

The Stone of Tantalus

“Observe constantly that all things take place by change, and accustom thyself to consider that the nature of the Universe loves nothing so much as to change the things which are, and to make new things like them.” --Marcus Aurelius

PROLOGUE

“Tell me, Miles... just between you and me,” Flint said, leaning closer from the cot across the small cell, “why did you kill him?” One of the fluorescent lights buried in the ceiling flickered and buzzed, turning the small room into a 3D version of a kinetoscope.

Miles turned his head slowly and tilted it, a praying mantis considering his next meal, then shrugged his shoulders and said, “I don’t know who you’re talkin’ about.” He returned to staring at the gray cell door.

“The *Fed*, man.” Flint sat on the edge of his cot, his right leg bouncing like a sewing machine.

Miles smiled. He remembered everything about that day, but he sure as hell wasn’t going to tell Flint about it. He was pretty sure the guy was an informant, anyway. They brought the twitchy little man in last night and threw him in the holding cell with Miles.

Flint tried another tack. “What are you in for, then?”

Miles snorted once, and said, “Denver cops dragged me in a couple of days ago on a ‘drunk and disorderly’.”

The other man raised an eyebrow, “Then why ya still in here?”

Miles laughed softly, and shook his head. “I was pretty fuckin’ disorderly,” he said.

Flint laughed at that. “Yeah, I bet you were. The cops said you sent one of ‘em to the hospital.” He said it weird... hos*Pital*.

Miles raised an eyebrow at the other man. “What did they get *you* for?”

“Ah, you know,” he wagged a hand, “a little o’ this, a little o’ that.”

“I hear ya.” *Definitely an informant*, he thought. It never ceased to amaze him how stupid the cops were. He shook his head. *As long as they don’t find the gun, they don’t have nothin’.*

“You’ve come a long way, man. I heard you was a congressman or somethin’.”

Miles just looked at him, his face a mask of pure bland.

Flint took a breath, and let it out slowly. The bouncing of his right leg was now joined by his left, and his voice cracked a little as he said, “Yeah, I heard whoever got that guy up in the mountains plugged him in the chest with a 45.”

“Do tell...” A picture came unbidden to his mind--his hands around this fool’s throat, throttling the life out of him. He smiled thinly at the thought, comforted by the daydream.

Miles’ outward calm rarely betrayed the seething underneath. Years spent controlling his reactions buried the burning anger deep within. It was an anger not born of *hate*--not even for his daddy--but rather something that was always a part of him, buzzing in the background like a swarm of cicadas. That changed the day the bastard from the FBI took his life away. Even knowing he could sidestep didn't mollify him, so he kept a close watch on the man and waited. He was a patient man, trained through years of life with his daddy, and he needed all his calm and patience to do the job right. It wouldn't do to leave clues for some *other* Dudley Do-Right to connect the dots, but he knew the day would come. Miles amused himself during that time by practicing on vagrants and hitchhikers.

It took years, but the opportunity finally came, and he followed his prey to the cabin in the woods. Vacationing alone in the mountains, he never suspected he was being stalked. It wasn't even a very eventful death. Miles simply knocked on the cabin door, and when the fool

opened it Miles shot him in the chest. It took him a while to die, too. Miles liked that part the best.

I should go back and do that again. Just for fun, he thought.

Why relive the past, though? Why not make something new? Sidestep to find a similar reality, and *then* go back to set things right. *I'll get to do it much earlier in the dance this time,* growing hard at the thought. He reached down to rub the throbbing distraction, and Flint recoiled. That, more than anything, convinced him to embark on his next journey.

Miles slapped the other man on the leg, and said, "Thanks, officer. You've been a lot of help." He tipped an imaginary cap, and said through a tight smile, "Gotta go now."

His eyes lost focus, and he slumped back on his cot. Flint leaned forward to check on him, and then Miles suddenly sat up and drew a rasping breath. He looked around the room, then at Flint, and said, "Who the fuck are you?"

CHAPTER ONE

If ever there was a day for skipping class, this was it. The sky was blue without a cloud in sight, a faint chill in the air, and all the pretty girls were out in force. Jason Callahan wasn't much for skipping, but that didn't mean he couldn't enjoy the walk across campus. April on the campus of the University of Texas meant the women's shorts were high, the t-shirts tight, and the blonde pony tails swayed freely when they walked. From the first day he arrived, it seemed that every girl on campus was a 10, and even at the end of his third year he still marveled at the sight. Jason smiled, shoved his hands in the front pockets of his faded jeans, and began the long walk across campus from Jester East to Moore Hall. He had at least an hour before his Quantum Three lecture, so he took his time, strolling leisurely with his usual lanky gate.

