me in your dream?”

“I kept hearing your name,” she said. “Sounds are big in my dreams. Men were calling out your name. You were standing in a field yelling about the lights. I couldn’t tell what you looked like – just a man’s figure. But you were hopping around because the field was full of worms, thousands of worms, and they were crawling all over your shoes.”

Jake chuckled. His life had gotten pretty weird pretty fast, so why not throw in a field full of worms, too.

“Were there any lights in your dream, or was it just me and the worms?” Jake asked.

“No, there were no lights,” Marian said. “But the whole sky was silver. Shiny. Metallic.”

Jake pictured in his mind the flash of meteorites that had thrown a scare into the TinCaps’ audience. He tried to steer the conversation in a different direction.

“Have you talked with the Indiana Tech student who saw the lights and called the radio show?” Jake wondered. “Or any of the other people in the newspaper story, the people who saw the lights near Northrop High School?”

“No, I haven’t, because I didn’t dream about **them**,” Marian said. “Just you and the worms and the silver sky.”

She said she had gone to Smith Field the previous afternoon. She had wanted to stand in the vicinity where Jake had seen the lights, to try to feel the presence of something, anything.

Personnel at the airport were good-natured about her visit; they told her a lot of people had suddenly expressed an interest in Smith Field.

Jake felt sheepish. He had nosed around the airstrip a few times since spotting the lights, and he suspected airport staff had kept an eye on him sitting in the lawn chair in his driveway.

Marian had asked Smith Field workers whether the



Photo and illustration by Lara Neel | The Journal Gazette

lights Jake had seen had shown up as blips on their radar. No, she was informed, Smith Field is a general aviation airstrip and not a controlled airspace airport; the control tower and radar system for the region are at Fort Wayne International Airport.

That was the same thing workers had told Jake during one of his visits. What they didn’t tell Jake or Marian was that Fort Wayne International’s radar had been lighting up like a Christmas tree lately.

“I have to go now,” Marian told Jake over the phone.

“You didn’t answer my question,” Jake said. “Do your dreams come true?”

“Many of them have, yes,” she said. “We’ll have to see what happens. Goodbye.”

Jake fell asleep thinking about worms.

# CHAPTER 10



Photo by Clint Keller and illustration by Lara Neel | The Journal Gazette

The mayor knew he'd made a mistake booking his town-hall meeting at Anthis Career Center even before he saw the crowd.

The auditorium holds 462 people, and every seat was taken more than an hour before the 6 p.m. meeting. Dozens more people crammed into the hall outside, waiting for folding chairs and TV monitors to be fetched. Still more showed up, saw the growing horde and left grumbling.

Much of Fort Wayne had witnessed the previous night's light show, and it was rehashed by newspapers, TV newscasts and websites. The mayor considered moving his meeting to a larger venue at the last minute, but he figured he'd infuriate an audience already on edge. Besides, the public access TV channel was broadcasting the event.

Astronomers had concurred that the streaks of silver the night before had to have been meteors. The planetarium director at the University of Saint Francis was certain of it; he had seen them himself, and that's what he would tell the town-hall audience.

The Saint Francis astronomer joined the others on the stage: the mayor, the Homeland Security director, the

Air National Guard wing commander and representatives of the airport authority, the National Weather Service, Raytheon and BAE.

Cindy was on the panel to represent ITT. She wore a Band-Aid where her chin had skidded on the sidewalk when she was knocked down outside Parkview Field. She was shocked when it happened; later, while letting her ex-husband clean and patch her wounds at her home, she was angry: **What's gotten into people?** But now, looking at the anxious faces in the audience, Cindy realized she was lucky she hadn't been trampled to death.

Panelists were introduced by the mayor and asked to make brief remarks. The Homeland Security director spoke first, but it wasn't long before he was interrupted.

"What are you hiding?" an audience member shouted.

"Yeah! Where are these lights from?" another person shouted.

Cindy cringed. That sounded a lot like Jake's voice. She trusted he was watching the broadcast at his home.

“Why are fighter jets patrolling the city every night?” another person demanded.

The mayor appealed for order. It was a losing fight. So he invited people in the audience to ask their questions at microphones standing in two aisles of the auditorium.

