

The Canadian Who Came Almost all the Way Back from the Stars

Jay Lake and Ruth Nestvold

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Highly prolific new writer Jay Lake seems to have appeared nearly everywhere with short work in the last couple of years, including Asimov's SCI FICTION, Interzone, Strange Horizons, The Third Alternative, Aeon, Postscripts, Electric Velocipede, and many other markets. He's produced enough short fiction to have already released four collections, even though his career is only a few years old: Greetings from Lake Wu, Green Grow the Rushes-Oh, American Sorrows, and Dogs in the Moonlight. He's the co-editor, with Deborah Layne, of the prestigious Polyphony anthology series, and has also edited the anthologies All-Star Zeppelin Adventure Stories, with David Moles, and TEL: Stories. He won the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer in 2004. His most recent book is his first novel, Rocket Science.

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Here they join forces to give us a surprising story that's about exactly what it says that it's about.

Kelly MacInnes was pretty, prettier than I had expected. She had that sort of husky blond beauty I associated with the upper Midwest. Or in her case, the Canadian prairie.

Together we stared out across Emerald Lake, one of those small mountain lakes jewelizing western North America, framed by a vista of Douglas firs, longleaf pines, and granite peaks clawing their way into the echoing summer sky. Midway out on the lake, the water gathered into a visible depression, as if a huge weight had settled on it. The dimple was about forty feet in diameter and ten feet deep, perfectly flat at the bottom, with steeply angled sides like a giant inverted bottle cap. It had appeared five days after Nick MacInnes had mysteriously called home three months ago — years after he was presumed dead.

At which point Nick's widow had promptly dropped everything and come here to Yoho National Park in darkest British Columbia. "It looks unnatural." It was a dumb thing to say, but I didn't have much to offer. I was an intruder after all, a U.S. agent come to investigate phone call and dimple —and Mrs. MacInnes.

"It is unnatural," she replied. "A couple of weeks after it appeared, every fish in the lake had beached or moved downstream."

I could imagine the rot. Such a stench seemed impossible in this mountain paradise. The air had the sharp tang of snow on pines, the flinty odor of wet rock, the absolute purity of the Canadian Rockies.

But there was a lot that was impossible going on here. I had seen the satellite tracking reports —NORAD, NASA, ESA, even some Chinese data. The dimple had appeared, fish had died—*something* had happened—but there was no evidence of re-entry, no evidence of any precipitating event whatsoever. Only the hole in the lake in front of me.

And a phone call that couldn't have happened, from a dead man lost in interstellar space.

"You say your husband told you to come here." They'd all asked her the questions before: the RCMP, the Special Branch, the FBI, several U.N. High Commissions. Kelly MacInnes had met her husband in college, where they both studied astrophysics, but her name had never been on any of his papers or patents. They asked her the questions anyway.

And now it was my turn, on behalf of the NSA. We still didn't know what had happened out there in that lake, but we wanted to make sure no one else knew either. The first step had been to clear out the park—except for Kelly MacInnes. My job wasn't as much to drag information out of her as it was to make sure it didn't get to anyone else first if she was moved to start talking.

She stared out at the hole in the water, the unfilled grave of her absent husband. "He's not dead."

I nodded. "I've read the transcripts—it's clear to me you believe that." *Or at least you claim you do.* "But, Mrs. MacInnes, there is no evidence your husband survived his rather spectacular departure from earth six years ago."

She hugged her plaid flannel jacket closer, her gaze drifting up to the sky. Despite the sun, the air was crisp. "The trip was supposed to take less than a week. Then six years after he left, he called and told me to meet him here. Just after 2:30 a.m. on April seventeenth, the center of the lake collapsed into that hole. That's what I know, Mr. Diedrich."

I followed her stare toward the summer sky. Somewhere behind that perfect blue shell was an explanation for what happened to Nicholas MacInnes.

Too bad the sky wasn't talking today.

Barnard's Star is slightly less than six light-years from Sol. A red dwarf, it is interesting only for its convenient position in the interstellar neighborhood and the fact that it is moving noticeably faster than any of our other stellar neighbors. Until Nick MacInnes decided to go there six years ago.

Four years prior to his launch, he'd published a paper in the *Canadian Journal of Aerospace Engineering and Technology Applications*, "Proposal for a Cost-Effective Method of Superluminal Travel." *CJAETA* was about one step above vanity publishing, and the article was soon well on its way to the dustbin of history.

Recently, I had seen to it that all copies of Volume XXXVI, Issue 9, had been destroyed, along with computer files, Web sites, mirror sites, tape backups, printer plates, CD-ROMs, library microfiche archives, and everything else we could think of. Because one fine spring day, Nick MacInnes, sometime mobile communications billionaire, made a space shot from a privately built and previously unknown launch site on the prairie east of Calgary, found his way into orbit on top of surplus Russian missile hardware, and did something that crashed a significant portion of the world's electronic infrastructure. At which point, he disappeared in a rainbow-colored flash visible across an entire hemisphere of the planet.

