

BOOK II

THE PAGE
TURNERS

ECONOMY OF FEAR

Kevin T. Johns

ONE

STRANGE LIGHTS OVER MAPLEWRIGHT

There were strange lights in the sky over Maplewright. Chip Crawford saw them as he pulled off Main Street onto Route 9, heading north out of town.

He'd closed up the gas station a little past eleven. *Crawford's Gas*, his own place, right there on Main Street—not too shabby for a guy whose daddy was a lifelong high-school janitor.

Chip hoped to make it to the Cat Skin Tavern, in Caferton, before midnight. Sure, there were drinking-holes in Maplewright where the liquor was wet and the prices affordable, but there was this one waitress at the Cat Skin

and, *hot damn*, did she ever make the drive to the next town worthwhile.

Chip pictured every curve of her plump body as he lit a cigarette and pulled onto the two-lane highway. He was thinking that tonight just might be the night she finally gave him the time of day, when he saw the thing up ahead of him in the sky.

The lonely roads that connect one rural town to the next are unlit for long stretches. Save for the moon's dim glow, the vehicle's high beams are all there is to cut through the dark. The sky becomes an endless canvass slipping past the windows, and a foreign light is nearly impossible to miss.

Chip watched as a single refulgent orb darted with speed and precision across the blackness above Route 9. The cold, white light against the pitch backdrop of night reminded him of the Lite-Brite toy he'd played with in his darkened bedroom as a child.

The orb now crossed the sky in an increasingly erratic flurry of movements. It was too large, swift, and frenetic to be a satellite, a passenger jet, or any kind of manned aircraft; and it was far too high above the horizon to be a reflection from the back of some night animal's eyes.

This wasn't the first time something strange had been spotted in the sky over Maplewright. Six months earlier, lights had been reported near the location of a car crash that had claimed three lives. Then, just one month back, in mid-October, lights were again sighted, above the high school, just before a power blackout. Chip had heard all of this discussed at the station by local gossip hounds and conspiracy mongers as they bought cigarettes and paid for gas, but he'd not believed a word of it himself. The truth, as Chip saw it, was that in a town like Maplewright there wasn't much to do at night besides stare up into space, and if you did that long enough you were bound to see *something* up there.

Ahead of him, the single light doubled in an instant and became two glowing snowballs, equal in size. Then the two became four.

The orbs chased one another across the sky, playfully skipping back and forth, up and down, like school children at recess.

One of the lights began to change shape, growing and shrinking, pulsating as if with breath or a heartbeat, and then distending outward, from a sphere, into an oblong cigar.

All of this unravelled ahead of Chip while he watched in utter fascination, trying to keep an eye on the road and his hands on the wheel. When the lights began to change colour, blinking repeatedly through a sequence—red, now green, now blue—any question of whether he was watching a natural phenomenon dissolved into the same black night through which his truck carried him.

He knew suddenly, as if the information had finished downloading into his brain at that very moment, that he was witnessing something well beyond the realm of his experience. Those lights represented something bigger than himself, something bigger than Maplewright.

With this knowledge came the understanding he should have been afraid—there was the mark of threat in those lights—but, instead of fear, he found himself drifting into a pleasant sort of trance. Leaning forward to get the best view up through the windshield, he stared into the dancing colours, and his pickup began to drift across the asphalt. The sideways motion was slow at first, but his right foot soon became leaden. The truck traversed the centre line unchallenged and kept on drifting across the opposing lane. It hit the gravel shoulder, threw up clouds of dust for a mere second, and then dove nose-first into a ditch.

Chip was thrown forward as the pop of smashing glass followed the crush of steel and aluminum taking on new shapes. His face connected with the steering-wheel, breaking his nose and jaw. The pain snapped him out of his trance. The truck was rolling now, end over end. It was like the time when his childhood buddies had sent him tumbling downhill in a refrigerator box; but this was far faster, against rigid plastic, hard glass, and cold metal.

The truck's last movements were side over side, and Chip cried out in pain and the shock of it all as his pickup tumbled to a halt, passenger side in the ditch, driver's side up toward the heavens. When his head had stopped spinning, he found that he hung in midair, held partly in place by his seatbelt.

His fingers reached to his face and came away wet and sticky. As the light outside brightened and hovered momentarily in just the right spot, he saw the red of his own blood, more of it than he'd ever seen before. With his muscles tight from pain and his stomach turning, he took hold of the steering-wheel to keep from falling, and then fumbled with the seatbelt until it released. His feet dropped toward the passenger door. Painfully repositioning his body, he tried to open the driver's door, up above him, but

it wouldn't budge. Noting that the window had shattered, he gave up on the door and instead pulled himself up and out the window, cutting both hands on the crumbling safety glass. He half lowered himself, half fell, down onto the dormant tall grass next to his ruined vehicle, and sat dazed and bloody, sucking in the night air in quick gasps.

This was the second time he'd ditched the truck in recent days. The week of the blackout, Stu Donaldson had let one of his cows break free, and she had walked out onto the highway. Chip had nearly hit the damn bovine on his way to work. Now, here he was again, same highway, same ditch, but this time the truck was totalled. The cops had been helpful enough the first time, but there was no way they were going to believe he hadn't gone back to the bottle now—not with two crashes in six weeks. There was gonna be hell to pay. Tears came down over a throbbing nose that wouldn't stop bleeding and a jaw that could only hang there, too swollen to move.

Despite his injuries and the ruin of his truck, Chip was surprised to find himself compelled to pull his ragged body back up onto its feet and stand, in awe, looking up into the night sky. Leaning back against the vehicle's undercarriage, and fighting through the ache of whiplash, he tilted his

head and watched, silently, as the lights came together, again, into a single sphere of incandescent frost, hovering high above.

Somewhere within the wreckage, the glowing end of Chip's cigarette met with the growing trickle from the ruptured fuel tank. He was aware, for a second, of a sudden strange heat, down behind his calves. Then the truck exploded in a fierce orange mass of flame and metal.

With the brief mushroom cloud came a deafening *FOOM!* blasting out across the countryside.

The last thing Chip saw, before the shrapnel tore through his flesh and blistering heat claimed his body, was the light in the sky, shooting off into the distance, moving south—towards the Killick family farm.

Enjoy this sneak preview? Pre-order *The Page Turners: Economy of Fear* now:

<http://www.kevintjohns.com/thepageturners2>