A particularly pretty redhead passed him going the other way, and she smiled shyly as she reached up to brush a spray of hair over her ear. He smiled back, almost turning, when his cell buzzed once in his back pocket.

Kat always knew.

He almost laughed out loud, then pulled the phone from his pocket to check the text message.

Lunch after class?

He poked large fingers at the screen, having to correct a number of times, *Only if I don't have questions for the prof after*, then hit send.

Less than a minute later the phone buzzed again with the message, *As if*.

This time he did laugh.

Kat knew him better than he knew himself. She was always a step ahead of him in life, and he was grateful for it. There were a couple of times he grew complacent his first year, but when she joined him on campus after her graduation things shaped right up. *He* shaped up. It was the same all through middle and high school. From the day they first met she was his personal drill sergeant, urging him to “get his shit together.” Nothing she said or did ever felt like nagging to him, though his friends laughed every time she pulled him into line.

Which was often.

The air was clear this late in the morning, the early fog shooed away by a demanding sun, so he parked momentarily under a tree to watch students hurry to their classes. Urgent and earnest freshmen were easy to spot, as well as the sophomores who were convinced they knew everything. Seniors seldom made their presence known outside of class, always grinding to finish what they started. Juniors, though, were a different breed altogether. Members of the

larger fraternity long enough to know the ropes, but still just *students* rather than soon-to-be-graduates.

Kat was only a sophomore, but she already knew all the best places to eat (Conan's), where the best music was on sixth street (a running debate), and when to avoid that area altogether (ROT Rally). An Army brat, she rapidly adjusted to every new environment, and was already an Austin native while he still felt like an outsider. Coming to Austin was, for him, like stepping on a new planet; every social gathering a First Contact situation fraught with diplomatic danger.

Keep Austin Weird! The shirt, worn by a shambling dreadlocked sophomore, yelled at him in all-caps helvetica as the boy passed. *The cannabis is strong with this one*, Jason thought with a smile. He had one of the t-shirts stuffed in a drawer in his dorm, too self-conscious to wear it. The damn thing felt like a statement on his own personality, rather than the odd-ball parts of the city.

"How long you gonna stand there watchin' the girls like a creeper?" Jason's roommate, Dan, appeared at his side and leaned against the tree as well.

"Damn, dude. Never saw you comin'."

"Too busy scopin' trim," he said, smiling. "If I'd a been a snake, I'd a bit ya."

Jason laughed. Dan wasn't nearly as dense as the Central Texas twang led most people to believe. The truth was, Jason was sure it was a deliberate act on Dan's part--kind of like how Jason learned Spanish without ever telling anyone. It made for a major advantage at times. Although, with no one to practice on, he was forced to watch telenovelas on the Spanish language channels when no one was around.

"And I'm not girl watching," Jason protested.

“Hey, I won’t tell Kat if you don’t.” Dan grinned again, “I don’t want to have to clean the blood off the floor when she cuts yer nuts off.”

“True that,” Jason said and lifted a fist to bump knuckles with his roommate.

“You comin’ out to play some pool tonight?”

“Nah. Gotta work in the lab until nine.” Other than his grants and scholarships, it was his only source of income. He worked hard to avoid the student loan trap so many of his friends were in, but those programs only went so far. Work-study was a joke in many departments, but Physics seemed to get it. They worked him hard, but with enough pay and hours to make ends meet.

“Too bad,” Dan said with mock sympathy. He raised an eyebrow and grinned, adding, “Guess I’ll have to entertain Kat for ya.”

Jason laughed and said, “Yeah. You let me know how that works out for you.”

Dan smiled, then checked the time on his cell. “Shit! I’m late fer class. Again.” He looked around at the bevy of young ladies, then up to the sky, and said, “Fuck it. Just Geology anyway.” He set his backpack on the ground, fished around inside, then pulled out a beat up Frisbee. “Wanna toss it around a while?”

“Damn, Dan, that’s some serious old-school shit, there,” Jason said, shaking his head. He pulled his cell out of his pocket, checked the time, and said, “I’ve got exactly twenty minutes.”

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“If you’re that interested, Jason, you know all of Feynman’s lectures are available on the internet.” The lecture today didn’t answer all of his questions, and as usual, he spent the time on the way out of class drilling the professor for more.

