



The Starmaster

Book 8

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PREVIEW

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Chapter I

Sunday, April 12, 1931

“**M**y plans are almost complete!” The speaker wore a green mask over his face, with the brim of his hat pulled down to shade his eyes. His voice boomed, underscored by rumbling thunder. Lanterns flickered.

Outside, the storm raged. The barn doors creaked in the wind. Water dripped from leaks in the roof. Rivulets ran under the walls and pooled on the dirt floor. Allison Paine occupied one of the chairs that formed a circle near the back wall of the barn. Her husband, Ellery, sat beside her. Nearly twenty others were in attendance.

None of the regular attendees admitted to knowing the Starmaster’s identity, though several members of the group had quietly speculated. The Starmaster’s personal guards, the chosen few, stood near the front of the barn and waited beyond the range of the lanterns. They held German Shepherd dogs on short leashes.

“Within the next few weeks, I will achieve the next step toward my greatest goal.” The Starmaster moved around the center of the circle, stopping to gesture to various members of the group. Approving murmurs whispered through the crowd. Anyone who helped him had been promised rich rewards.

Allison sat rigidly on the edge of her chair, feeling the same lack of enthusiasm from Ellery. The longer they participated in the

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group, the more it sounded like fairy tales. The idea that aliens existed, and were already living on Earth, had turned into a bad joke. The Starmaster's claim that he was descended from them, and destined to rejoin them as their ruler, was nothing short of insanity. A specific form of insanity—megalomania. To him, humans were inferior beings.

The Starmaster's collection of artifacts—mesmerizing at first—looked as fake as a circus sideshow. Ordinary pieces of metal littered tables and filled cabinets throughout the barn, along with bone fragments that could have come from anything, and eyewitness accounts that read like cheap fiction. If the Starmaster had studied the pitiful fragments to discover the secrets of alien technology, he wouldn't have learned much.

“Why did you miss the last two meetings?” The Starmaster stopped in front of Ellery and glared down, only his eyes showing. His commanding voice could compel even the most reasonable men to believe his fantasies and obey his whims.

“We were tired.” Ellery's excuse sounded flat. They had only come tonight because of a strongly worded personal invitation, with the veiled indication of a threat. “I've been busy with an assortment of things lately, and you can't expect my wife to do more than she's already done. After what happened last month—”

“Tired?” The Starmaster leaned down, his posture aggressive. “We're days away from the greatest turning point of human history, and you no longer want to participate because you're tired?”

“You can't ask us to give up more than we already have,” Allison said, leaning in to support Ellery. She couldn't believe how much of her life she had dedicated to the Starmaster's work, all for nothing. “I spent months working undercover for you, changed my name and took a different job, even pretended to be unmarried and made advances to another man, just to get the information you wanted—”

“And after all of that, you still failed.” He turned away from Ellery to focus his glare on her instead. “It should have been simple.”

“And after the man who knew about the aliens was shot in the head, what did you expect me to do?”

“You had months with him, before that.”

“He wouldn’t talk about it. It took that long to get him to trust me. He was just about to tell me everything, and then—” She stopped abruptly. Lightning cracked, showing through the gaps between the barn boards. Wind howled against the roof. “Maybe he didn’t know anything, either. Maybe he made the story up to get attention a few years ago, and when he almost lost his job over it, he never mentioned it again.”

“There were too many coincidences. I had already confirmed all of the details, and I found the crash site. I brought the pieces here.” Thunder rumbled. He waved toward several larger pieces of metal leaning against the back wall, which he claimed had come from the hull of a spacecraft. “There was only one vital piece of information I still wanted—*the name of the survivor!*”

“What if there wasn’t one?” She spoke louder, addressing the others around the circle. “What if it was just an unreported airplane that crashed in the woods? What if there are no aliens—”

“Blasphemy.” He struck her hard across the face, knocking her back into her chair. “After everything I’ve taught you?”

She bit her lip. The metallic taste of blood turned her stomach.

