

The Constants

Book 4 of "The Last Axiom" Series

By Derek Devon

Patrick "Rod" Alpaugh had puttied the same six-foot birdie attempt forty-seven times, and it still wouldn't break left toward the hole. According to every law of physics, every topographical map of Riverside Golf Club's thirteenth green, and twenty-three years of reading greens professionally, the ball should curve gently downhill and drop into the cup. Instead, it rolled straight as an arrow and stopped exactly eighteen inches past the pin.

Every. Single. Time.

"This is impossible," Rod muttered, crouching behind his ball for the forty-eighth attempt. He'd been at this for two hours, his regular Wednesday afternoon session having devolved into an obsessive experiment. The green's slope was a consistent 2.3 degrees — he'd measured it with his digital level app. The grass grain ran perpendicular to the break. The morning dew had long since evaporated, leaving optimal putting conditions.

But somehow, gravity wasn't cooperating.

Don't stop believin'—the thought jumped into his head unbidden, and Rod shook it off. Focus was everything in golf. He lined up the putt again, drew back his putter, and struck the ball with exactly 4.2 feet per second of velocity.

Straight. Eighteen inches past.

"Rod!" a familiar voice called across the green. "You trying to hypnotize that ball into submission?"

Rod looked up to see his friend Jeff "Duke" Lukas approaching with his characteristic swagger, golf bag slung over one shoulder and a grin that had been charming women since high school. At sixty-two, Duke had retained both his silver-haired good looks and his confidence that the universe existed primarily for his entertainment.

"Duke, perfect timing," Rod said, straightening up. "I need a second opinion. This putt should break left, right?"

Duke squinted at the green, drawing on decades of weekend golf wisdom. "Left and slightly downhill. Easy birdie putt." He gestured with his club. "What's the problem?"

"The problem is it won't break. At all. I've tried it forty-eight times."

Duke raised an eyebrow. "Forty-eight? Rod, even you're not that obsessive."

"Watch this." Rod reset the ball and made the same stroke he'd perfected over thousands of practice sessions. The ball rolled in a perfectly straight line, stopping eighteen inches past the hole.

Duke blinked. "That's... weird. Try it again."

"That's what I've been doing for two hours."

As Rod lined up for attempt forty-nine, Duke's phone buzzed with a text message. He glanced at it, then read it again with a puzzled expression.

"What is it?" Rod asked.

"Text from Scrott. Says he needs to see us both immediately. Something about—" Duke squinted at his phone "—people singing Duran Duran in the grocery store without realizing it."

Rod straightened up, finally abandoning his putt. "That's oddly specific."

"You know Scrott. Always been dramatic. Comes with being in a band." Duke pocketed his phone. "But he sounded genuinely freaked out."

Hold on loosely, but don't let go — the lyric popped into Rod's consciousness like a radio station bleeding through static. He frowned. "Duke, this might sound strange, but are you getting random song lyrics in your head?"

Duke's expression shifted. "As a matter of fact... yeah. All morning. 80's stuff mostly. Why?"

Rod looked back at the putt that wouldn't break, then at his friend who was experiencing the same inexplicable mental soundtrack. "Maybe we should go see what's got Scrott so worked up."

"Probably nothing," Duke said, but he was already shouldering his bag. "Though I have to admit, something's felt... off today."

"Off how?"

Duke hesitated, then shrugged. "You remember that thing I do? The little head tilt when I'm talking to women? The one that makes them smile?"

"Your 'signature move'? Please tell me you're not talking about that ridiculous thing you've been doing since we were twenty."

"It's not ridiculous, it's effective. Or it was. Today it's been making them step backwards instead of lean in. Like I'm miscalibrating somehow."

Rod stared at him. A putt that wouldn't break despite gravity. Random song lyrics. Duke's charm detector malfunctioning.

Something in the air tonight — the thought drifted through his mind, and this time Rod didn't dismiss it.

"Duke," he said slowly, "I think we need to have a serious conversation with Scott."

The Brewhouse had been their regular meeting spot for fifteen years, ever since Duke's divorce, Scott's brief retirement from touring, and Rod's decision to freelance in the golf industry. It was the kind of place where you could nurse a beer for three hours while solving the world's problems, and the staff knew better than to rush anyone wearing a Spoons tour shirt.