It soon became known that he was carrying four surplus Russian M-2 nuclear warheads. "For the bomb-pumped lasers" the Ph.Ds assisting MacInnes said, as if the rest of the world were worrying excessively over trivialities.

When I returned to Emerald Lake three months later to check on Kelly MacInnes and security at the park, the Canadian Air Force and NASA were back. The CAF had flown a Lockheed Orion P-3C AIP over the lake back in late April and through most of May.

Now, in October, NASA and the Canadian Space Agency had stuck some added instrumentation on it. They gave up on towed sonar after losing two rigs in the trees along the shoreline. Recon satellites had

performed various kinds of imaging and discovered a significant gravitational anomaly at the bottom of Emerald Lake. Or maybe they hadn't. The dimple in the lake surface was caused by the stress of the anomaly. Or maybe not.

There wasn't a ferrous body in the lake, but a significant mass concentration rested on the bottom, absorbing radar and creating weird thermal gradients. Wild theories were thrown around concerning polymerization of water, stress on molecular bonds, microscopic black holes, time singularities, and so on. There was some hard data about a heat rise in the center of the dimple, a heat rise that declined in temperature during the first three weeks of observation before leveling out about nine degrees centigrade above historical ambient surface temperature.

Curiously, remote sensing indicated ice at the bottom of the lake in the area of the dimple. Cameras and instrument packages sent down didn't add much to the picture—the mascon was big, it was inert, and it distorted the lake's temperature profile.

But then the search for additional meaningful data was complicated by the one incontrovertible thing discovered besides the heat rise: radioactive contamination. Everyone working at the lake was being exposed to radionuclides equivalent to three hundred rem a year, sixty times the permitted exposure level for workers in the United States. Well into cancer-causing territory, especially leukemia, but not enough to give you an immediate case of the pink pukers or make your hair fall out.

When I heard, I sought out the CSA project manager in charge of the current phase of the investigation, Ray Vittori. I was no physicist, but I'd been a technology spook for years. This stank. "How in holy hell could you not have noticed this before?"

Vittori shook his head. "It wasn't here before, Diedrich. Simple."

I crossed my arms. Behind me, I thought I could feel Kelly MacInnes smile, but I didn't bother to turn around to see if I was right. She mistrusted government institutions, including her own, but she loathed the United States government.

As it was, we couldn't justify trucking the required diving equipment, mini-sub, and underwater instrumentation high into the Canadian Rockies to find out more about the dimple. So much data had already been collected that it would take years to analyze it in the first place. And the anomaly didn't seem to be going anywhere anytime soon. The radiation levels just complicated whatever case I might have made for increased allocation of intelligence assets.

The Orion went back to hunting subs in the maritime provinces. The think tanks went back to thinking somewhere else. Some cameras and sensors remained, wired in around the lakeshore, shooting telemetry back to my agency in Maryland. Other than that, only the satellites still provided us with information, along with the occasional research team willing to sign their souls away in indemnity clauses. A bare-bones contingent continued to secure the perimeters of the park, all volunteer agents at exorbitant pay for assurances that they wouldn't seek damages if they ever showed signs of sickness that could be attributed to radiation.

By the time the first snow fell, I was left alone to observe the astonishing natural beauty of Yoho National Park and the equally attractive Mrs. Kelly MacInnes. Just me, after all the attention and the hardware went away, with a dosimeter, a sixteen-foot bass boat, and lots of time.

We ate corned beef hash and canned peaches in the echoing stillness of the lodge's dining hall. The worst of winter was past, but it was damned cold anyway, and we wore down jackets everywhere—and extra layers when we dared to go outside.

"At least he picked a national park," I said, looking around the empty lodge. My visits to Emerald Lake had been getting longer and longer over the winter. The agency kept me largely free, since it was hard to get anyone else to come up here with the threat of contamination. Not to mention the godawful remoteness.

And then there was Kelly. Nick knew what he was about, choosing this woman with the loyalty of a lioness. Though at times I rather imagined it was she who had done the choosing.

She smiled. "Quiet place, facilities nearby, eh, Mr. Diedrich?"

"I was thinking more in terms of access control. Difficult to secure and patrol private land."

Her big laugh rang out louder than was natural in the empty spaces of the lodge. "Do you see anyone trying to violate your vaunted security in this godforsaken place?"

I grimaced. A psychiatrist would probably have a field day with me —NSA spook falls for married woman who laughs at him.

But what a magnificent laugh it was.

I lowered my forkful of peach. "Why are *you* still here in this godforsaken place?" Kelly still had plenty of money—Nick's misadventures in orbit had barely depleted his fortunes, even after the staggering fines assessed against his estate for sundry air traffic and orbital protocol violations. She could have checked on the dimple then headed for Tahiti.

She cocked her head. "I could ask the same question, with more justification. I'm waiting for my husband, making sure you lot don't muck up his chances of returning. Keeping my eye on the dimple. What are *you* waiting for, Mr. Diedrich? Why do you keep coming back?"

I couldn't give her a true answer, not one that she would accept.

The melting of the snow was like a revelation.