The room fell silent only for an instant. Ellery sprang from his chair and grabbed the Starmaster’s arm, swinging to strike him back. “Don’t you dare hit my wife!”

The Starmaster was a big man, but Ellery held his own against him. The other members of the circle tripped over chairs in the scramble to get out of the way. The masked man grabbed a chair and swung it.

Ellery ducked. The chair crashed against the metal hull fragments balanced against the back wall, scattering them across the floor like oversized bowling pins. Thunder shook the barn.

The Starmaster’s guards edged closer, looking for an opening in the fight. Their powerful dogs strained at their leashes, growling and baring their teeth. Ellery charged at the Starmaster and slammed into him, knocking him back against the tables.

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One guard turned his dog loose. It shot forward, snarling, and launched itself into the fray. When Ellery brought his arm back for another punch, the dog sank its teeth into his wrist. Ellery yowled and kicked, trying to shake himself loose, but the dog held fast. At the same instant, the Starmaster reached for one of the artifacts on the table—a massive, black-bladed knife. He whirled back toward Ellery, his arm swinging in an arc.

Allison screamed. The world moved in slow-motion. Ellery cried out and crumpled. The guards swarmed over him. The dog's teeth remained clamped onto his limp, bloody arm.

The others crowded closer, craning their necks for a better view. They turned toward Allison, shuffling at first, then picking up speed. She had known them for years, but couldn't recognize them now. The flickering lamplight transformed their faces into grotesque animations.

Every one of them would follow the Starmaster's orders with religious zeal. An intense heaviness fell upon her. Her heart pulsed in her ears. She had just become his target.

"Get her!" The masked leader raised his arm and pointed. Lamplight cast him as a silhouette, spreading towering shadows across the walls.

She sprinted for the unguarded door. Outside, the stinging rain nearly blinded her. She sloshed through puddles, shivering uncontrollably, tripping over branches in the darkness, and sinking into the slippery mud. Wind tore at her hair and clothes. Branches waved and cracked.

The barn was located on a private country road. One direction led back to the highway, the other, presumably, to the Starmaster's house. She'd never been that way. An oil lamp flickered in the barn doorway. Soaked to the skin, she leaned against a tree and panted. A flash of lightning gave her a brief glimpse of the woods.

Close behind her, a dog barked. She rubbed the water out of her eyes and fled into the night.



Chapter II

Sunday, April 19, 1931

Detective Lieutenant Marx stepped off the train station platform, holding a small suitcase. Rita Nanning followed a few steps behind, while Jane Maplewood searched for a porter to handle her far more extensive luggage. O'Malley—though he had travelled on the same train back from Kansas—remained aloof for the entire journey and had already disappeared.

Marx stopped and waited for Rita to catch up. Trains chugged, rattled, screeched, and whistled. The crowd swirled around, jostling against them. Voices shouted, people waved. Marx held his breath and looked down at his shoes. “About going to the movies with me . . .”

“Sure, anytime.” Her response sounded flippant and automatic. She stared past him, searching for an opening in the crowd.

“Rita, I . . .” He choked, struggling to organize his thoughts into coherent words. His brain froze. Thinking about her often had that effect on him. So did crowded locations. Passing travelers, trying to reach the train, bumped against his back and knocked him closer to her.

He could have kicked himself for the way he'd asked her. After catching her in the role of an exotic dancer at a circus, she'd begged him not to tell her parents. Asking her for a date under those circumstances implied blackmail. She had been polite to him on

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the train, but nothing more. He hadn't had a minute alone with her. Jane, almost old enough to be their grandmother, filled the role of chaperone.

"If . . ." He wheezed. His chest ached from the strain. She was still the most beautiful woman in the world. With one poorly timed question, he might have ruined any chance he ever had. "If you don't really want to—" The train whistle drowned out his words. By the time he reorganized his thoughts, she had already turned away.