Scott "Scott" MacDonald was already at their usual booth, drumming his fingers nervously on the table. At fifty-eight, he still had the lean build of a performer, though his hair had gone prematurely white in a way that somehow made him look more distinguished on stage. Today, however, he looked troubled.

"Finally," Scott said as Rod and Duke slid into the booth. "I was starting to think you guys wouldn't show."

"We came straight from the course," Rod said. "What's this about Duran Duran?"

Scott leaned forward conspiratorially. "It started this morning at the grocery store. I'm in the cereal aisle, minding my own business, when this woman—maybe forty, business suit, very professional — starts singing 'Hungry Like the Wolf' under her breath."

Duke shrugged. "So? People sing."

"She wasn't singing it, Duke. She was incorporating it into her conversation. Like she was talking on her phone about quarterly projections, but every third sentence contained a line from the song. 'We need to increase market share' — 'mouth is alive with juices like wine'—'by fifteen percent this quarter.'"

Rod felt a chill. "Did she realize she was doing it?"

"That's the thing. She had no clue. When I mentioned it, she looked at me like I was crazy. Said she'd never heard of Duran Duran."

Duke snorted. "Come on, Scott. Everyone's heard of Duran Duran. You're being paranoid."

"Then explain this," Scott pulled out his phone and showed them a voice recording. "I started documenting it after the third person."

He pressed play. A man's voice, casual and friendly: "Yeah, I'll pick up milk and bread on the way home — 'just like heaven' — and don't forget we have dinner with the Johnsons tomorrow — 'sometimes you just can't win' — around seven o'clock."

The three friends sat in silence for a moment. Then Rod spoke: "Scrott, those lyrics... they're not random, are they?"

"That's exactly what's freaking me out. The guy was talking about his evening plans, and he unconsciously quoted two different Cure songs that directly related to what he was saying. It's like the songs are bleeding through somehow."

Duke was looking increasingly uncomfortable. "Guys, I hate to pile on, but Rod and I have been experiencing some weird stuff too."

Scrott leaned back. "Thank God. I was starting to think I was losing my mind."

Rod explained about the putt that wouldn't break, the impossible consistency of the ball's trajectory despite all physical laws suggesting otherwise. Duke reluctantly admitted to his romantic radar being mysteriously recalibrated, leaving him making social missteps he hadn't made since middle school.

"So let me get this straight," Scrott said slowly. "Gravity isn't working right on the golf course. People are unconsciously quoting 80's songs in normal conversation. And Duke's legendary charm is glitching."

"When you put it that way, it sounds insane," Rod admitted.

"Or," Duke said thoughtfully, "it sounds like something bigger than us is happening."

We are the world, we are the children — the lyric floated through all three minds simultaneously. They looked at each other with growing alarm.

"Did you guys just—" Rod began.

"We Are the World?" Scrott finished. "Yeah. All of us. At the same time."

Duke flagged down their waitress, a cheerful woman in her twenties named Sarah whom they'd known for years. "Sarah, can you do us a favor? Just chat with us for a minute. About anything."

Sarah smiled and leaned against their table. "Sure thing. Quiet day today, which is nice because — 'every rose has its thorn' — it gives me time to catch up on — 'nothing else matters' — homework for my psychology class."

She continued talking naturally, completely unaware that she'd just quoted Poison and Metallica in the space of ten seconds. The three friends exchanged meaningful looks.

"Thanks, Sarah," Duke said gently. "We're good for now."

As she walked away, still humming what sounded like a medley of half-remembered 80's hits, Scrott pulled out a notebook and started writing.

"What are you doing?" Rod asked.

"Making a list. Times, locations, specific songs. If something's causing this, there might be a pattern." He looked up at his friends. "Rod, I need you to test that putt thing again. But this time, document everything. Measurements, angles, results."

"And Duke," he continued, "as much as it pains me to say this, you need to go talk to some women. Test your theory about the charm malfunction."

Duke perked up. "Now you're talking my language."

"This is serious, Duke. We need data and I am not talking about you heading to Pure for data!."

"I can be serious and charming simultaneously. It's one of my many talents."

Rod was already pulling out his phone. "I'm calling Riverside. I'll book us range time for tomorrow morning. We'll test this properly."