“But what about situations arising from having two independent single spin waves? The energies you calculated on the board seemed a bit off. Here...” Jason took out a pen and looked for something to write on, but Kat stepped away from the wall by the door and took his arm.

“Dr. Harrell probably wants to go to lunch, Jason,” she said, gently steering him away from the harried man. “Just like *I* do,” she finished with a smile. From the first day he met her, it was the smile that bridled him.

“Next week, then,” he said to Dr. Harrell, allowing Kat to pull him away. As she hooked an arm into his, she handed him her book bag to carry.

She frowned, looking around him, “Don’t you *ever* carry any books or paper to your classes?”

“Nah. I like to travel light.”

“How do you take notes?”

He tapped the side of his head with a forefinger, “It’s all up here, babe.”

“You always took notes in high school,” she said, then squinted at him, “and don’t call me babe.”

“That was mostly for you. That and the fact that I didn’t like any of the other subjects in high school. It was all I could do just to stay awake in class.” He smiled at her and said, “Here--especially this year--everything I’m taking is something I’m interested in.” He leaned in and kissed her on the cheek. “You’ll notice I have never taken notes about *you*, either.”

She leaned in, resting her head on his shoulder as they walked, then said, “What day was our first kiss?”

“Uh...”

“Maybe you *should* take notes,” she said, laughing.

Part of him wanted to complain that no one kept track of things like that, but the rational part knew better than to voice it. That path only led to a full-blown argument rather than playful teasing. Most of his friends had already been through several girlfriends in the time he had been with Kat, and they occasionally asked him how--some meaning *why*--he stayed in one relationship so long. *It's all in knowing when to keep your mouth shut*, he thought. *Knowing when to pick your battles, and when to surrender*. Neither of which had anything to do with being right.

“So, where are you taking me for lunch?”

He looked down and smiled, “We could walk back to Jester. I’ve got a lot left on my meal card. My treat.”

“I’ve got a biology lab in an hour.”

“Kismet Cafe, then?” he shrugged.

“Sure. I’ll buy, though.”

“Hey, I got this,” he said, sniffing.

“You got any cash or a credit card on you?”

“Uh...”

“Like I said, Mr. Callahan. I’ll buy today.”

And that, apparently, was that. There was no arguing with her once she last-named him. Jason still bristled at the idea of her paying for so much--his upbringing so steeped in the male mystique as it were--but it wasn’t as if she didn’t have the funds. She rode in her freshman year flush with scholarships and lots of cash from her parents. And even though she didn’t *need* to work, she still found time to put in a few hours a week tutoring local students for extra money. Money he knew was going to help *him* with his expenses.

Money was fungible, as the economics majors were fond of saying, so he couldn't get away from the idea that the engagement ring with the tiny diamond he had hidden in his dresser was paid for with *her* money. *Ah, well*, he thought with an inward sigh, *at least if she says no, she gets her money back.*

"So serious," she said. "What are you thinking about?"

"I'm thinking that if we don't hurry, you'll miss your lab and my stomach will start eating itself."

She laughed as he picked up the pace, matching him stride for stride.

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The Computational Physics lab was as quiet as a library. Most students wouldn't even *begin* serious study for another couple of weeks. Tonight only the regulars were in attendance. Those guys--and a few gals--who never seemed to get enough compute time on the mainframe.

Jason sat at the desk, quietly overseeing the students working at their stations, occasionally helping them with a problem, but mostly reading. That was the *study* part of work-study that most departments got wrong. They worked their students ragged, leaving little time to read or do homework. In Physics, the job was monotonous, but also secondary. The exact opposite of the athletic department.

More than once, Jason thanked the stars he never took the bait in middle school. The coaches saw his size and athletic ability, and courted--then harangued--him to join their programs. Too many of his friends in school fell victim to the pitch, and he rarely saw them again once the beast swallowed them up. Most of them were now working in menial jobs, without a decent education--ground up by the football machinery of the state. A few of those managed to get athletic scholarships to small universities, where they would again be sacrificed

to the football gods for four or five years and *still* not have a marketable education to show for their troubles.

Jason put his book down when he realized he had read the same passage three times. It was Hugh Everett's *The Theory of the Universal Wavefunction*, and needed all of his concentration if he was going to understand it. Everett was an early pioneer in cosmology, though he left the field in disgust shortly after publishing the thesis Jason held in his hands. He tossed the book to the desk, and reached for another, more recent book from the stack he kept close at hand. This one, Roger Penrose's *Shadows of the Mind*, was one he read in high school. It was only in the last year, though, he had enough grounding in quantum theory to really understand all the concepts.