Patches of green appeared in the unremitting white of the landscape just as the first anniversary of Nick MacInnes's telephone call from the stars approached.

In celebration of one or the other, Kelly and I hiked out to the lake to inspect the dimple. All winter long, it hadn't frozen over, despite the blankets of snow on all sides, despite the fact that other lakes in the region were solid sheets of ice.

The dimple still appeared much as it had the first day I had seen it, even with the snow on the north side of the lake—wide, unnatural, a mystery to be solved.

And the key stood next to me.

"In some ways I'm waiting for the same thing as you, you know," I said finally.

She was silent for a long time. I knew she understood me —during the time we had spent together over the last winter, we had developed that odd pattern of shortcuts and silences that many married couples use to communicate. I just barely remembered it from my own failed marriage.

She nodded out at the dimple. "You were born in the United States?"

Non sequitur. We had advanced to those as well. But I still didn't know where she was going with this. "Yes."

"You've been on the winning team all your life. You don't have a clue what it's like to be Canadian, having the world's biggest brother next door." A hare hopped into our line of vision. I watched it make tracks in the snow left in the sun's shadow.

"The United States," Kelly continued, not looking at me. "The 'we did it first' country. You build the space shuttle, we build a robot arm. Canada makes another contribution to progress."

She seemed to expect a serious answer. I didn't give it to her.

"And now your government keeps sending you here to babysit me. Because the hard men with the bright lights didn't learn anything."

"No one is forcing me."

She gave me a look that asked me whom I thought I was kidding, one eyebrow raised and her wide lips somewhere close to a smile. "No, but I know why you're here. You hate it, the whole world hates it, but especially you Yanks. You hate that a Canadian went to the stars first, without you."

She was partly right.

But only partly.

Kelly was a hard nut to crack, laughter or no laughter. It wasn't until we'd been alone together regularly for almost a year before she started calling me by my first name.

Even though I had been waiting for it for what seemed forever, I almost didn't notice. We were out on the lake in the park's Ranger Cherokee to take some measurements of our own of the surface temperature near the dimple, cross-checking the instruments. My Geiger counter kept acting up—the third one the agency had sent me—but there was nothing wrong with our old-fashioned thermometers.

I had no interest in taking the boat into the middle. The drop to the flat surface of the dimple was about ten feet and looked vaguely like a ring of waterfalls.

"I'm keeping at least five boat lengths away," I said. "We'll circle."

Kelly trailed the thermometer on a length of fishing line. "Fine with me, Bruce."

I was so busy navigating the rim of the dimple, the fact that she had called me "Bruce" didn't immediately register. When it did, it was like a kick to the gut, and I jerked the tiller toward the edge.

I corrected immediately, and Kelly looked up. "Temperature holding steady here. What about you?"

"I'm fine."

The pines whistled with the mountain wind; even in July, it was chilly up here. As I drove the boat, I watched a hawk work the thermals off toward the granite massif that sheltered the headwaters of the Kicking Horse River. There was something seriously wrong with me if Kelly's use of my first name felt as intimate as a kiss.

It was about time I called my boss, Marge Williams, and returned to Maryland again for a while.

Somehow, I didn't have much success fleeing Emerald Lake. The next time I came back, I came back for good. The ostensible excuse was Marge's gentle insistence—the government still wanted whatever information Kelly MacInnes could provide badly enough to make it a permanent assignment. The potential value of what Nick had done, even with its fatal flaws, outweighed any cost of my time and

effort.

But the real reason was Kelly. NSA couldn't force me, given the radiation risk—and they didn't have to.

I returned in October. To my surprise, she was waiting at the park landing zone as the helicopter came in.

"What took you so long!" she shouted out over the whirring of the blades as I hopped down from the cabin. "We've had no less than seven dimple-fans succeed in breaching security since you left."

"Seven! Guess I better get back on the job." Of course I had already been informed about the handful of trespassers who weren't bright enough to be scared off by radioactive fallout—Marge had used them as a further argument to get me to return. For the good of the project, of course. And Kelly's safety. That and a huge bonus I could put aside to finance my medical bills if I ended up with cancer in a decade or two.

It all seemed worth it with Kelly glad to see me. Perhaps it was just the basic human need for companionship, but I was happy to delude myself into thinking it was more.

By our third year at Emerald Lake, it began to appear that the world had forgotten us. Over the winter, attempts to breach park security had dwindled to nothing, and even with the arrival of spring and the second anniversary of the appearance of the dimple, there had been less than half a dozen. Of course, I still spoke with headquarters nearly every week. We also had occasional contact with maintenance personnel and an RCMP trooper by the name of Sergeant Perry who actually came by on horseback when the weather was good and sometimes brought us old newspapers. I went back to Maryland regularly for my quarterly mission reviews and radiation assessments, and we were connected with the outside world through the Internet, but for the most part we were alone.

Me, Kelly, and the dimple.

She looked at that damn dimple every day as if Nick MacInnes was going to come walking out of it and embrace her. I just looked at it.

And so we hadn't become lovers. To me she was a widow, but Kelly thought of herself as a wife.

