

No Small Bills

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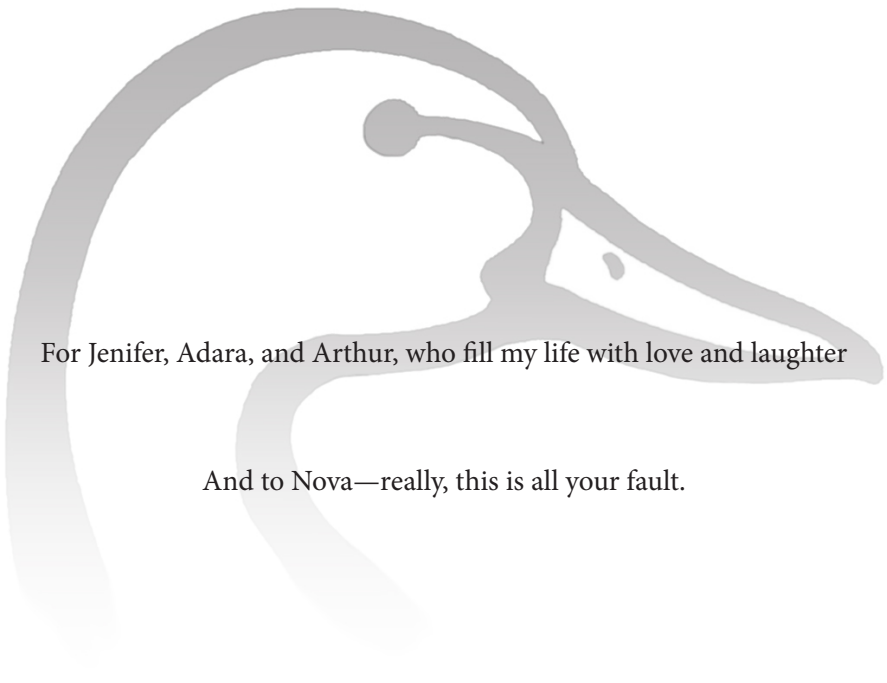
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First edition



For Jenifer, Adara, and Arthur, who fill my life with love and laughter

And to Nova—really, this is all your fault.



Chapter One

DuckBob, meet the Universe.

Universe, meet DuckBob.

Ever have one of those days where nothing ever seems to go quite right? Where you miss the train by seconds each time, fumble your change at the snack machine, click away from the porn site too slow to fool your supervisor, kick yourself in the head when you're trying to tie your shoe, take a swig of your beer only to realize it's a canister of baking soda instead?

That's pretty much every day for me.

The name's DuckBob. DuckBob Spinowitz. No, that's not a nickname or a pet name or any of that other funny stuff. It's my name. I had it legally changed. Figured it was easier to join 'em than try to stop 'em, and when you beat 'em to the punch, it stops being funny. A little. Sometimes. Why "DuckBob"? Well, okay, here's the thing—

—I've got the head of a duck.

I know, right now you're thinking, "oh, he's got a flat nose" or "he's got a weak chin and a high forehead" or "he must have feathery blond hair." No. That's not it at all.

I.

Have.

The head of.

A duck.

Really. My head? It's that of a mallard—a Wood Duck, to be precise. Complete with black-tipped red-and-white bill, white below the bill and down the front of the neck, a touch of yellow rising up from the bill and leading to a white streaks above red eyes, and emerald green feathers covering the rest, with a few white streaks mixed in.

A duck.

Only, y'know, man-sized.

I've also got webbed feet. And feathers instead of hair. All over. Soft downy feathers, looks just like fine hair until you feel it. Speckled brown down the chest and on the feet, tan across the arms and hands, emerald green on the back (yes, all the way down!), and white on the belly, groin, and legs.

It's pretty slick-looking, actually. If I were a crazed xenobiologist with leanings toward ornithology, I'd say I was an impressive specimen. I even won a few awards at bird shows, before I was disqualified—seems the entry and the owner can't be the same person. Purists.

Plus there was that whole “disrobing in public” thing. But hey, is it my

fault they wouldn't take my word for it about the feathers, y'know, Down Below?

On the plus side, I can walk in the rain and not get wet. And swimming? Fuggedaboutit.