He was on the right track, he thought, but Everett's right... I think the wave function doesn't collapse to a single state.

Jason understood, like others in his field, that artificial intelligence was a dead end. Most of his friends in computer science thought otherwise, and would debate him on the topic until late in the night. *Dan thinks we will all one day bow to our robot overlords*, Jason thought with a smile. *Of course, Dan also thinks Hogwarts is a real place.*

He checked the clock on the wall and said, "Bout time to call it a night, guys. Start saving your work and shutting things down." There were a few groans from the far end of the room where a small group gathered around a single monitor, but otherwise only the sound of students gathering their belongings greeted his announcement. He tossed the second book on the desk near the first, and stood to stretch his legs and back. The lab was small, so there were no more than two dozen workstations to shut down, but he had to check each one.

As he stepped away from the desk he glanced to where the two books lay, and stopped.

He reached down and turned them, lining them up side by side and shifting his gaze from one to the other. Back and forth, over and over, while his mind raced.

“Ha!” he almost yelled. “That’s it!”

The students all looked up to see what the commotion was about, but Jason was already sitting again and grabbing for a pencil and paper. He finally, after a nearly an entire semester of hand-wringing, knew the subject for his senior honors thesis. Jason had almost given up hope he would find a suitable subject, having several of his lesser ideas already rejected by his adviser.

Everyone just smiled at him, shook their heads, and walked quietly out of the room. This wasn’t the first time they witnessed such a reaction from an upper-level undergrad, each one silently praying it wouldn’t take *them* this long to figure it out.

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“I’m telling you, Dan... this is it!” Back in his dorm room, already surrounded by piles of notes and books, Jason sat on the edge of his chair. Dan barely made it into the room from a night of playing pool before Jason forced him to sit and listen to his idea.

“Can it at least wait until I’m sober?” He said, sitting on the edge of his bed and struggling to pull off his shoes and socks. After a few tugs the second shoe came off, nearly hitting him in the head, and he dropped everything to the floor. There they joined the growing pile of discarded clothes that needed washing. He stared down at them for a few seconds like he expected them to dance.

“Nah. You’re in the *exact* state of mind to hear this,” Jason said, grinning. “It’s pretty out there.”

“Dude... it’s almost one, and I’ve got an early class tomorrow.”

“Then you shouldn’t have stayed out late and gotten liquored up.”

Dan stared at Jason for a long time, eyelids straining under some unseen weight, and then scrubbed his face violently with both hands. “Okay, roomie,” he said, waving his hand in a *gimme* gesture, “shoot.”

“It has to do with why there will probably never be truly conscious artificial intelligence,” he began.

“Ah hell, Jay, are we gonna have that argument again? ‘Cuz let me tell ya, I think I’d rather sleep.”

“Notice I said *probably* this time. I’ll lay out the conditions for it in a bit, but first...” he picked up the two books he had been reading in the lab and held them out for Dan to take. After a few seconds Dan snorted and snatched them from Jason’s hand. “Penrose says there can’t be true artificial intelligence because what’s happening in the human brain is quantum-related and can’t be replicated in silicon.”

“I’ve heard this shit before, buddy. What else ya got?”

“It also means even a quantum computer couldn’t pull it off because we are still dealing with algorithms that *mimic* intelligence, and since real consciousness is rising from a purely non-algorithmic collapse to a single state, it won’t work.”

“And I still say Penrose is full o’ shit.”

Jason held his hand in front of him, waving them like a carnival barker as he spoke. “Here’s the cool part,” he pointed at the second book. “Everett there says the quantum wavefunction *never* collapses to a single state.”

“Yeah, I know,” Dan said, sobering. “That’s the multiple worlds interpretation guy, right?” He sneered and shook his head. “What’s one thing got to do with the other?”

“What if they’re *both* right?”

Dan tilted his head, raised an eyebrow, and said, “I’m not sure I follow. How can two mutually exclusive ideas be both right?”

“Here’s where my genius shines! Because the wavefunction only collapses *locally*.” Jason stood, his body quaking with a barely restrained energy. Dan looked up at him, his eyes unfocused and uncomprehending. Jason paced as he spoke, “It’s like this... all the quantum realities exist like branches on a tree, each decision marking a new path. The decision that marks the branch is the outward expression of a wavefunction collapsing to a single state, but the branching itself represents the universal wavefunction which *never* collapses!”

“So...?”

“What else looks like branches on a tree?”