As they prepared to leave the Brewhouse, each lost in thoughts about impossible putts and musical conversations, none of them noticed the soft strains of "Don't Stop Believin'" drifting from the kitchen radio—even though the radio was turned off.

The next morning found them at Riverside Golf Club at dawn, armed with more measuring equipment than most land surveyors. Rod had borrowed a professional grade inclinometer, a device for measuring green speed, and a laser rangefinder accurate to within millimeters. If physics was malfunctioning, he was going to document exactly how.

"This feels like overkill," Duke observed, watching Rod set up his equipment on the thirteenth green.

"Science requires precision," Rod replied, adjusting his tripod-mounted laser. "If gravity is behaving differently, we need measurements to prove it."

Scrott was sitting on a nearby bench, notebook open, recording everything. "Twenty-seven people yesterday," he announced. "Twenty-seven different individuals unconsciously incorporating song lyrics into normal speech. And the selection isn't random — the songs always relate somehow to what they're talking about."

"Coincidence?" Duke suggested hopefully.

"The odds against that level of coincidence are astronomical."

Rod finished his setup and placed a ball at the same spot he'd used the day before. "Okay. Green speed measures at 10.2 on the stimpmeter. Slope is 2.4 degrees downhill with a 1.8 degree break toward the hole. Wind speed negligible. If I putt with 4.2 feet per second velocity..."

He made the stroke. The ball rolled straight, stopping eighteen inches past the hole.

"That's impossible," Duke said flatly.

"Unless," Scrott said slowly, "gravity has changed. Rod, try putting to a different hole."

Rod moved to a flat section of green with no discernible slope and putted across level ground. The ball rolled perfectly straight for exactly six feet and stopped.

"The distance is consistent," Rod noted, making calculations. "But it's ignoring the green's contours entirely. It's like the ball is rolling on a perfectly flat surface regardless of the actual topography."

Duke's phone buzzed. He answered with his usual confident swagger. "Duke here — " His expression shifted mid-sentence. "Oh, hi Janet. Yes, I — 'hungry eyes' — would love to have dinner sometime. How about — 'every little thing she does is magic' — Saturday night?"

He hung up, looking confused. "That's never happened before."

"You just did it," Scrott said excitedly, scribbling in his notebook. "You incorporated 'Hungry Eyes' and 'Every Little Thing She Does Is Magic' into asking Janet out. Did you realize?"

"Not until you mentioned it." Duke looked genuinely disturbed. "And she said yes, which is good, but she also laughed in a really strange way. Like she'd heard something funny that I hadn't said."

Rod was lining up another putt, this time with a deliberately different speed. "Guys, watch this." He struck the ball with more force — about 6 feet per second. The ball rolled at the same speed as before, stopping in exactly the same spot.

"The ball is ignoring the energy input," he said, his voice tight with concern. "That violates conservation of momentum."

Don't you forget about me — the thought hit all three simultaneously, followed immediately by a shared sensation of being observed.

They looked around the empty golf course nervously.

"We need help," Scrott said quietly. "Professional help. This is beyond weird coincidences."

"Who do we call?" Duke asked. "What do you even say? 'Hi, we think physics is broken and everyone's speaking in song lyrics?'"

Rod was already pulling up a news article on his phone. "Maybe we're not the only ones noticing. Look at this — 'Unexplained Equipment Failures Plague Global Communications Networks.' And this one: 'Atomic Clock Synchronization Issues Puzzle Scientists Worldwide.'"

"Those could be related," Scrott agreed. "But how do we connect our experiences to — "

He was interrupted by a woman's voice calling across the green. "Excuse me! Are you gentlemen having equipment problems too?"

They turned to see an elegantly dressed woman in her forties approaching, carrying what appeared to be some kind of scientific equipment.

"Dr. Robbie Dorsey," she introduced herself. "Quantum systems researcher. I couldn't help but notice your rather extensive measurement setup." She gestured to Rod's array of devices. "Are you experiencing anomalous readings?"

Rod hesitated, then decided honesty was the best approach. "We're documenting gravitational inconsistencies. And you are?"

"Someone who's been chasing similar anomalies for the past week." Dr. Dorsey's eyes lit up with scientific interest. "Would you mind if I observed your tests? I'm collecting data on localized physics variations for a classified research project."

"Classified?" Duke perked up. "You mean this is official?"