An extremely loyal wife.

We got along well enough, had even become friends of sorts. That is if you disregarded the fact that I dreamed about the scent of her every night.

It was a warm day in late August when I finally asked the question. "So, why are we still here?"

Kelly and I sat in front of the lodge on a little pebbled strip of land too modest to call a beach. The dimple punctuated the lake in front of us, and the mountains loomed high in the sky around it. For a change it was warm enough that I didn't have to wear a jacket.

"Why are *you* still here?"

I shrugged. "You're my job." You and Nick, I thought, but I tried to say his name as little as possible. "According to my boss, they don't have anything else for me."

She placed her left hand on my right forearm, a rare moment of physical contact between us. "Oh, surely there's more for you to do than wait by a lake. You Americans, you always have some mess to go fix. Or make."

I didn't move a muscle, afraid to dislodge her touch. "I wouldn't have to be here all the time just to oversee the security of the site. Your husband achieved something no one ever did before him, and there are a lot of people who want to know what he didn't tell us." *What you're not telling us.* "Marge sent me here to find out why you're still keeping such a sharp eye on the dimple."

Kelly smiled, one eyebrow arched. "Marge?"

"Sure. Not everyone is as afraid of first names as you are."

She moved her hand away. Me and my big mouth. My arm still tingled where her fingers had been.

"Actually," she said, "I'm waiting for another message from him."

I couldn't help laughing. "Another phone call?"

She grinned. "No, no. Nick promised to set a sign in the heavens." Despite her grin, I had the strange feeling that she was serious.

After the snows melted the next spring, Kelly started bugging me to go into the center of the dimple with her, a squint of worry around her eyes. The thing had never frozen over, even as the ice crusted around the edges. A heavy snow could cover it for a day or so, before the snow blanket sagged into the warm water beneath. The dimple was there like a great blind eye in the water, staring at the sky, trapping us in its unseeing gaze.

I studied the curious phenomenon that had become such an everyday part of life. "How do you propose we get back out if we go down in there?"

Kelly gazed at me speculatively. "How good a swimmer are you, Bruce?"

I shook my head. "No, no way."

She gave me her wide smile. I could almost believe I had imagined the worry— but only almost. "If we had a long enough rope with us, you could belay the boat back for sure. You're strong. I bet you're a good swimmer."

"I was all-New England in prep school," I admitted. "But I'm still not going to do it."

"Why not?"

Oh, Christ, Kelly. "One, I don't want to drown in those damned waterfalls. Two, I don't want to put my body near that thermal gradient without a boat between me and it. The overflight data suggested ice layers down there, at the reverse end of the heat rise. That's why we have cameras and instrument packages."

"Sometimes there's nothing like a first-hand look."

"No."

"You're already exposing yourself to constant radiation," she pointed out, flirting and pleading at the same time. I hadn't thought her capable of either. "Why worry about a simple mascon?"

This time I said it out loud. "Christ, Kelly."

She let loose a lovely peal of laughter and took my elbow. "Besides, it's not like you have anything else to do this summer."

When Kelly realized I wasn't going to get into that water for her anytime soon, she decided we needed to build a "dimple observatory." We spent several days hauling lumber from the park's maintenance shed to a beautiful old rock maple right up by the water with just the right spread of branches. Kelly's big laugh echoed between the trees and the mountains more often than I had ever heard it as we messed with ropes and nails, building our tree fort.

I had thought I was lost in love before, but I hadn't known how charming, how fun she could be.

Our Mountie showed up while we were up there hammering away. He regarded us—seriously for a moment from his big bay mare, like a critical parent.

Kelly took the nail out of her mouth and called down to him. "Come on, Sergeant Perry. Don't you want to work on a tree fort again?"

He cracked a smile and gave us a few hours of his time. I finally thanked him for his help when I noticed him watching his dosimeter more carefully than he was watching the hammer in his hand.

One night Kelly and I were grilling hot dogs over a campfire next to our "observatory" when she gave me *that look* again. "Bruce, won't you at least take me out to the surface of the dimple? I want to see it for myself."

"Christ, Kelly." I pulled my dog out of the fire and tried to brush off some of the burned spots. What the hell. I'd already signed up for cancer for her sake, had been throwing away red-lined dosimeters for a while. "Sure."

She tackled me with a squeal that made it all worthwhile.

I hoped.

"How deep can you dive?"

I looked up from the gear I was stowing in the Ranger Cherokee. I hadn't done any diving in years. "Now wait a minute — "

"If you're going into the water anyway, you could also see if you could get down to the mascon."

I straightened, shaking my head. "The anomaly is in thirty meters of water. I don't think I can hold my breath more than ninety seconds. That's not enough."

"So we tie a fifteen meter rope to your ankle, drop you over with something heavy to take you down fast, and you push a pole down the rest of the way."

I laughed. "And do what? Tap?"

She smiled her real smile. "You come back up, tell me what you saw, what it felt like. What's down there."

"You were planning on asking me this all along, weren't you?"

Her smile took on a guilty cast. "Well, yes."