Jane joined them, trailed by a struggling porter loaded down like a pack mule. Marx bit his tongue and sighed, then pushed through the crowd after Rita. Outside, the damp air was heavy with the scent of exhaust fumes. A line of taxis waited. Seagulls squawked and sailed overhead. Engines idled. The crowd dispersed into cars. Jane found an empty taxi and supervised the loading of her luggage.

Rita paused and turned back, meeting his eyes briefly. She touched his arm. "Thanks for coming."

His breath caught. At her request, he'd dropped everything and travelled halfway across the country to rescue Lowan from a murder charge made by an abusive sheriff. In the process, he'd stopped a homicidal magician, solved the disappearance of two locals from Milford Falls and two more murders committed at a circus, and had nearly been eaten by a lion. All for a simple *thanks for coming*. He couldn't ask for more than that. "If you don't really want to go to the movies—"

"Hey, lieutenant!" Footsteps pounded toward them. Marx turned. A patrol car was parked at the end of the line of taxis. Officer O'Neill jogged to intercept them. He paused to pant, leaning forward with his hands on his knees. "Lieutenant, *Captain Kramer* wants you in his office right away."

Marx's stomach twisted into knots. Kramer's long-expected promotion had been finalized less than a week ago. Marx wasn't anxious to see him anytime soon. "I wasn't supposed to be back to work until tomorrow."

“Too bad.” O’Neill straightened up. “If he knew where you went, he’d have called you back sooner. We’ve been looking all over for you. Where’ve you been?”

“Kansas.” Marx hesitated, tightening his grip on his suitcase. He’d never gotten along with Kramer. “What’s it about?” He’d spent the past three years worrying that as soon as Kramer had the authority, his first act as captain would be to fire him.

“Homicide.” O’Neill looked around at the crowd and lowered his voice. “Happened during that storm last weekend, but wasn’t found until the day you left. Sanducci’s been working on it, but he really made a mess of it, and the captain wants you to straighten it out. I’m supposed to give you a ride to headquarters.”

“Great.” Marx’s breath hissed between his teeth. He shoved his suitcase at O’Neill. “I’ll be there in a minute.” While O’Neill plodded toward the police car, Marx turned back to Rita. “You can get home from here?” Not that he doubted her ability to fend for herself, but it wasn’t gentlemanly to abandon his traveling companions.

“Sure, I’ll ride with Jane.” She handed her suitcase to the cabbie, then slipped into the back seat. “See you later.”

Marx stomped past the row of cars, climbed into the passenger side beside O’Neill, and slammed the door. He stared out the window while O’Neill steered into traffic. The beginnings of a headache blurred the edges of his vision. He’d been counting on having the rest of the day off to go back to his apartment, get cleaned up, eat, and sleep. After spending over twenty-four sleepless hours on a train, he wasn’t in the mood for anything else.

“So, how was your vacation?” O’Neill tried to sound friendly. He gripped the steering wheel and stared at the road ahead.

“It wasn’t a vacation. I was helping a friend out of a jam.”

“Oh. And that girl who got into the cab . . .”

Marx almost snarled.

“Sorry I asked.” O’Neill turned his attention back to the road.

“What about this homicide? How’d it happen? Who’s the victim? What did Sanducci do?” Marx rubbed his face, leaving out

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the one question he wanted to ask. *Why couldn't it wait until tomorrow?*

"You'll have to ask the captain." O'Neill parked in front of the police station.

"Sure." Marx stepped out, slammed the door, then reached into the back seat to grab his suitcase. He trudged up the front steps, past Sergeant O'Leary's desk, and down the hall. Kramer's office had a window facing the hallway. He was bent over his desk, going over paperwork. Unusual on a weekend—unless the problem was important.

Marx tiptoed past, left his suitcase in his own tiny, windowless closet-turned-office at the end of the hall, then backtracked. He stopped in front of Kramer's door and held his breath, working up the courage to knock.

Kramer glanced up from his papers, frowned, and waved. The window muffled his voice. "What are you waiting for? Get in here."

Marx pushed the door open and stepped inside. He stopped in front of Kramer's desk, remained standing, and stared at his shoes. "O'Neill just picked me up at the train station."