"Let's just say certain organizations are very interested in unusual phenomena lately." She looked at Rod's setup appreciatively. "May I?"

Rod gestured for her to watch as he repeated his putt experiment. Dr. Dorsey observed intently, occasionally checking readings on her own device — something that looked like a cross between a tablet and a Geiger counter.

"Fascinating," she murmured as the ball once again ignored physics and rolled straight. "The gravitational field appears to be locally altered. As if the fundamental constants are... fluctuating."

"Fluctuating?" Scrott asked.

"Changing. Being modified somehow." Dr. Dorsey looked up from her device. "Gentlemen, what you're experiencing isn't isolated. Similar anomalies are being reported worldwide, though most people aren't aware they're experiencing them."

"Like people singing without realizing it?" Duke suggested.

Dr. Dorsey's eyes widened. "You've noticed the linguistic anomalies too? The pattern speech disruptions?"

"If by that you mean people unconsciously working song lyrics into conversation, then yes," Scrott said. "I've been documenting cases."

"This is remarkable. My colleagues will want to speak with you." Dr. Dorsey seemed almost excited. "Would you be willing to participate in a research study? We're trying to understand why some individuals are more aware of these changes than others."

We built this city on rock and roll — the shared thought came with unusual clarity, and Rod realized something important.

"Dr. Dorsey," he said slowly, "I think we just experienced another anomaly. All four of us just had the same thought simultaneously."

She checked her device, and its readings confirmed something significant. "Gentlemen, I think you've just helped me document humanity's first confirmed instance of spontaneous quantum consciousness entanglement."

The four of them stood on the thirteenth green as the morning sun cast long shadows across the course, each realizing they'd stumbled into something far larger than wayward golf balls and musical conversations.

In the distance, the clubhouse radio could be heard playing what sounded like a medley of every 80's hit ever recorded—though the radio, they would later discover, wasn't plugged in.

Dr. Dorsey led them to a small trailer parked discretely beside the maintenance shed—a mobile research station that definitely hadn't been there the day before.

"How long have you been monitoring our golf course?" Rod asked as they climbed inside.

"Three days," Dr. Dorsey admitted, gesturing for them to sit around a small table covered with scientific instruments. "We detected gravitational anomalies consistent with localized spacetime fluctuations. Your repeated putt tests yesterday triggered our sensors."

The trailer's interior was cramped but sophisticated, filled with equipment that hummed quietly and displayed data in flowing, colorful patterns.

"You've been spying on us?" Duke asked, though he seemed more intrigued than offended.

"Monitoring. There's a difference." Dr. Dorsey powered up a tablet and showed them a series of graphs. "These represent quantum field variations in this area over the past week. Notice the spike patterns?"

Scrott studied the displays. "They look almost like... audio waveforms."

"That's extraordinarily perceptive. They are, in a sense, harmonic variations in the fundamental frequency of local spacetime." Dr. Dorsey highlighted specific peaks. "And they correlate precisely with the times your friend Rod was testing his putt."

"So the golf ball isn't ignoring gravity," Rod said thoughtfully. "Gravity itself is being modified."

"Exactly. And not just gravity—all fundamental constants appear to be subject to systematic adjustments." She pulled up another screen. "Electromagnetic interactions, strong and weak nuclear forces, even the speed of light in localized regions."

Duke whistled low. "That sounds bad."

"Actually, it appears to be quite deliberate. Almost like... calibration adjustments."

"Calibration for what?" Scrott asked.

Before Dr. Dorsey could respond, all the equipment in the trailer began chiming simultaneously. Data flowed across multiple screens in patterns none of them had seen before — beautiful, complex, and somehow musical.

"What's happening?" Rod asked.

Dr. Dorsey was working frantically at her controls. "We're receiving some kind of signal. Directly to our quantum measurement systems." She paused, staring at one particular readout.

"Gentlemen, I think something's trying to communicate with us."

On the main display, patterns began to form — not random data, but organized information. And incredibly, remarkably, the patterns were organizing themselves into something they could all recognize.

Musical notation.

"Is that...?" Scrott began.

"'Don't Stop Believin'," Dr. Dorsey confirmed, her voice filled with wonder. "The signal is literally playing Journey."

But as they watched, the musical notation began to shift, incorporating lyrics — not as text, but as mathematical expressions that somehow conveyed meaning directly to their minds.