“Um...”

“Jesus, Dan. You, of all people should...”

“A network!”

“Got it in one,” Jason said, grinning. “Or infinity. Depends on your point of view, I guess.” He rubbed the two-day stubble on his chin, then said, “Penrose believes that there is a quantum effect in the rise of intelligence and consciousness, and he’s correct, but wrong in the process. I think maybe it’s all about the network. From the day you were born--earlier, really--you have been making decisions and branching off new universes with a version of yourself in each one. A you for every possible decision you could have made. But the branches constitute a network in a massively parallel quantum computer that is the human mind.” He took a deep breath, “That’s where the *you* comes from. Our consciousness arises naturally from the growth of the network.”

“Are you sure?”

Jason laughed and sat on his chair again. “Oh hell no. I’m pulling most of this straight out of my ass.” He swiveled in the chair to pull some papers off the desk behind him. “Some of these concepts have already been explored in other papers I’ve found.” He held up a sheaf, waving it behind him a Dan, “Albert and Loewer”, then another, “H. Dieter Zeh. All pointing to what they call the many minds interpretation.” He bent to the desk and snagged a pencil. “I’m going to have to change my whole schedule for next year, *and* take a couple of extra classes this summer. The math alone...”

Soon he was muttering softly to himself as he worked out an outline for his approach, Dan snoring like a chainsaw behind him.

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“What did you mean last night about the conditions for AI?” Dan was carefully pulling clothes from the “clean” pile beside his bed, taking a sniff, then laying them out for inspection. Occasionally he rejected one after the initial sniff and tossed it to the “to be washed” pile on the other side. Not a single piece had ever seen the inside of the dresser, as far as Jason knew, and the system--while odd and disorganized--worked for Dan.

“So you weren’t completely out of it,” Jason said with a grin. He had showered and dressed before Dan woke, and was already working on his outline again. The fact he hadn’t slept never crossed his mind.

“Not *completely*, no,” he said, rubbing his head. For Dan, this was known as “combing his hair.” Little more than stubble most of the time, the jet black matte refused to do much more than just lay there. Dan scrounged in the nightstand next to his bed, pulled out a bottle of ibuprofen, and popped two in his mouth. “I clearly remember,” he said around the pills, “you saying something about certain conditions allowing for an AI to be conscious.”

Jason set the pencil down on the stack of papers and turned to fully face his friend. “If that AI, even algorithm-based, is running in a quantum computer and allowed to make it’s own decisions, then it’s a *possibility*.” He tapped Penrose’s book beside him for emphasis. “There are physical structures--microtubules--in the human brain that, theoretically, operate on a quantum level. It’s my hypothesis that they are also responsible for the network connections throughout the multiverse that give rise to consciousness. If those structures can be mimicked in hardware...” he raised his hands and shrugged his shoulders.

“*Can* they be mimicked?”

“Haven’t a clue. It’s out of my field.”

“Probably out of mine, too,” Dan said, shaking his head. “I’m just a computer science geek, and I have a feeling this is gonna be way more complicated than your typical IT troubleshooting.”

Jason chuckled. Dan was always selling himself short. *Sometimes it seems he actually believes the image he projects of himself.* “Not every computer science geek has read Penrose or Everett,” Jason said.

“I blame you, roomie,” Dan said with a short laugh, then grabbed a pillow and threw it like a frisbee at Jason’s head. Instead it bounced off his chest and fell to the floor near the “to be washed” pile.

“You’re gonna know even more before I’m through,” he said with a wink. “I’ve gotta bounce my ideas off *someone*.”

“What about Kat?”

“I try not to talk about this stuff around her. Puts her right to sleep.”

“I don’t know, Jay,” Dan said, rubbing his head again, “Maybe a biology major would be

of some use to you, donchathink?”

He hadn't considered that. The truth was that physics bored Kat to tears, and was a lousy topic of conversation on a date. After the first few times he tried to talk about his classes, watching her eyes glaze over, he avoided the topic like health-food. Now, though, there was finally some overlap. He needed a lot of information in the field of biology--specifically the human brain--and that just happened to be Kat's focus. If nothing else, she could at least guide him to the right sources. Internet searches only went so far.

“I'll take the silence and the stupid look on your face as a yes,” Dan said, watching him. “Personally, I think yer full ‘o shit, but what do I know?” he said with a shrug. He methodically dressed, careful not to move around too much, and then he sat on the edge of the bed and bent down to retrieve a shoe. “Ah, hell,” he said, then ran out of the room and down the hall to the communal bathroom. The sounds of retching reached the room, but, thankfully, none of the odor. After several minutes and two or three flushes, Dan walked back into the room. The color had leached from his face, but he stood a little straighter.