I sighed. How much did it matter now? There wasn't much I could do to compete with her rich, dead genius husband. At least I could do this for her.

I wired the butt of an ancient oak post to the end of a twenty-foot aspen pole, then made a wrist loop at

the other end of the pole out of an old bootlace. I would jump headfirst out of the bass boat clutching an old wheel rim to weigh me down and follow the pole toward the bottom. First I smeared my body with a mixture of Vaseline and mud—we didn't have enough of the petroleum jelly around the lodge to use it straight up, but I was worried about the cold.

"We're nuts," I said. Kelly drove the boat straight for the dimple. Our long line trailed behind us toward the nearest shore, some two hundred feet distant, ready for my belaying act.

Kelly looked happier than she had since I first met her. "Nick's down there."

"I'm not knocking on any doors." I already had mud in some very uncomfortable places.

Her smile was like the sunrise. "Just see what you see."

What I saw was what Nick MacInnes had seen in her. What I wondered was what she had seen in him: the record suggested he had been a monomaniacal nutcase who happened to have gotten it right.

The Ranger Cherokee slid down into the dimple, and my stomach did a sharp flop—the world's shortest log-flume ride. Kelly cut the trolling motor, and the boat circled loosely in the base of the dimple, a forty-foot wide bowl. The ten-foot walls of water around us were incredibly disconcerting, a violation of every sense and sensibility. It didn't help that our trailing line strained *upward*, vanishing into those angled waterfalls.

We tipped the stripped aspen pole overboard. The oak block pulled it straight down until it was stopped by the bootlace loop I'd slipped over a cleat, rocking our little boat. I stared down at the rippling black water beneath which lay the mascon.

"Don't think too hard," said Kelly. "You won't do it."

I checked the knot of the lifeline on my ankle. I was only doing it for her, and she was doing it for her husband—she was right, I'd better not think too hard. "Count to thirty, then start pulling up, as fast as you can." I slipped my hand through the loop on the gunwale cleat, pulled the pole free with the tether around my wrist, and fell in headfirst, clutching the wheel rim to my chest.

The water wasn't any colder than I expected, but it pushed up my nose in a way that seemed stronger, sharper than reasonable. Venting a little air from my lips, I released the wheel rim; I was getting enough downward pull from the weighted aspen pole.

My ears throbbed with mild pain. The breathing panic started, but I ignored it, letting the pole drag me down past the visible light.

The water got cooler as I sank. I wondered how deep I was, wondered if Kelly had tossed my line over, sending me off to meet her husband. My ankle jerked up short, and I almost lost my grip on the pole, but the bootlace loop around my wrist held.

I bobbed head down for a moment, the pole pulling me down, the rope holding me back. I worked my hands to get a firmer grip on the pole. With my eyes open, there was a vague greenish quality to the darkness. The water pressure on my body was like a giant fist slowly closing.

That was when I realized my fingers were cold, way too cold. I brought my free hand up in front of my face, but there wasn't enough light to see it. I touched my fingers to my lips—ice scum. I knew what the reports had said, but still... water froze from the *top*, not the *bottom*.

Then the pole jumped in my hands. The downward pull was gone, the pole floating slowly upward. What

had happened to the weight? My chest tightened with anoxia and fear. The water felt much colder. Where the hell was Kelly? I tried to turn my body, but with the pole in the way, I started to get trapped in the rope.

My ankle jerked.

Kelly.

Thank God.

I held the pole while she tugged the rope from somewhere inside the blue sky far above. I followed my heart toward the bright air.

Kelly wrapped me in two blankets when I rolled into the boat, and I shivered in their scratchy depths. I didn't have the strength to swim to shore yet.

She examined the aspen pole. "Looks like it snapped off."

I shook my head. Now that I wasn't panicking, it was easier to figure out what might have happened to the pole. "No applied pressure—I would have felt that."

Kelly pointed the broken end toward me. The end looked more like it had been blown off. Would my hand have done the same, under the pressure of the rapidly expanding ice?

Kelly came to the same conclusion at about the same time. "Cold," she said, her voice strangely satisfied. "The aspen shattered from the cold."

"What's so great about cold?" The cold could have killed me. I was feeling groggy from the dive, chilled in the half-hearted sun of the Canadian Rockies.

Her smile flashed. "Very slow entropic progression, that's what's so great about cold."

Very slow entropic progression. I'd never heard her talk like that before.

The following winter, we were enjoying a comfortable afternoon in front of the lodge fireplace when we heard shots. We looked at each other in shock for a moment before we jumped up, pulled on our Gore-Tex snowpants and parkas, and headed out for the snowmobile.

Less than a mile from the lodge, we found Sergeant Perry's body in the snow, his skis sticking up at an odd angle, his blood spattering the pristine white of the landscape.

Kelly stifled a sob, then bent to close his eyes. I had to stop myself from reaching to comfort her, so I scanned the woods for signs of movement instead. Nothing.

I called Maryland. There wasn't much point in seeking cover—if the shooter was still out there, we were in their sights.