It was soon apparent the panelists either knew little more than the audience or else were unwilling to reveal what they did know. They offered times, dates, places, descriptions. They tried to refute rumors that their agencies and companies were testing hovercraft or laser weapons. But none would hazard a guess as to what the lights were.

The audience questions soon became accusations.

One person insisted that the \$1 million in repairs at Smith Field had gone for technology to contact and lure life from other planets. Smith Field was being turned into an extraterrestrial landing base. Taxpayers were funding an alien invasion.

Another person knew why aliens were coming: Fort Wayne was seventh on Hitler’s bombing list – there’s a whole book about it. The aliens are coming here for

the city’s industrial products, especially magnet wire; they need it for the motors in their spaceships.

Cindy shook her head. She’d read her then-husband’s copy of “Fort Wayne is Seventh on Hitler’s List: Indiana Stories,” by city native Michael Martone. **Don’t these people know it’s fiction? It’s a short story about nostalgia for the World War II era!**

The next person at the microphone opened a copy of the Bible and read:

“Then I turned, and lifted up mine eyes, and looked, and behold a flying roll. ... Then said he unto me, This is the curse that goeth forth over the face of the whole earth. ... Zechariah, Chapter 5, Verse 1.”

He flipped the pages to a bookmark.

“For Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness. ... Second Corinthians, Chapter 11, Verse 14.”

**This is going to be a long night,** Cindy thought.

## CHAPTER 11

Jake turned off the broadcast of the town-hall meeting and asked his daughter to take him to the grocery store.

Chelsea resisted at first, then gave in after inspecting the fridge. A days-old, half-eaten sausage roll looked like Jake’s best bet for breakfast. Chelsea knew her father could use some food to supplement his mostly liquid diet.

They checked the sky over Smith Field as they left the house. That had become routine for them, even if it was still light out.

They chatted for a few minutes about Cindy. Jake felt sorry for her having to sit there and listen to mass paranoia. But Chelsea was proud of her mother – Chelsea and her dad might have seen a UFO, but her mom is investigating it: “How cool is that?”

They drove to the Meijer store on Lima Road, just



Photo by Clint Keller and illustration by Lara Neel | The Journal Gazette

west of Jake’s house on Ludwig Road. Chelsea had trouble finding a parking space. She couldn’t remember seeing the place this crowded.

She and her father walked in. The store was packed with people. Customers filled the aisles, pushing carts full of canned vegetables, boxed pasta, batteries, light bulbs and rolls of duct tape.

Chelsea and Jake walked through Meijer. The bread shelves were almost bare; the beverage displays weren't far from it.

Chelsea saw two women wrestling over the last package of disposable diapers, their toddlers watching fretfully from their shopping-cart seats.

Jake didn't look for vodka or orange juice. Why bother? Carts backed up from every checkout lane. They'd have to wait an hour to buy anything.

Jake and Chelsea left the store, got into her car and drove north to Walmart. It was the same: full parking lot outside, empty shelves inside, checkout lines snaking far away from the cashiers.

"Let's go for it," Chelsea said. Her father nodded.

They grabbed what little they could find: chicken pot pies, hot dogs, pretzels, beer – the type of menu Jake favored in college and returned to soon after the divorce. Good thing Jake didn't need toilet paper; it had disappeared. So had milk and eggs.

A man clutching a dozen frozen pizzas galloped past Jake, a store employee in pursuit. The man ran into the path of a shopping cart, knocked it over and stumbled against a freezer, dropping his pizzas. Nearby shoppers snatched the food off the floor and wheeled away, the man and the store employee yelling after them.

"I can't believe all the negative energy in this town," Chelsea said to her father.

"Doesn't surprise me," Jake replied. "People around here are always in a snit about one thing or another."

"Yeah, like you and Smith Field a few years back," Chelsea said.

"No, that was **positive** energy – not exactly what I'm

known for," her father said.

In a checkout line, Jake struck up a conversation with a woman whose shopping cart was stuffed with cases of bottled water. She said she hadn't bought so much water since the Y2K scare in 1999, when all the world's computers were going to crash because they hadn't been programmed for the new millennium.