Jason grinned, and said, “Ready for breakfast?”

Dan's face twisted, turned a dull green, and he spun on his heels and walked back the way he came.

“I would feel sorry for you,” Jason yelled at his back, “but I seem to remember you serving me runny eggs the last time I was in your shoes.”

The retching was louder this time.

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Miles Henderson scraped the last of the eggs from the plate and shoved the fork into his mouth. The other students at the table had barely started their meal, but Miles learned early in

the Navy to shovel it in fast and efficiently. He finished his one and only hitch three years ago, but those lessons suffered a slow death.

Something they have in common with my dad, he thought as he chewed. That was long behind him, though, and if the cops hadn't connected the dots by now, they never would. The fact he joined the Navy two weeks after his father disappeared placed a big red *arrest me* sign around his neck, but small-town Texas constabulary being what it was, they were still just trying to figure out how to spell his name.

Keeping his temper in check during his time in the Navy was a simple task after living with his daddy. He mastered early the required attitude of obsequious deference to his so-called "superiors." Mastered it well enough to reach the rank of Petty Officer, 3rd Class--his CO even offering him 2nd Class just for re-upping--but the first four were more than enough for Miles. Enough to sock away as much cash as he could, and earn his GI Bill benefits.

After three years at Lamar he still had enough from the GI Bill stipend and his savings to pay for a Masters. A year from now he would join the class of 2014 and graduate with a degree in Poly-Sci, then slide into a graduate program in Public Administration. For the first time in his life, things were looking up. Volunteering at his local congressman's campaign headquarters earned him the connections he desired most, and there was already a position waiting for him when he graduated.

"Hey Miles, what's got you smilin' today?" Bill Oaks poked at Miles at every opportunity, having once seen the man's temper, and for some unfathomable reason wanted to see it again.

"Nothing you would understand, Billy." Miles' grew broader as the other man stiffened. "Just contemplating world domination."

The rest of the young men laughed, some at Miles--but a couple at Bill, and Miles gathered his trash onto his tray and stood. "Sorry boys, I've got a fact-finding tour to get to at the Exxon refinery," he winked. "Can't keep the congressman waiting, you know."

"You still volunteering for that asshole?" another boy asked.

"Yep, and for as long as it takes," Miles said. He began to walk away, then turned around and said, "I've got your US History paper ready for you, Billy, if you've got the cash." He smiled down at him as the boy's face reddened. "Catch ya later."

He wouldn't.

CHAPTER TWO

Jason woke Thursday to the sound of the television blaring, Dan's face glued a foot or two away from the set. He was watching the morning news, of all things.

"What's up?" Jason sat up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"Another plant explosion," Dan said without turning. He reached out and muted the sound.

"In Beaumont?" *Bad news always comes in threes*, Jason thought.

"Nah, that was yesterday morning at the Exxon refinery," he said, finally turning his face away from the pictures of devastation. "This was last night at a fertilizer plant in West, Texas. Pretty much flattened the whole town."

"Fertilizer?"

"Ammonium nitrate," Dan nodded. "Dumbasses in this state never seem to learn. Fourteen dead, over a hundred injured, a school destroyed, and these morons will chalk it up to an unforeseen act of God," he finished by waving his hands in the air. "Can't go regulatin'

bidness outta bidness,” he said in a fair imitation of the governor.

Jason rubbed his head, then scrunched his eyes at his roommate, “Hey, that’s not too far from where you live, right?”

“‘Bout ten miles,” he said, already watching the news again. “Mom called this morning to let me know dad was ok.”

“Your dad?”

“He was helping train EMT’s in the area, and responded to the call.” He turned back to face Jason, bitter tears welling in the corners of his eyes, “Three of the trainees died trying to help.” His voice cracked, and he said, “I *knew* those guys.”

“Shit, man,” Jason said softly.

“Yeah...” He wiped his eyes and turned back to the screen. “Life’s cheap in this state. Especially where *bidness* is concerned.”

Jason lay back, one arm over his head. *Life turns on a dime, and there are no guarantees.* He wanted to tell Dan that it didn’t matter. That those people lived on in another universe, having made a different choice that day. He turned his head to watch his friend. *This is the wrong time, though. Maybe later.*

“Tell me something, Jay,” Dan stood and turned the TV off.