Just a small town girl, living in a lonely world — but the concepts behind the words carried deeper meaning about isolated systems and quantum states.

She took the midnight train going anywhere — and they understood this referred to probability vectors and infinite possibility matrices.

"It's using music as a universal language," Dr. Dorsey whispered. "Mathematical concepts expressed through familiar melodies and lyrics."

The display shifted again, showing a three-dimensional map that looked remarkably like what Luke Matson had seen in Denver — Earth at the center of a vast network of connections extending across the galaxy.

Words appeared on screen, but they weren't words exactly. They were concepts that bypassed language entirely:

GREETINGS

CALIBRATION NEARLY COMPLETE

INTEGRATION PROCEEDING AS DESIGNED

Rod felt the pieces clicking together in his mind. "The gravity changes, the song lyrics, Duke's charm malfunction — they're all part of the same thing. Someone's fine-tuning reality itself."

"More than that," Duke said, studying the display with surprising insight. "They're testing us. Seeing how we adapt to changes in the fundamental rules."

Scrott was nodding rapidly. "And the music — it's not random. It's a compatibility test. Can we understand communication that works on multiple levels simultaneously?"

Dr. Dorsey looked at her three unexpected collaborators with new respect. "Gentlemen, I believe you've just provided more insight into this phenomenon than my entire research team has managed in weeks."

The display changed once more, showing what appeared to be an invitation — coordinates, times, and a sense of welcome that transcended language.

DENVER INTEGRATION FACILITY

48 HOURS

BRING FRIENDS

NEW PERSPECTIVE VALUABLE

"They want us to go to Denver," Rod said unnecessarily.

"All of us," Duke added. "Together."

"Dr. Dorsey," Scrott asked, "is this actually happening? Are we really getting invited to join some kind of cosmic conversation?"

She smiled — the first genuinely relaxed expression they'd seen from her. "Mr. MacDonald, a week ago I would have said that was impossible. Today, I'm packing a bag for Denver and hoping the universe has a good sense of humor."

As if in response, the trailer filled with the gentle sounds of "Time After Time" — though none of them were humming it aloud.

"What do we tell our families?" Rod asked practically. "Our jobs?"

"That we're going on a golf trip to Colorado?" Duke suggested. "It's not entirely untrue."

Dr. Dorsey was already making calls, arrangements, clearances. As her voice faded into bureaucratic background noise, the three friends looked at each other across the small table.

"So," Scrott said finally, "anyone else feel like Alice falling down the rabbit hole?"

"If Alice had better musical taste," Duke replied.

Rod picked up one of Dr. Dorsey's readings devices, noting how naturally it seemed to fit in his hands. "You know what's weird? None of this feels as scary as it should."

"Maybe because we're finding out we're not alone," Scrott suggested. "In the universe, I mean."

"Or," Duke said with a grin that was purely his own, "maybe because we're about to become part of the greatest pickup line ever: 'So, want to hear about my role in first contact with alien intelligence?'"

Come on Eileen — the shared thought was accompanied by shared laughter.

Whatever was happening to reality, at least they were facing it together.

And somewhere in the quantum foam that connected all things, something vast and ancient was pleased with their friendship, their curiosity, and their unconscious harmony with the cosmic changes flowing around them.

The universe was gaining new members. And they came with excellent taste in music.

TWO DAYS LATER - DENVER INTEGRATION FACILITY

The Denver facility was nothing like what any of them had expected. Instead of a sterile government building or underground bunker, they found themselves in what looked like a high-tech community center. People of all ages and backgrounds moved through comfortable spaces, many carrying devices that showed the same flowing, musical data patterns they'd seen in Dr. Dorsey's trailer.

Luke Matson met them at the entrance, grinning broadly. "Dr. Dorsey's golf course team! Great to meet you guys. I'm Luke — officially Earth's first galactic network administrator, unofficially the guy who talks to cosmic intelligences through Pac-Man."

"Pac-Man?" Duke perked up. "Now that's my kind of communication protocol."

"You have no idea," Luke laughed. "Come on, let me show you around. Dr. Devon and Dr. Hammond are eager to meet you."

As they toured the facility, Rod noticed something remarkable. "Luke, everyone here seems... happy. Excited, even. Aren't people scared?"