"It was going to be a catastrophe, remember?" she said to Jake.

"And what happened," Jake asked her, "when the computers didn't crash?"

"Well, I didn't have to buy any water for an awfully long time, I can tell you that," the woman said with a laugh.

"I think it's going to be the same thing this time," Jake advised her.

"Better safe than sorry," she responded. "Those guys on TV tonight didn't say anything to make me feel better. What do **you** think those lights are?"

Jake was slow to answer. He realized he'd never been asked this question, and he'd seen the lights.

His daughter, his ex-wife, the Homeland Security director, the newspaper reporter – he told them all what he had seen that night, but nobody asked him what he thought the lights might have been.

And he hadn't asked his daughter – who was now reading a magazine and paying no attention to Jake's chat with a stranger – what she thought she had seen, either.

"Well," the Walmart shopper asked him again, "what do **you** think the lights are?"

"Fireworks," Jake told her. "It's that time of year, and this city is crazy about fireworks."

"So," the woman said, "you don't believe in aliens."

"I really don't believe in much of anything," Jake said.

## CHAPTER 12

The pilot of the F-16 Fighting Falcon radioed the base. He had spotted lights moving over Fox Island County Park. He was going in for a closer look.

The plane swooped lower, and the lights rose higher. The pilot passed by them 700 feet above the ground.

They were similar to what witnesses had described in

that they formed a circle. But they were red, not blue, and the object projecting them appeared to be larger than reported. It wasn't yet dusk; the pilot could see the object was black and likely metallic.

The jet circled back. No sign of the lights – except on the ground, where flashbulbs went off. A crowd of people had gathered this evening, as they had on recent nights, at the spot where Zach, the Indiana Tech student, had told the two radio shows he'd seen the lights. They brought cameras, binoculars and telescopes.

The F-16 pilot saw a blur of red darting to his left – and a bigger, silver object dropping from the sky on his right. He flew between the two.

The plane banked and went for another pass over the park. The red lights appeared again, near the ground but climbing fast. The pilot looked around his plane's cockpit for the second, larger object. And then it appeared on his right, slightly behind him, almost as if it were chasing his plane.

He felt a collision – something struck the bottom of his left wing hard enough to make his jet wobble.

The pilot quickly corrected, flew higher and swept over the park. No lights or objects were in the sky. He told the base he was heading back to see whether his plane had been damaged. The F-16 seemed to be flying all right, but he didn't want to take any chances.

On the ground at Fox Island, people ran to where they saw the ring of red lights fall. But patrolling police instructed them to leave or be arrested. If anything had landed there, police said, the proper authorities would be notified. The disappointed crowd dispersed.

The 122nd Fighter Wing maintenance crew found little wrong with the F-16. They inspected what seemed like black paint on a dented wing – the object had just missed striking an air-to-surface missile – then notified their supervisors, who informed various agencies.

Cindy would want to examine the plane and take samples of the black material back to the ITT lab. She'd also want to know that the pilot had seen two unidentified flying objects at the same time.



Photo by Laura J. Gardner and illustration by Lara Neel | The Journal Gazette

Cindy was going through her notes on the town-hall meeting when her daughter arrived home from marching band practice. Chelsea said a lot of kids hadn't shown up. Those who had were freaked out about the flying saucers.

Chelsea showered, put on pajamas and sat down to the computer in the den. A few moments later, she yelled to her mother.

There were video clips on YouTube showing a ring of red lights ricocheting off a plane in a dusky sky. The clips purported to be from Fox Island in Fort Wayne. None lasted more than half a minute, and the lights were visible for less than 10 seconds. The videos were all grainy.

But except for the different hue, the lights looked and acted much like those Chelsea had seen and Chelsea's father had said he'd seen.

"And now you've seen them, too," Chelsea told Cindy.

"It's time for the news," Cindy said. "Turn on the TV."

After waiting through a Blackburn & Green commercial, they flipped back and forth among the local channels, seeing the YouTube videos and others like them played and replayed and analyzed by each station.

"Now **everybody's** seen them," Cindy said.