“What’s that?”

“Are you ever gonna pull that ring out of your dresser and give it to Kat?” He stood over Jason, an odd expression on his face. His arms hung by his sides, but there was a restrained tension in his stance, like a boxer preparing to enter the ring. Jason began to think there was a wrong answer possible.

“Why do you ask?”

Dan's shoulders slumped, and the tension leaked away as he said, "I dunno." He shrugged. "Everything now is all about the choices we make, right?" He poked a finger at Jason's chest, "You need to shit or get off the pot."

"I'll be sure to use that exact phrase when I ask her," Jason said, grinning lopsidedly.

Dan smiled for the first time that morning. "See that you do." He snorted and said, "Can I be there when you do that?"

"For the proposal, or me just acting like an ass with Kat? 'Cause I'm pretty sure you've seen a lot of the latter already."

Dan laughed, reached down beside Jason's bed, and pulled pants and a shirt from the floor. He looked at them, shaking his head, then tossed them at Jason's head. "Just get dressed so we can have breakfast before class."

Jason sat up, rolled the clothing into a bundle, and said, "Mind if I shower first?"

"Please do."

He stood and walked past Dan on his way to the bathroom, then turned back and said, "Dan... it's *always* been about the choices we make--here and all the way up and down the line, across every branch. We just didn't *know* about it before."

He turned and walked out the door, Dan muttering behind him, "Tell that to my dad."

#

The morning air held a distinct chill at just under fifty degrees, but it was the rain that made it miserable. Jason pulled the hood from his sweatshirt up over his head, and mentally prepared for the soggy trek to class. A full coat was pointless, since the weatherman said it would clear off by noon, leaving blue skies and temperatures in the mid-eighties.

Welcome to Texas. If you don't like the weather here... wait a minute.

The rain wasn't bad, just relentless. He avoided the usual low areas on the sidewalks and streets, but couldn't keep his pants from getting soaked anyway. *I'll have to put my shoes in the dryer, too, when I get back to the dorm.*

Ten minutes into his walk a wave of nausea hit him, his head spinning like he'd spent an hour on a Tilt-O-Whirl at the State Fair. His heart raced, threatening to burst from his chest, and he staggered to the nearest tree. He couldn't breathe as he leaned against the old trunk, doubling over and attempting to suck in lung-fulls of air.

This must be what a heart attack feels like, he thought as he felt for his pulse along the carotid.

He turned to brace his back against the tree, the few people walking in the rain never noticing his distress, and as he shifted his weight to lean back, he fell *through* the tree. Or thought he did. Part of his mind knew he was still resting his back against the old oak, but he was also falling. He surrendered to the feeling for only a moment to look below and saw... *nothing*. Blackness, deeper than anything imagined. An abyss as wide as it was deep, dropping forever and extending to infinity in all directions.

He was swallowed by the black, and falling to a *darker* line below. A part of him knew the impossibility of this, but *all* of him knew it was true. All around him a multitude of voices whispered in something approaching awe, but he could make out no words. Coherence was lost. It never existed.

Great, he thought as he fell, *I'm dying and apparently going to the wrong damn place*. Something passed him going in the opposite direction--a relative *up* to his down--and its presence was both familiar and alien. Off to one side, the sound of tiny bells drifted in the black, and he looked for the source but could not find it. The darker line approached, now

limned in a faint blue haze. Before Jason had a chance to register the distance, it engulfed him.

#

“Damn, Jason,” the voice beside him boomed, “you just got fracked with extreme prejudice, dude.” A hard slap on the back, knocking the headset off into Jason’s lap.

Jason blinked rapidly, his eyes now unaccustomed to the light. The large screen in front of him showed a battlefield--a game--where small groups of soldiers fought with impossibly powerful weapons. The game controller in his hands felt odd, and he placed it on the coffee table in front of the sofa. *His* sofa. He swiveled his head around *his* apartment. He turned his head to look at the young man next to him, his own game controller in his hand. Without even considering it, a name came unbidden to the front of his mind. *Ben*.

“You’re Ben, right?”

“Dude, did you blow a fuse or something?”

“Just feeling a little nauseated is all.” He tried to stand, but his center of gravity was different. His body felt wrong--top-heavy, and his t-shirt was far too tight. Trying to regain his balance, he looked down, saw the cowboy boots on his feet and nearly passed out. He fell back to his seat with a heavy thud and rubbed his head. Outside his window, lightning flashed as today’s mild sprinkling of rain turned angry and became a full-fledged Central Texas thunder-boomer.