No, I wasn't born this way. And no, I don't want to talk about it. Just another example of the colossal bad luck that routinely plagues my life. Because that's what it was—bad luck. I mean, was it my fault I was hiking through a restricted area in the Catskills in the dead of night, waving a lighter in one hand and a neon-orange fishing pole in the other? While naked?

Long story. There was a girl involved. At least I certainly hope so, because otherwise I've got no excuse.

Beyond that—let's just say that, all those stories about alien abductions and crazy experiments? They don't know the half of it. Those little gray buggers are downright cruel.

So you're probably thinking, "Okay, this guy's half man, half duck. That's weird. I'll bet he's a superhero, with a face like that—DuckBob the Aquatic Avenger. Or a mad scientist. Or a professional deep-sea diver. Or at least a sunglasses model."

Nope. Sorry. I'm just your ordinary average guy, and when I'm dressed I look completely normal, 'cept for the whole duck-head thing. I'm no

superhero. I work at—aw hell, does it even matter what the name is, really? It's an office job, okay? I'm a pencil pusher, and not even a glorified one. I shuffle papers and push buttons in a little cubicle all day. Then I leave.

Whee.

Some life, huh? Well, it beats the alternatives. At least that's what I like to tell myself. Hey, whatever it takes to get through the day. For me that usually includes watching a few minutes from old Donald Duck cartoons at some point. It's about the only way I can convince myself things could be worse. Look like this, not be able to talk straight, and be forced to walk around with my butt and my business hanging out all the time? Yeah, that would pretty much be the last straw.

Anyway, I'm used to being the butt of some cosmic joke. That being said, I was still surprised when I walked into work one Tuesday and two guys suddenly showed up alongside me and grabbed me by the arms. Big guys, too—they lifted me right off my feet, and I'm not small myself. Plus the bill weighs a lot—I've got amazing neck muscles.

"Hey, what's the big idea?" I demanded as they turned and carried me back out the door. "I've gotta punch in!"

"Mr. Spinowitz?" One of them asked. He had a face like a microwaved potato—squishy and overflowing—and a voice like a hoarse bulldog. He was wearing a suit, a dark one, and I was pretty sure I heard fabric tear

each time he shifted.

“Yeah. Who the hell are you guys?”

“We need to speak with you about an urgent matter of national security,” the other guy said. He was taller than his buddy, athletic where Mr. Potato Head was just squat. (I’m big-boned and slightly rotund, by the way. It’s the slacker lifestyle that does it.) Matching suit, though. I thought that was sweet. Like jewelry but washable.

“National security? I was just curious what sort of brownie recipes it had,” I said quickly. “I didn’t try any of the other stuff, and even if I did Missus Gries down the hall had it coming! I’m sure the twitching will stop soon!”

The shorter guy raised an eyebrow but shook his head. “That’s not why we’re here.”

“What, then?” I thought for a second, then gasped. “Oh, come on! I know the porn was from Yugoslavia but I only traded an old Steve McQueen movie for it! It’s not like I was selling state secrets! It’s not even a clean copy!”

By this time we’d reached the curb, and a big black sedan idling there. Mr. Potato Head opened the passenger door and slid in, then Mr. Tall shoved me in after him. I’ve never understood the whole “dark sedan with government plates” thing, actually. Why that kind of car? Why not those

crazy monster SUVs, so the agents can drive over anyone who gets in their way? And nobody'd escape custody—it's not like you can get out of one of those without a ladder and some pitons. Or go for sports cars, classy and great in a car chase. Or the old kidnapper classic, the white Econoline van—cheap, ubiquitous, and now with faster sliding doors! Or maybe something to counteract their whole “we're not really on your side after all” image. I bet government agencies wouldn't seem half as scary if they all drove brightly colored compact cars or minivans with “My Kid's an Honors Student” bumper stickers.

Instead, there I was in the back of a dark sedan. The windows were tinted—I could have made faces at my co-workers and they'd never have known. Not that I can do many faces anymore—duckbills are not very versatile. I'm great at Charades, though. As long as it involves water fowl.

“Where're we going?” I asked as the car pulled away—there must have been a third guy driving but I couldn't see him. “Who are you? What do you want from me? Say, what's that?” That last one I asked while pointing at the Empire State Building, just to get a reaction. I did. They looked at me like I was a moron. I know that look all too well.

With a head like mine, it's hard getting people to take you seriously.

“Our superiors want to speak with you,” the taller guy answered.