# CHAPTER 13



Photo by Samuel Hoffman and illustration by Lara Neel | The Journal Gazette

Cars and trucks jammed Interstate 69, heading north and south out of town in a steady rain. Traffic was heavy on east-west routes, too.

Many stores, offices and factories had not opened, even though the mayor had pleaded for people to go about their usual business. It was like a snow day in the middle of summer. The mayor's televised presence apparently wasn't as convincing as video snippets showing a flying saucer colliding with a fighter jet.

City streets were largely deserted, but cars filled the parking lots of churches, and worshippers filled their pews.

Jake sat inside the downtown Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. He wasn't Catholic. In fact, this was the first time he'd been inside any church since just before his wife filed for divorce years earlier. Jake had gone to the couple's church and prayed hard for God to fix his marriage; God didn't.

Jake had asked his daughter to join him at the Cathedral. Her mother overruled him, ordering Chelsea to stay home. Cindy said people were in a panic – there was no telling whether things might turn violent.

Jake wasn't the type to panic. He preferred to sulk.

He took measure of the gathering at the Cathedral. Some people prayed. Some wept. Others sang. Jake sensed faith, fear, hope and dread converging in the sanctuary.

During the singing of "Amazing Grace," Jake mouthed the lyrics "was blind but now I see," and his thoughts turned to Marian's dream about him, the silver sky and the ground covered in worms.

Sitting near the back, he bowed his head for a long time, his hands clasped on his lap. When he rose up, he felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned around to see the Journal Gazette reporter who had told the city that Jake had witnessed a flying saucer.

The reporter asked Jake what he was praying for.

Jake smiled.

“I was asking God to give me the strength to quit talking to reporters,” he said.

“C’mon,” she whispered, grabbing a pen and notebook out of her Vera Bradley handbag, “you didn’t have to talk to me that night. Are you sorry you did?”

“No,” Jake said. “I think I’ve been pretty much vindicated by now, don’t you? Although I never said I saw a UFO or flying saucer.”

“That’s not what I wrote,” the reporter said. “What were you praying for?”

“That’s pretty personal,” Jake said. “Anyway, who’s going to be left to read your next story? Everyone seems to be in a hurry to get out of town.”

“Not everybody,” she said. “This is the third church I’ve been to today; the first two were packed.”

“Well,” Jake said, “this is the City of Churches, after all.”

## CHAPTER 14

National Guardsmen surrounded the barn off U.S. 24 east of Fort Wayne.

Fort Wayne and Allen County police squads gathered behind them with bomb-sniffing dogs and an explosives ordnance disposal robot. A firetruck parked along the road.

Two soldiers from the 1st Battalion, 293rd Infantry Regiment broke down a door with a battering ram. Rifles were trained on the entrance.

The Homeland Security director walked inside the barn, which looked like it had been in a state of slow collapse for decades. Beams of sunshine peeked through holes in the sagging roof.

Workbenches lined one wall of the barn. Lathes, drills, saws and other machines crowded nearby. A card table and metal folding chairs sat in the middle of the dirt floor.

“The bars and strip clubs are packed, too,” the reporter said.

“Maybe that’s where I should be,” Jake said.

“But you came here instead,” the reporter reminded him. “What were you praying for?”

Jake relented.

“To see the lights again,” he responded. “Up close. I want to know what they are, where they come from, what they’re doing here. I don’t believe in aliens or government conspiracies. There’s got to be a logical explanation. I want to know what it is.”

The reporter scribbled in her notebook.

“Between you and me,” Jake added, “I was also saying a prayer of thanks.”

“Thanks? Thanks for what?” the reporter asked.

“The lights,” Jake said. “Whatever they are, I’m thankful for them, because they sort of brought my family back together. My daughter, my ex-wife and me – about all we’ve got left are the lights, but that’s something.”



Photo by Jak Wonderly and illustration by Lara Neel | The Journal Gazette

Blueprints, circuit boards, transistors and wires covered the table. One chair was empty. On another sat a toolbox. A third chair supported a stack of newspapers with stories about UFO sightings on their front pages. The Homeland Security director saw a picture of his

face looking up at him from one of the newspapers.