"Perhaps it was a hunting accident?" Marge said over the static-filled connection.

"A hunting accident?" Islamists, Chinese, environmentalists—I could think of a lot more likely explanations than that. "Marge, no one should be able get past our security for there to *be* a hunting accident. You need to initiate an outside investigation."

Kelly knelt in the snow next to the body, tears streaming down her face. We hadn't known the Mountie well, but he had been one of the few people we'd had any contact with in the last four-plus years.

On the other end of the line, Marge sighed. "You're right, this needs to be looked into. I'll take care of it, Bruce."

"Thanks."

An NSA helicopter flew in to collect the body and take Perry back to wherever he had come from. Kelly and I watched it wing away again, and to my surprise, her arm slid around my waist.

I had the odd thought that I wished I could die right then, standing in the snow like one half of a couple with Kelly MacInnes.

The dimple was definitely changing. During the summer following Sergeant Perry's mysterious death—which NSA had failed to clear up—it had grown visibly wider and shallower. Even with our crude measurements, the heat rise was becoming noticeably greater. Radiation levels remained stable, however the dosimeters and my Geiger counter were consistent.

I suggested calling in surveillance aircraft from the agency once more, but Kelly would have none of it. "What good are they? That could have been one of us out in the snow—and no record of a breach in security according to your precious Marge!"

She was right, of course. I had taken to carrying a pistol, something I'd never done before—I no longer trusted my agency's ability to keep us safe. But that didn't have anything to do with whatever was happening in the lake. "Their equipment could still give us valuable data on the dimple."

"And how do we know whether we can even trust their data?"

I wasn't happy with how Marge had handled the security breach either, but I still thought Kelly was overreacting. "What if I ask for the CAF Orion again?"

Kelly shook her head. "No. Not if they're sent by your NSA."

Damn me if I didn't let her talk me out of it.

She couldn't talk university research teams out of coming, though. Suddenly, interest in the dimple revived, and we were no longer as alone as we had been. It seemed like they were everywhere, bitching about agency controls on their equipment, about the mosquitoes, about how we wouldn't let them use the restrooms in the lodge. But we still didn't allow the journalists clamoring for a permit into the park.

Kelly eyed the researchers suspiciously, as if they were going to take her dimple away from her or something. She sat in the tree fort and watched Emerald Lake with a simple pair of binoculars, jealous of anyone else who went near it. I joined her sometimes, but the more the lake changed, the more she left me. I didn't need that reminder of how far away she was again after what had seemed so close.

She was spending the day in the "dimple observatory" as usual when I brought her sandwiches one late autumn afternoon. We had the park to ourselves again for a change, for what little it was worth. The leaves of the maple around her were brilliant with shades of orange and red and yellow, but Kelly only had eyes for that damn dimple.

"Look at the way it's steaming," she said, hardly glancing at me as she took a peanut butter and jelly. "Things are getting even warmer down there."

"Hm." I stared across the water, at the steam rising above the lake. It wasn't that hot, but there was enough temperature differential with the air to build miniature fog banks that rolled down inside the dimple and occasionally crept out. The first snow had not yet fallen, but the days were near freezing now. "You

expecting anything?"

"Entropic progression is speeding up," she said instead of answering my question. "Coming up on the sixth anniversary of Nick's return."

Perhaps it *was* an answer.

By the time the snow started melting again in late March, the dimple was so wide and shallow it spilled onto the shores of Emerald Lake and it was developing a noticeable bulge in the middle. The water was quite warm.

The research teams had mostly disappeared over the winter. Alone again, Kelly and I had settled into a routine a lot like an old marriage —subdued acrimony, half-secrets, and mutual celibacy—so I was surprised when she came looking for me in my room in the lodge one day₇ with that huge smile I hadn't seen in a year.

I fell in love all over again.

"Bruce, can you help me with something?"

I tossed aside the tablet computer with the report I was writing. "Sure."

She led me down to the tree fort. In front of the trunk stood a big plastic shipping crate with rusted catches. I had never seen it before, although I recognized the chain saw and the plastic gas can next to it. There was fresh dirt clinging to the crate.

"What's this?"

"Something I buried a long time ago," Kelly said. "When I first got here."

Almost six years in the middle of nowhere together, and she starts pulling crates out of the ground? Entropic progression, my ass.

She was undoing the latches of the crate. "I need to get this up to the observatory. Do you think we can construct some kind of pulley system?"

"Okay. But what is it?"

"See for yourself," she said, throwing open the top. As I watched, she drew out a nice Celestron G-8 Schmidt-Cassegrain telescope.

"What are we waiting for?" It was cold as hell in the tree fort in the middle of the night, and Emerald Lake sounded like it was bubbling in the dark.

"April 8, 2:30 a.m." Kelly trained the flashlight on her watch. "Which is in about twenty minutes."

I stared up at the stars. "He told you something in that phone call, didn't he?"

Her nod was little more than a shifting shadow. "There was more of a mission profile than we admitted."

I didn't miss the *we*. "You were part of it all along."