“They never heard of the phone?”

He glared at me. “It’s a matter of national security.”

“Yeah, you said that already. Couldn’t they have used a nationally secure phone?”

That got snorts from both of them, and I think from the driver as well. “No such thing,” Mr. Potato Head said. “You have any idea how easy it is to tap into a cell phone conversation?”

“No. Could you show me? I’d love to know what my boss says about me.” Though actually I think I have a pretty good idea. “Quack, quack” is surprisingly easy to lip read.

They didn’t answer, and we spent the rest of the ride in silence. I hate silence. It gives me time to think.

Finally we pulled into a building down near the south piers. A warehouse, it looked like, on a narrow street full of warehouses. I didn’t see a sign or a street number or anything. Which I guess was the point.

“Out,” Mr. Tall demanded once we’d stopped and the garage door clanked shut again. He got out first and Mr. Potato Head shoved me from behind to make me move, then clambered out after me. Maybe his door was broken. I looked around as I got out but it just looked like a warehouse. There was a guy standing there watching us, though. Average height, skinny as a razor blade, with features to match and glossy black hair that looked painted on. Same suit as my escorts but his looked better on him.

“Mr. Spinowitz? I’m Mr. Smith,” he said, offering his hand. “Thank you for joining us.”

“I didn’t really have a choice,” I pointed out, but I shook hands with him anyway. Hell, I was in a nondescript warehouse somewhere in Manhattan with at least four guys, all of them probably armed. Being rude didn’t sound like a good idea.

“I apologize for our insistence,” Smith explained. “But this is an urgent matter and we couldn’t risk you refusing our invitation.”

“Okay, so I’m here.” I glanced around again. Nothing to see but rusty walls and stairs and railings, concrete floor, the car we’d pulled up in, and us. “What’s this all about?”

Smith started to say something, stopped, and started again. “We have a situation, and we think you may be uniquely qualified to handle it for us,” he said finally.

“Qualified? Me? You haven’t read my performance reviews. What makes me so qualified?”

Smith pointed at my head. “That.”

“Oh.”

“Yes. You see, we’ve been approached by extraterrestrials. We have no idea what they want, and none of our attempts to communicate have worked. But you’ve encountered them before—we hoped that might have

granted you some rapport with them.”

I stared at him, at the guys behind me, and then back at him again. “Let me get this straight—you’ve got some aliens you want to talk to, and you want me to do the talking because I got abducted and given a duck head so you figure I can relate to them better? Are you mental?” Okay, I might have forgot about the whole not-pissing-off-the-men-with-guns thing.

“You may be correct,” Smith admitted. He actually didn’t look pissed-off at all, which was unusual for anyone I talk to. “But we have little to lose at this point, and it seemed an avenue worth exploring. Would you be willing to make the attempt? For the good of your country?” Man, this guy was good! Those callers from the Fraternal Order of Police had nothing on him!

I took time to think about it, though. I didn’t want to just jump into anything. “Yeah, okay, sure.”

“Excellent!” He actually rubbed his hands together. I thought they only did that in cheesy movies. “Come along, it’s right this way.” I followed him to the back of the warehouse, which had several doors. The floor above continued back past this point so I was looking at the doors to several rooms rather than a whole set of back doors. Which makes sense because why would anyone need more than one back door, especially all in a row?

Why not just have one great big giant door? Smith gestured toward the door to the left. “After you.”

“Oh, the alien’s in there?” He nodded. “And you want me to talk to it?” Another nod. “Alone?” Nod number three—one more and I walked. “But you just said ‘after you’—doesn’t that mean you’re going in with me?”

Smith smiled then, which looked like something you’d see on a buzzard that suddenly found itself at a breakfast buffet. “I lied.” He indicated the door again, and rested one hand on his side. Right below the bulge I suspected was his gun—either that or he had a hideous growth under his left arm. Either way I figured I’d better do what he wanted.

“Okay, okay, I’m going.” I turned the knob and pulled the door halfway open. At least it looked dark on the other side, no blinding lights and sets of examining tables and rows of glistening tools. Not that I think about such things. Much. Ever.

“Right.” I took a deep breath. “Here goes.” And I stepped inside.

And promptly screamed as the door slammed shut behind me. Then the lights came on, showing me four plain metal chairs and a small folding table—and the little figure sitting in one of the chairs facing the table.