Two black clamshells, each several feet in diameter, perched on the workbenches. Fiber-optic strands poked from the edge of either disc, forming a dotted-line ring of filament. Each object balanced on three tubes that the Homeland Security director knew were thruster devices. Scientists and law enforcement officials would have to take apart the saucers to determine what type of engines or motors powered them.

The clamshells were dented and scratched, and caked with patches of dried mud and grass. One appeared to be constructed from fiberglass; the other seemed made of aluminum.

Another workbench was bare except for clumps of soil. Police dogs sniffed around while explosives experts examined the benches, machinery, table and chairs.

Cindy didn't need to be told not to touch anything. She had, after all, led everybody here.

Cindy inspected one of the clamshells.

"So this is what put Fort Wayne in a state of panic the past two weeks," she said to the Homeland Security director.

"People really did see flying saucers," he said, "didn't they?"

## CHAPTER 15

Cindy's ex-husband had suggested she stay at his house for a few nights. That way, she would be at Smith Field the next time the lights appeared.

Chelsea had endorsed the idea, as long as she was included. She didn't want to stay home by herself with Fort Wayne in a frenzy over UFOs.

Cindy was tempted to accept Jake's offer, but she declined. Her decision had little to do with what was left of their relationship, which she had to acknowledge was surprisingly friendly, even a tad flirtatious, in the past few days. Cindy had seen the side of Jake that had attracted her to him in the first place.

She was convinced nothing would show up again at Smith Field – all those spectators who by now were hauling their lawn chairs and binoculars to Ludwig

"Yeah, but they came from a workshop in an old barn, not from another planet," Cindy said. "And this workshop isn't even mad-scientist eerie, either – it's too messy."

She noticed fast-food wrappers on the ground. A man's black hoodie sweatshirt was draped over the back of a folding chair, and a pair of mud-crust boots rested on the dirt below it.

"This guy doesn't even dress like a mad scientist," Cindy said.

Two state police officers approached Cindy and the Homeland Security director.

"The couple in the house down the drive don't seem to know much," one trooper said. "They say they never come out to the barn."

"He's in a wheelchair, and his wife tends to him when she's not at work," the second trooper said. "They sold off most of the farm years ago. Their adult son still lives with them."

"They say he uses the barn to putter around in," the first trooper said. "His mom says he's an inventor, just like his granddad was."

**Yes, he is that,** Cindy thought. She wished her ex-husband and their daughter could be here to share in her discovery.



Photo illustration by Lara Neel | The Journal Gazette

Road every evening would surely scare away any intelligent life form, her own family excluded, of course.

She planned to scout a spot along U.S. 24 that had produced a couple of reported sightings. Jake thought Fox Island offered more promise, but Cindy said she had a sense about the site east of town.

Cindy hadn't told Jake and Chelsea that she had been at Fox Island the morning after the red lights zoomed into the wing of the F-16 fighter jet. Homeland Security called her and other investigators to examine an object that had been found in a wooded area by a police patrol.

The saucer was crumpled on one side where it had hit the plane. No lights were shining or blinking or spinning.

Bomb-sniffing dogs detected nothing suspicious, but people on Cindy's team worried about the possibility of hazardous or explosive materials. Cindy knew better. She recognized thruster devices on the saucer; they appeared to match something she had in her own home.

Cindy called for fingerprints to be gathered.

"This is no alien craft," she announced, "and it's not a spy drone." She instructed team members to take it to ITT.

And so while Jake was in church and Chelsea was stuck at home, Cindy and her lab partners took apart the saucer. It quickly yielded answers – unlike the shiny, slimy chunks of silver a farmer had pulled out of his soybean field north of Van Wert, Ohio, the day after the meteor shower. Cindy's lab team had yet to

## CHAPTER 16

Raymond sat on the edge of his bed. He recalled how excited he'd been when, as a child on Halloween, he saw the flying saucer in his grandfather's backyard on the south side of Fort Wayne.

Raymond's grandfather had built it in secret, fastening together two aluminum sledding discs and taping white blinking Christmas lights to the saucer. He put it near a bush and placed buckets of dry ice nearby, creating wispy "smoke" for the just-landed alien craft.