"You were on vacation long enough." Kramer huffed through his wiry moustache. "Some of us have work to do here, and we can't go galivanting off across the country for a whole week."

Marx didn't take the bait. Angering Kramer would only have made the situation worse. Trying to explain the purpose of his leave wouldn't have invited any sympathy. Kramer hated Lowan, too. "O'Neill said Sanducci was working on a homicide case . . ." He trailed off and looked down, waiting.

Kramer tossed a file. It landed with a breezy *slap* on Marx's side of the desk. "It would've been yours from the start, but you weren't here. I'm sure you'll enjoy sorting through Sanducci's bungling."

Marx hesitated, then reached forward and flipped the file open. Kramer had spent the last three years treating him like the department's most incompetent pariah. Now, Kramer apparently considered him the only one capable of handling a difficult case. "What happened?"



Chapter III

Tom Nanning sat at his desk and pounded on his typewriter. The *Milford Falls Gazette* went to the presses every day of the week—even Sundays. Noise echoed around him. Dozens of typewriters, voices, footsteps, shouting. His was one of almost twenty desks arranged in a grid in the main room at the heart of the *Gazette*, a chaotic and factory-like environment. If he needed peace and quiet to write, he'd never get anything written. And he wouldn't have a job.

The smell of ink and cigarette smoke settled like a heavy fog. He checked his notes, thinking of how to arrange the information in a concise and informative manner, without the story being too dull to read. The paper's overall tone walked a thin line between *sensational* and *just the facts*. Editor Wilson loved to see excitement splashed across the front page, but wouldn't tolerate sloppy reporting or unsubstantiated claims.

This story was a dull one. Due to ongoing cleanup from last weekend's major storm, several events at the library would be rescheduled for later in the week, including the monthly meeting of the ladies' embroidery guild and a

lecture by John J. Mellinger on social work and the local homeless crisis.

He made a note to find out more about Mellinger. That could make more of a story than the embroidery guild. The last time he'd tried to do a story on one of their embroidery meetings, he'd been bored out of his mind. He couldn't squeeze more than two hundred words out of the whole evening, and most of that had been old ladies' gossip. Footsteps thudded closer, then stopped. The feeling of being watched made his spine tingle. He paused mid-sentence and looked up.

Phil Perry, another reporter, stared back at him. He smirked. "The big guy upstairs wants to see you. He's got a special assignment that only you can handle."

"What's this about?" Tom turned his notes over. Even if this story wouldn't make it past the middle of the last section, he still didn't want Phil copying it. Phil treated hunting for bylines like a blood sport. "If it's an important story, I'm surprised you're not dashing up the stairs ahead of me."

"Nope, this one's all yours. You can have it. In fact, I suggested to him that you'd be the best man for the job." Phil flashed another toothy grin. A predatory expression shone from his half-closed eyes.

Tom shoved his notes in a drawer and stepped around the desk. Phil Perry moved back to chat with Bill Swanson, the paper's new lanky, sandy-haired photographer. Bill wore the same smirk. They watched him navigate through the maze of desks to the iron staircase at the back of the room. Editor Wilson's office was practically a crow's-nest, situated on a balcony with windows overlooking the main floor. Tom's footsteps clattered on the metal stairs. He slid his hand up the iron handrail, stopped on the landing in front of the door, knocked, and went in.

“Tom.” Vernon Wilson motioned for him to take the chair across from him. Papers covered his desk, along with a typewriter and telephone, pens, pencils, ink, scissors, glue, clippings, and scraps. Stories in various stages of editing, scribbled full of his nearly unreadable red and blue pencil notations. Layouts for an upcoming edition, still with blank sections. Wilson looked over the clutter and leaned back. “I just had an interesting call. I was going to send Phil, but Phil suggested that with your . . . greater experience in the subject . . . you might be a better fit. I see his point.”

“What’s it about?” Tom settled into the chair and waited.

Across from him, the normally blustery editor fidgeted and rearranged the pens on his desk. His chair creaked. “The call was from John Mellinger.”