Short, skinny, gray skin, huge head, huge eyes, no hair. An alien. Just like the ones who . . . anyway, an alien.

Though I wondered where he’d gotten the Halloween-themed footy

pajamas. Those didn't seem like standard issue. At least the black-bat pattern went with his skin tone and his eyes.

I was trying hard not to panic. I figured I could always do that later, in a pinch. I'm good at spontaneous panic. Also, shooting spitballs. I've got wicked velocity.

Right now, though, I figured the best thing was just to get this over with. Face my fear. All that.

"Uh, hi." I like to think my voice didn't shake much at all. I walked over to the table and leaned over it so we were roughly face-to-face. "I'm Bob. DuckBob. Um, have we met?"



Chapter Two

We do not all look alike!

It stared at me. Okay, strike one. I took one of the remaining chairs, swung it around to the far side of the table, and sat down. Up close these guys didn't look all that scary. Kind of cute, actually, like a kid with a really horrible skin disease and a seriously malformed head. Okay, cuter than that sounds. But not dangerous or threatening. Of course, the fact that there was only one of them, he didn't have any of his Mad Scientist equipment, and he was wearing footies probably helped.

"So," I said, "what can we do for you?" It just stared at me with those enormous eyes. Strike two. One more and I was out—and where had all the baseball metaphors come from all of a sudden? It seemed an odd choice for me. I'd never been particularly good at baseball. I was even worse at it now. Crappy depth perception, and the bill kept obscuring the ball. Though at least I could get beamed in the head and it didn't hurt as much.

"Look," I said, leaning forward, "you came to us, right?" Actually I had no idea if that was true or not—for all I know the Suits out in the main

room had nabbed this little guy on his way to some intergalactic slumber party. It would explain the PJs. “So you must want something. And I’m willing to listen. What’s going on? What do you want? Why are you here?” I pointed off to the side. “And what the hell is that?”

There wasn’t anything there, of course. But it got the alien to look, which was more reaction than I’d gotten so far, so I considered it one for the Win column. And when it turned back to me it was doing something seriously creepy.

It was smiling.

Ever seen one of those circular pencil cases with the top that zips all the way around so you can slide your pencils in and out more easily? Yeah, its mouth was like that. It had a little tiny chin anyway—seriously, its whole head was shaped like a triangle or one of those giant cartoon teeth, enormous at the top and tiny at the bottom—and its mouth seemed to go all the way around. And it had little tiny teeth—little tiny sharp teeth, like a row of needles. Two rows. Maybe three. It was not a pleasant sight.

And then it spoke.

“Ah, nonlinear thought,” it said. “You are clearly a more advanced member of your species, most likely due to your increased cranial capacity. And you have already been appropriately modified. Yes, you will be an acceptable intermediary.”

Huh?

I guess the Suits were listening at the door—rude, much?—and understood it, though, because they came bustling in. Smith took a seat next to me, while Potato Head and Tall stood behind us, arms crossed. The alien didn't even glance at them, though. It was staring at me the whole time. I'd probably have run if I didn't know the Suits would just grab me and shove me back in my chair again.

"Ask it what it wants," Smith whispered to me.

"Duh!" I whispered back. "I tried that!" But I asked again. "So what can we do for you?"

This time it replied! "The quantum singularities are converging," it said. "Vector forces are multiplying. The onslaught is imminent, and we are unable to withstand it unaided. Thus we have come here to obtain sufficient assistance to bulwark ourselves and stabilize the region."

Again—huh?

"Something is coming?" Smith asked. "What? How do we stop it?" When it continued to ignore him—which clearly pissed him off and which I found pretty darn funny—he elbowed me. Ouch!

"What is coming, exactly?" I asked. "And how do we stop it?"

The alien nodded as if it thought these were good questions. I was pretty pleased with them myself. Then it reached into its footies—footy PJs

with pockets? Cool!—and pulled out something that looked like a cross between a TV remote, a fancy pen, and a baby octopus. And it clicked or pressed or stroked something to make the end light up. It glowed for a second, bright blue then bright pink then bright red then blue again, and then stopped.

“Be on alert!” Smith shouted, and behind me Tall and Potato Head both dropped into these really efficient-looking combat stances, pulling massive handguns from inside their jackets and holding them out with both hands while scanning the area. Me, I put my hands over my head, or tried to. Have I mentioned I have a huge noggin now? It probably looked like I was trying to cover a basketball with a pair of Q-tips.