Kelly turned away from the Celestron, trained on Ophiuchus, low in the southern sky this time of year. "We had contingency plans."

Mission or no mission, she was finally showing me the core of her, the part she had kept hidden all these years. "So tell me."

She sighed, one hand trailing down the barrel of the telescope. "Obviously, we couldn't test his drive in advance. Nick was pretty sure he'd get a simultaneous translation to Barnard's Star, but he couldn't predict when he'd come out. One analysis said he'd just show up, the other that he had to wait out a lightspeed lag in a state of reduced entropy. Nothing's for free in nature, right? When he didn't come back right away, I knew he was waiting out the lag."

Assuming he hadn't just croaked out there in the depths of space in the violent spray of energy with which his homebuilt starship had departed. I shook my head. "How did he make the phone call from Barnard's Star?"

She laughed, her real laugh. And then I understood—the thing out there in the lake, the dimple, the mascon—that wasn't just a symbol of a man, someone I could compete with. No, that was her dream, the dream she shared with Nick MacInnes.

"The same paired-quantum effects that allow the drive to function can be used to open an electromagnetic channel," she lectured me. "We tested that here on earth. Once he got to Barnard's, Nick used a satellite phone with a virtual antenna that could hit the orbital network he'd built years earlier in our telecomm days. It totally blows Einsteinian simultaneity."

It dawned on me how ridiculous it was that a man went to the stars and called home on a cell phone. "You can say that again."

"It's how I knew we got the math right." In the dark, a ghost of a smile. "He didn't blow up when he got there. He called, promised to come home." Kelly leaned over, handing me what appeared to be a fat manila envelope. "Here."

"What is it?"

"Schematics, mission profile, the data about the cost-effective drive none of you believed in. Just in case things don't work out."

Things don't work out? What things? Her very slow entropic progression, presumably. I squeezed the envelope, checking the thickness of the paper, then slipped it inside my shirt. "Why me? Why now? I'm the enemy."

She put her face back against the eyepiece of the telescope. "Yeah, you are the enemy. You and all your government kind. But I also know you're an honorable guy. I've been hanging out here all these years to keep someone like you from messing things up. But you turned out okay, Bruce."

I swallowed. That was more than she had ever given me before.

She went on. "You're also a survivor. If it turns out we're wrong about something important, you'll get the data to the Canadian people for us."

I had questions, dozens, hundreds of questions about the documents in the envelope, but the warm, rotten reek from the lake bothered me too much to ask them. The Canadian Rockies in April are not supposed to smell like a Louisiana summer. After years of just sitting around, it was all coming together, too fast.

"Ophiuchus. You're looking for Barnard's Star. It's about six light years, right?"

"Five point nine seven," she said without moving her head. She had her telescope where she wanted it and was staring intently. "Five years and three hundred and fifty-five days. Plus a few hours."

Emerald Lake was definitely bubbling now, like a pot on to boil. "Which is now, right?"

"Five minutes, give or take a slight margin of error."

"And you expect..."

Her smile gleamed at me briefly in the darkness before she turned her face back to the eyepiece. "A sign set in the heavens."

I suddenly remembered the bomb-pumped lasers. Below us, Emerald Lake was in full boil. Literally. The reeking steam was the mud bottom being cooked.

"Christ," I whispered. "You're watching for the laser light. He set off the Russian nukes, then hit his drive and came home."

"Got it. You Americans aren't all dumb after all. He'll be home a few seconds after we see the laser light."

I finally understood the slowly growing heat rise in the lake—it was energy leakage from whatever that mascon really was, some very exotic bloc of matter, a giant quark, something. Nick had been back for the last six years, wrapped in an indeterminate envelope of arrested entropy, sitting out reality in his lightspeed lag. Traveling through space and time, waiting for the equations to balance out and spit him out.

Kelly's husband was down in the bottom of the lake—literally waiting for his time to come.

The lake bottom. "He came out in hard vacuum, somewhere near Barnard's Star, right?"

"Yeah... cometary orbit..." She wasn't really listening.

"Why not come back to vacuum here?"

"Reentry," she said absently. "Added an entire layer of complexity and design requirements. Throw weight for the launch, all kinds of issues. We figured on translating straight home."

Right smack in the middle of a much, much higher density of matter than the single hydrogen atom per cubic centimeter he would have encountered out in deep space. The burst of his arrival at Barnard's would have been nothing but a light show. Back here, though... I was no physicist, but even I could imagine the energy gradient coming together when his wave front finally collapsed out there in the lake.

"Kelly," I said, my voice as calm as I could make it. "Nick's ship is exploding. It's been exploding for six years, very, very, very slowly—that's what the dimple has been. In three minutes, it's going to explode in real time."

"He didn't bring the nukes back." Kelly's voice was dreamy. "The ship was set to ditch them before reengaging the drive. Just in case he couldn't set them off."

"Nukes or no nukes, something is blowing up. We have to go, *now*." I reviewed the escape routes, paths to higher ground versus how far we could get in my Ford Explorer parked up by the lodge. "I said no nukes," Kelly replied absently, still peering through the Celestron.