The thing frightened the child when his grandfather

determine their composition.

Much of Cindy's job as an ITT systems engineer was confidential before the UFO sightings, and her work had only become more covert since. As long as her daughter and ex-husband were keeping their wits about them, Cindy was confident her own knowledge of the lights could remain a secret, providing the mystery was solved soon.

Cindy didn't tell Jake that she'd been to a barn off U.S. 24 once today already. She returned there before nightfall, her team keeping watch on the place from two vans parked nearby.

They waited and watched for two hours. Then, just before midnight, Cindy received a phone call from the Homeland Security director. Her mad scientist wouldn't be coming home after all. Investigative teams at Fox Island and a half-dozen other sites heard similar news.

As soon as lights had appeared over Smith Field – much higher and brighter than before and a long white spray this time, not a ring of blue or red – roadblocks went up along Cook, Coldwater, Ludwig and Lima roads. A fighter jet zoomed overhead. National Guard troops combed the airfield.

A figure was spotted sprinting through the darkness on the north side of the airstrip, near Cook Road. Troops quickly circled it, their rifles drawn.

The figure stopped and fell to the ground.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" a man's voice begged. "I give up!"

unveiled it just after dusk. Raymond's fear soon turned to giddiness as Grandpa invited trick-or-treaters into his backyard. The younger ones were scared, and some refused to get close enough to recognize it as a prank.

"Just think if it could really fly," Raymond told Grandpa. "We could scare all of Fort Wayne!"

As he got older, Raymond joined in his grandfather's construction projects; it was a welcome respite from the boy's chores on his parents' farm. They assembled

bicycles out of spare parts, made skateboards and built a go-kart.

As a teenager, Raymond became a natural at operating radio-controlled cars, boats and planes, sinking a small fortune into the hobby. He entered contests and won trophies. He made Lego structures and Rube Goldberg machines. His successes sat on bookshelves and the dresser in his bedroom; the pieces of his failures cluttered the floor, until his father relinquished a rickety, rotting barn for use as a workshop.

Campus police had obtained Raymond's fingerprints his sophomore year at IPFW after he built a small rocket for an engineering class and launched it from the top of a campus parking garage. It crashed into a guest lecturer's car in the parking lot of the Gates Center, and there were witnesses. Raymond fled but was later arrested.

Raymond said he would pay to have the car's broken windshield fixed. A professor vouched for him. The visiting lecturer – an engineer from ITT – agreed to not press charges. Cindy did get to keep the rocket, first in the event of insurance questions and then as a souvenir.

Raymond got the idea for a homemade flying saucer from studying robotic lawn mowers and self-propelled vacuum cleaners. If they could roll over a floor or a yard, he reasoned, a lightweight version should be able to float in the air if powered by remotely controlled thrusters.

He rounded up materials and harvested parts from his radio-controlled vehicles. He worked nights on the saucers in the barn at his parents' house off U.S. 24. He wanted to be able to fly his fiberglass and aluminum clamshells expertly before going public.

It didn't take long before his saucers were in the air and obeying his electronic commands. Each object flew fairly well as long as it didn't strike anything, like a tree or a telephone line or the wing of a fighter jet.

Raymond hadn't meant to scare anyone at first, but then it seemed like his childhood Halloween all over again. He got hooked on the cat-and-mouse game with investigators, well aware his skill and luck might run out at any time.

Being his own getaway driver added to Raymond's logistical challenges – he often had to run long distances



**Photo by Todd Anderson and illustration by Lara Neel | The Journal Gazette**

in the dark, carrying a saucer, before he reached his car, hidden away on a side street or a deserted parking lot. He didn't dare try to hunt for the saucer that crashed at Fox Island – the place was swarming with police.

He realized he would have been caught tonight, regardless. He now knew that investigators had been staking out both IPFW and his parents' house, all because his fingerprints had a name and an address. What's more, professors and classmates had recognized the voice of Zach, the Indiana Tech student, on two radio shows and correctly identified its owner as Raymond, the IPFW student, when they called a UFO tipline set up by investigators.

Raymond had spent most of the day at the downtown Allen County Public Library, poring over books on electronics and robotics, ignorant of the manhunt. Nobody in the parking garage spotted the large clamshell in the backseat of his car.