“What’d you do?” I asked the alien.

“Summoned one who has been equipped to aid you in your endeavors,” it replied.

Okay, that one I understood. It had called for help. Good. Maybe whoever it called spoke more clearly, and in smaller words. But I wasn’t willing to bet on it.

Behind the alien, the back of the room started to glow like there was a light over there, even though there wasn’t. It was a faint blue at first, but getting brighter and brighter. Then it shifted to pink, red, and back to blue before flaring up so brightly I had to look away.

When I looked back there was someone there.

And what a someone! Tall, leggy, busty—all kinds of “y”! She looked liked a supermodel, if a supermodel actually, y’know, ate properly and had muscle and real curves instead of resembling a wire hanger with hair. Her face was gorgeous but stern, her eyes like sapphires, and she had black hair pulled back in a thick braid that hung over her shoulder and down across her really impressive chest. She was wearing a lab coat, though I was pretty sure no one had ever tailored a lab coat to fit like that before. It was like every fantasy about a hot substitute science teacher come to life. (Oh, come on, don’t even pretend you didn’t have those!)

“Hello,” she said, and I shivered. She had one of those deep sexy voices, the kind that rumbles right through you. What, just because I’ve got a duck head doesn’t mean I’m not interested any more, okay? It just means my dating options are usually limited to fanatic animal lovers and horny swans. Don’t go there.

“Hi,” I replied. “I’m Bob. DuckBob.”

“Yes, I can see that.” She studied me for a second, and I’d have broken into a sweat if I still sweated. “Partial body modification, full head reconstruction. Impressive.”

“Thanks.” I didn’t get called “impressive” much, except at costume contests. “Who’re you? And how’d you do that little lightshow?”

“I am MR3971XJKA. The ‘lightshow’ you refer to was a translocation effect. The Grays use it for short-range travel but it requires precise coordinates and typically a signal emitter on both ends.”

That sounded kinky but I was too busy trying to remember her digits to pay too much attention. “MR39 what? How about Mary? Does that work?”

She studied me again, then nodded. “Mary will suffice.” There was one chair left at the table and she slid into it, which made me shiver. Damn! She could make a video of that, just sliding into the chair, and sell it online. There’d be men all over the world suddenly wishing they were cheap furniture.

Even the Suits were affected. It was the first hint I’d had that they were human after all. “I’m Mr. Smith,” Smith said, offering his hand. He was trying to look all commanding but his voice cracked like a nervous teenager. “I’m in charge here.”

Mary nodded at him but didn’t take the hand. “We know who you are.”

“We?” I leaned forward, both to hear her better and to get another gander at her chest. Hey, I’m not proud. “You’re not one of them, are you?” I guess I’ve seen that before, really—gorgeous women with hideous little men. But this was an extreme example.

“I am not a Gray, no,” she acknowledged. “I am human, but I have been extensively modified to serve as an intermediary. I can communicate with the Grays and utilize much of their technology, and I have been fully versed on the problem at hand.”

“What exactly is the problem?” Smith demanded. “All it told us was something about singularities and vectors and an onslaught. Are you under attack?”

“We all are,” Mary answered. “This entire region of space is about to be invaded. And if we cannot withstand the assault, everything here will be obliterated.”

“So what can we do?” Smith asked. “How can we help to stop it?”

“You cannot,” Mary told him. “Only he can.” And she turned those amazing blue eyes on me.

“Me?” I sat back and gulped air. Damn, no pressure!

“Yes, you,” I was totally lost in those eyes. “You, DuckBob, are the only hope for the universe.”

I’ve had fantasies like this—what self-respecting geek hasn’t? Amazingly hot chick shows up and tells you you’re the only one who can save the universe. Of course, then it turns out that you can help by getting with the amazingly hot chick and everything veers into Skinemax territory. I had a bad feeling that wasn’t going to be the case this time.

“So what, exactly, do you need me to do?”

She smiled at me. So did the alien next to her. And both of them had the exact same smile—the kind you give a nice juicy steak, just before you take that first bite. And trust me, I’m sensitive to that kind of look. You’d be surprised how many people see me as a month’s worth of Duck L’Orange. I’ve taken to wearing orange all the time, just as a precaution.