"To hell with the nukes. He's carrying too much potential energy out there, without a hard vacuum to bleed it off into!"

Agonized, I could hear the smile in her voice. "The math worked. He got there, he'll get back. I have to be here to meet him."

She had a scientist's faith in the numbers, damn her—and a lover's faith in the future. "For Christ's sake, no matter what the numbers tell you, Nick's ship is blowing up. Emerald Lake will be coming down around our heads." Was there such a thing as a quantum explosion?

"No. We modeled everything. We knew if he got there, he'd get back, and —Hey! Barnard's Star is getting brighter! I can see Nick's lasers!"

"Kelly, come on!" I broke my cardinal rule for dealing with her and tried to force the issue. Grabbing her arm, I pulled her away from the telescope, but she whirled on me. Her fist connected with my jaw.

"I'm not leaving, Bruce. You're afraid, *you* run."

And to my shame, I did. The instinct for survival won out, and I found myself scrambling down the ladder and running up the incline away from the lake and the disaster I was almost sure was about to occur. I decided against taking the extra time to find the Ford and get it started and just kept running uphill, for all the seconds left to me, leaving the woman I loved behind with her telescope and her dimple and her long-lost husband.

And then the lake exploded.

I groaned myself awake in a puddle of mud, wondering how long I had been lying there. What had once been Emerald Lake was awash with light, and I heard the chattering of a helicopter in the distance.

I had gotten far enough away. I was alive.

And Kelly almost certainly was not.

About a quarter mile away, I saw the remains of the lodge, splintered timbers rising above a sea of mud, a nightmare landscape of shadows and destruction glowing in a spotlight from above. With all that radioactive lake bottom blown everywhere, this place was a real hot zone now.

I pushed myself up, every joint screaming in protest. Coughing water out of my sinuses, or maybe blood, I turned to head back in the direction of the shore.

A pale glow in front of me turned out to be Marge, finding her way through the debris with a red-filtered flashlight. She was wearing street clothes —a knee-length skirt, for the love of God, out here. "Glad to see you survived, Bruce."

And right behind her was Ray Vittori, the project manager from the Canadian Space Agency—who had told us about the radioactivity coming from the dimple in the first place.

And Vittori was in shirtsleeves, despite all the blown mud. God damn was I an idiot. So much for the radionuclides. No wonder my Geiger counters never worked right—they'd had to rig them up back at the agency. Hell, even J could think of three or four ways to fake a dosimeter.

"Nice to see you again, Agent Diedrich," Vittori said. "Although the circumstances could certainly be better."

I just stared at him.

He held out his hand, but it wasn't for a shake. It was palm up, expecting something. "I'll take those

documents now."

"What-?"

Marge smiled, teeth gleaming pink in the flashlit darkness as she lit a cigarette. "Microphones, Bruce. You should know better."

Yeah, I did know better. Passive surveillance was cheap. They could have wired the entire Canadian Rockies for sound during the time I'd been hanging around here.

I looked from Marge to Vittori. Kelly had said I should give the documents to the Canadian people, but I didn't think this was what she had in mind.

"There never was any radioactive fallout." My voice sounded as dead as I felt.

Vittori shook his head. "No."

"But why?"

He shrugged, finally lowering his expectant hand. "We already had all the data we were going to get from the dimple, Diedrich. All that was left was the woman."

The woman.

Kelly MacInnes, a laughing woman who had lived and died for a dream and a long-lost husband.

"Oh, God," I said, remembering someone else who was dead.

"Sergeant Perry—?"

Marge's expression hardened, and she took another drag on her cigarette. "Died in a hunting accident, Bruce. Headed the wrong way, you might say."

Hunting accident. Perry had been ready to say too much. I turned to her with the same question I'd asked Vittori: "Why?"

"There are plenty of people on both sides of the border who will do a lot for a working star drive."

For Nick MacInnes's plans, which we had all rejected twelve years ago. The Canadian who had made it almost all the way home from the stars.

With a sigh, I sat down on a shattered log, cruddy and mossy from the lake. Wedged behind it, I noticed a plastic gas container, the top still on.

"Can I bum a cigarette from you, Marge?"

"You quit years ago." Her voice was impatient.

"I need one now." I hugged myself, cold and wet in the dark April night. The envelope crinkled under my shirt, the one accurate record of MacInnes's cost-effective method of superluminal travel.

Marge held a lit cigarette out to me. I took it. "Thanks."

"Now smoke it and let's get going. There are some very important people waiting for you in Washington."

She turned to Vittori, whispering something I couldn't hear. Cigarette clenched between my lips, I twisted

around and unscrewed the cap, pouring the liquid on the ground.

It didn't smell right—muddy lake water. The container must have cracked from the force of the blast. I threw my cigarette into it. The butt fizzled and went out.

"You ready?" Marge asked.

I nodded. Pulling the envelope out of my shirt, I handed it over to the Canadian.

Some Canadian. I couldn't fool myself into thinking that it was what Kelly had wanted.

As we walked toward the helicopter, I realized I could no longer remember the sound of her laugh.