At the library, he daydreamed about his flying saucers earning him entrance to a graduate engineering program at MIT or CalTech. Instead, they put him on a bed in a cell at the Allen County Jail.

It would be tough to get into grad school when he faced terrorism charges.

# CHAPTER 17



Photo by Swikar Patel and illustration by Lara Neel | The Journal Gazette

**J**ake and Chelsea sat in lawn chairs in the driveway of his Ludwig Road home. They sipped lemonade.

Yellow crime-scene tape stretched along the fences at Smith Field. National Guard soldiers stood watch at the airport entrance, keeping newspaper reporters and TV news crews at bay. Nothing had been in the sky all day except military helicopters that arrived or departed now and then.

The grounds were crawling with people wearing white hazmat suits. Cindy was somewhere among them; Jake and Chelsea argued over which suit was hiding Cindy until they saw a brief wave in their direction – Jake had been correct, to his daughter’s delight.

Chelsea thought it was an awfully big fuss over an elaborate hoax. The neighborhood had been evacuated

last night and most of today for a college student’s prank. Now he was being treated as a homegrown terrorist. And her father kept going on about how he had helped save Smith Field only to have a front-row seat for its certain demise as an airport.

But Chelsea was puzzled; with all the panic, with Homeland Security and the National Guard involved, with criminal and scientific investigations unfolding, how had her father gained access to the fake flying saucer the previous night?

“They invited me,” Jake told Chelsea. “I had been an eyewitness to an earlier flight, and officials wanted any verification I could offer.

“Besides,” he said, “your mother put in a good word for me.”

Chelsea was miffed that she hadn't been asked. She'd seen the lights, too.

"Too risky," Jake said. "These soldiers use real bullets. Your mom was right to have you stay at a friend's house."

"So were you able to identify the flying saucer that crashed as the one we both saw earlier?" Chelsea asked.

"No, I wasn't," her father said.

"Yeah, we were too far away to see it very well," she said.

"It wasn't the same one," Jake said. "This one didn't have any lights."

"Mom said today that the guy who made these things had different designs," Chelsea said.

"This one was a lot bigger than his saucers," Jake said. "Perhaps 15 feet long. And it was silver, not black. Not shaped like a clamshell, either; it was triangular, like a stealth bomber."

Again, Chelsea said, the IPFW student just made a different model.

"He supposedly flew two at once at Fox Island, so he must have been good," she said. "They found his remote control at Smith Field, didn't they?"

"Yes," Jake said, "and they found his saucer, too, near where they caught him over by Cook Road. It never got in the air."

Jake then told his daughter the story he'd sworn to keep secret, recounting events and sights at the risk of arrest and who knows what else.

He told his daughter about the other flying saucer that crashed last night, after a 122nd Fighter Wing pilot in an A-10 saw an object zigzagging north of town. The Warthog pilot chased it; then the craft chased the pilot. The pilot slowed up and fired his seven-barrel machine-gun cannon at the passing object – those lights over Smith Field were armor-piercing tracer bullets. The object fell out of the sky, crashing on the ground next to an airport runway, the same runway that someone at the mayor's town-hall meeting claimed had been turned into a government welcome center for aliens.

The crowd, including Jake, cautiously circled the silver triangle. A section of it had broken away, almost like a hatch popping open, and inside – was it a machine or a creature? Or both? Jake couldn't tell.

Wires, tubes and hoses spilled out of the cavity and onto the ground. Milky fluid seeped from some of the broken strands. Sparks leaped from others.

The thing inside the craft was almost 3 feet long, but it didn't have a defined head or torso or arms or legs – it was just a mass of plugged-in slime, a robotic gray worm in an electronic cocoon. Jake was certain he had seen it squirming in the short time he watched it – "Marian's dream!" he had gasped – before Homeland Security officials and National Guard troops whisked him away for debriefing and a vow of silence.

Jake took a sip of lemonade. Chelsea didn't know what to say, so she said nothing. She and her father sat silently in their lawn chairs in the driveway of his front yard, watching the sky grow dark over Smith Field.