"Some were, initially," Luke admitted. "But the Architect — that's what we call the intelligence behind all this — has been incredibly patient. It's like having the universe's best teacher, one who adapts to how you learn best."

They entered a large room where dozens of people were working with displays similar to what they'd seen. Some showed complex scientific data, others displayed artistic patterns, and a few were playing what appeared to be interdimensional games.

"Dr. Devon," Luke called to a man with ink-stained fingers and a raven-engraved lighter. "The gravitational anomaly team from Colorado."

Dr. Derek Devon approached, extending his hand. "Gentlemen! And Dr. Dorsey, good to see you again. We've been following your unique discoveries with great interest."

"Our discoveries?" Scrott asked.

"You three represent something we've only seen in a few individuals worldwide," Dr. Devon explained. "Natural sensitivity to the universal modifications, combined with the ability to remain functional and curious rather than panicking."

A new voice joined the conversation — Dr. Nancy Hammond, carrying the now-familiar crystalline interface device. "The Architect has been particularly interested in your group dynamic. Three friends with different specializations discovering different aspects of the same phenomenon."

"Plus," added Luke, "your musical connection seems to resonate strongly with the communication protocols. The Architect finds human music fascinating — apparently, harmonic structures translate remarkably well across species boundaries."

Rod was studying the various displays around the room. "This is incredible. But what does it mean? What happens now?"

Dr. Hammond and Dr. Devon exchanged glances. "Now," Dr. Hammond said, "humanity officially joins the galactic network. We become part of a conversation that's been going on for millions of years."

"And our part in this?" Duke asked.

"You're pioneers," Dr. Devon explained. "The universe works on the principle that different perspectives strengthen the whole. Your unique insights — Rod's understanding of precise physical measurements, Scott's musical perception, Jeff's social intuition — all of those contribute to how humanity interfaces with the network."

As if summoned by their conversation, the crystalline device in Dr. Hammond's hand began to glow. Around the room, displays shifted to show a familiar formation of lights — the galactic network map, but now with Earth clearly integrated as a bright, active node.

A voice spoke — not the Architect's alien tones, but something warmer, more familiar: "Welcome, friends of Earth. Your world brings unique gifts to our community. Music that touches the quantum substrate of reality. Friendship bonds that strengthen under stress. The ability to find humor in the impossible."

Rod looked around at his friends, at the scientists who had become their guides, at the dozens of other people who were somehow part of this incredible development.

"So what happens to our normal lives?" he asked.

"They become extraordinary," Luke said simply. "You'll still play golf, still make music, still charm the ladies. But now you're doing it as part of something bigger than any of us imagined."

We are family — the thought came not as an intrusion, but as a welcome confirmation.

"Dr. Dorsey," Scroft said thoughtfully, "when you first found us, you mentioned we were more aware of the changes than most people. Why us?"

"Friendship," she replied. "Genuine connection between people seems to create a kind of resonance with the quantum modifications. The universe values relationships — it's built on them."

Duke smiled. "So the most important qualifications for joining a galactic civilization are being a good friend and having decent taste in music?"

"Among others," Dr. Hammond said with a laugh. "But those are surprisingly fundamental."

As evening approached, the three friends found themselves back where they'd started — sitting together, sharing stories, trying to process the impossible. The difference was that now they were doing it in a room full of others who had experienced their own versions of the impossible, and it all felt strangely normal.

"Rod," Scrott said as they watched data flow between Earth and distant stars, "think that putt will break correctly now?"

Rod considered this. "Probably. Though I think I'll keep the measuring equipment. Just in case gravity decides to get creative again."

"And I'll keep documenting the musical anomalies," Scrott added. "Apparently, I'm now Earth's unofficial ambassador to cosmic disc jockeys."

Duke raised his beer. "To the constants — the things that never change."

"Like friendship," Rod agreed.

"Like music," Scrott added.

"Like the fact that no matter how big the universe gets," Duke concluded, "there's always room for one more good story."

They clinked glasses as *Sweet Caroline* drifted through their minds — shared, welcome, and perfectly in tune with the cosmic song that now included Earth's voice.

The constants had changed. But the best things about being human remained exactly the same.

And somewhere in the galactic network, three friends' capacity for wonder, loyalty, and laughter was being catalogued as among Earth's greatest contributions to the cosmos.

The universe had gained more than new members. It had gained family.

End of "The Constants"