“I just came across his name. He’s scheduled to give a lecture at the library this week. Something about social work and homelessness . . .” Tom’s thoughts trailed off and his forehead wrinkled. “I don’t have any experience in that.”

“This concerned a separate matter. He owns a large tract of property northwest of Milford Falls. There’s been an incident in a section of his woods. He described it as a crash site. He heard a noise like an explosion, then found trees knocked down, a large crater, and debris. There aren’t any reports of downed aircrafts.” Wilson slid a scrap of paper across the table, then rummaged through a drawer until he found his cigar box. “Go have a look at it, and take a photographer with you.” He paused to light his cigar, glaring across the desk. “And, Tom, if you find anything at all, I’m expecting a story about a meteorite. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.” Tom glanced at the address on the paper, then backed away and left. He shut the door and clattered back down the stairs. *A meteorite*. The possibility of more than that set his nerves on edge.

Five years ago, while working on another story in the countryside, he'd witnessed something like a meteor fly over the road and crash somewhere in the woods. He'd chased after it, hoping to find a more interesting story than the dead two-headed calf he was supposed to be writing about. Instead, he'd found the rubble of a spaceship—and two survivors.

He'd been no more than a junior reporter at the time, after working his way up from delivering newspapers and running errands as an office boy. When he brought in a story about aliens, Wilson almost laughed him out of a job. The story was never printed, and his reputation had never completely recovered.

At the bottom of the stairs, Phil Perry cackled. “Aliens? *Woowoo . . .*”

“No, just a meteor.” Tom kept a straight face. Five years of not being able to speak the truth burned a hole in his soul. “It could be a valuable scientific discovery. I’m surprised you didn’t want it.” He motioned to Bill. “I need a photographer. Are you busy?”

Bill grimaced like he'd eaten something bitter. “I’ll get my camera.”

They took Bill’s car. The drive lasted almost forty minutes. Bill never said one word for the entire time. Tom stared through the window, watching the city recede into hills and forest, interrupted occasionally by stretches of farmland.

His thoughts wandered elsewhere. Less than a month ago, the photographer had been Allison Mansfield, his fiancé. She'd been killed in an ambush while they were working on a story in a rural area. If he had done something differently, she'd be the one next to him now. The

countryside faded into a blur. Bill turned down a long driveway and stopped in front of a house.

Not the old farmhouse that Tom had been expecting. John Mellinger lived in a mansion. Somewhat rustic by affectation, but the pretense didn't extend very far beyond the wicker porch swing and several new electric lights designed to mimic old gas lanterns. The house, with bright white siding and dozens of windows on the front, was a full three stories tall. Crisp white fencing bordered horse paddocks, where fine thoroughbred animals grazed. Beyond the immaculate stable, a kennel contained several equally well-groomed German Shepherd dogs.

“Gosh.” Bill stepped out and looked around. “What a place he’s got here.”

“Get your camera ready.” Tom hopped up the front steps to the wide front porch. The door featured a brass doorknocker in the shape of a horse’s head. He knocked. The sound echoed, metallic and resonant.

The door opened noiselessly. The man in the doorway appeared to be in his early forties, with a broad smile and enviable hair. His plaid flannel shirt, not the least bit faded, appeared tailor-made from the finest materials. He wore leather riding boots, probably imported from England. Like the house, any pretense of a rustic lifestyle was only an outward show.

Tom showed his press card, then motioned to the car, where Bill took his camera out of the case and checked it over. “I’m Tom Nenning, with the *Gazette*, and that’s Bill Swanson, our photographer. You called about an incident?”

“John Mellinger. Pleased to meet you.” He offered to shake hands, then pulled the door shut behind him and stepped off the porch. “I’m glad you came so promptly. I only just called your editor . . .” He glanced at his watch. “A

few nights ago, I saw a fireball in the sky, then heard a loud crash. Nothing's been the same since." He leaned closer and lowered his voice, wavering slightly. "I think something's still out there."

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