“I think it’s more than your stomach, man.” Ben put his controller down and pulled the headset off and set it aside. “You’re not lookin’ too good. Color’s all gone from your face.” He reached for his cell and said, “Maybe we should call one of the trainers, or the doc?”

Trainers? “Oh shit. I’m a quarterback.” The words leaked from him without

thinking. Now he *did* feel nauseated.

“No, dude... you’re *the* quarterback. NFL-bound, my friend!” Ben grinned, straight white teeth gleaming, “After next season, they’ll be lining up to draft you, Jay.” He poked himself in the chest, “And I’ll be there watchin’.”

He’s not kidding, Jason thought. *This has got to be a dream.* He pinched an arm, twisting the skin as hard as he could.

“Ow!”

“The fuck did you do *that* for?”

“Just checking.” *Not a dream, then. The only question left is am I crazy, or...*

“You *killed* it in the Orange-White game, Jay. Mack is an idiot if you don’t start next season.”

“This isn’t right...” Jason began, then noticed the large clock on the wall for the first time. “Shit! I’ve got to get to class.”

Ben tilted his head, and said, “You don’t have any classes this morning, dude.”

“Yeah,” Jason said, his mouth twisting as his brows beetled, “I’ve got computational...” But no, he didn’t, and the knowledge hit him like a punch to the solar plexus. Another memory rising to the surface brought the news he was *not* a physics major, but a goddamn *kinesiology* major. “At least it’s not history,” he mumbled.

“What?”

“Nothing.” *If this isn’t a dream, then something impossible has happened.* The set of explanations was finite, even if the multiverse was not. And that’s when he knew. *Somehow I’ve crossed a threshold. The branching must have occurred pretty early in my life to change things this much. So early, in fact, that...*

“Where’s my phone?” He frantically stirred the detritus on the coffee table, shoving most of it to the floor.

“Calm down, dude. I think I saw it on the kitchen counter, charging.”

Jason scrambled away from the sofa, bumping his leg on the table, and limped to the kitchen. The smartphone was definitely not the simple flip-phone he always carried, but his fingers flew over it using muscle memory as he searched for the number in the contact list.

“She’s not in here.”

“Who?”

His hands shaking, he methodically tapped out the number from memory--*old* memory. The ringing from the other end told him the number was at least in service.

“Hello?”

“Kat... uh Kathy Nichols?”

“Yes,” she hesitated, “this is Kathy.” A second or two passed as she was probably checking the number of the person calling her. “Who is this?”

“Jason... uh, Callahan,” he said, feeling like he was twelve years old again. Ben was trying to get his attention, but Jason waved him off and showed him his back.

“Oh, Jason,” she said as if she didn’t recognize the name. “Um... how did you get my number?”

How did I get her number? Time to tap dance.

“I was wondering if you would like to have lunch today,” he said. *Lame, but it’ll do.*

She was silent for a few seconds, obviously considering just how to answer a date request from a near-stranger.

“Aren’t you in Austin?”

“Yeah, so?”

“Well, unless you have a private jet and a pilot’s license, we might have to make it for later in the week.” She paused for effect, then said, “I went to Northwestern.”

His eyes opened wide. “The one in Illinois?”

She sighed heavily, “Is there another?” He had a clear picture of the look on her face, tapping her foot impatiently while talking to an idiot football player.

Considering all the options, there being only one, Jason did the only thing left to him.

“I’m sorry for bothering you. I’ll let you go.” *Or I could tell you we were in love in another universe. That would go over like a lead--*

“Are you okay?” The concern in her voice was real. He heard it enough over the years to recognize it.

“Yeah, Kat. I’m fine.” *No, I’m not.*

“It’s funny. Only my dad calls me Kat.”

“Sorry.”

“No, it’s okay. Somehow it doesn’t sound silly the way you say it.” She was silent then, and just when it stretched to awkward, she said, “Are you *sure* you’re okay?”

Still looking out for me, even if I’m not her boyfriend. It’s what he fell in love with when they were kids. *When did I mess all that up?* It had to have been soon after they first met. His memory of that day was still clear, but now he saw it through a haze of someone else’s memories. It was like watching a movie through *another* movie projected on gauze. A whole lifetime of memories that didn’t include her.

“Again, sorry to bother you.” He took a shuddering breath, and before she could say anything else, he said, “Bye,” and hung up.

He set the phone back on the counter gently, like he was putting a baby to bed, and turned back to his roommate. Ben watched him with concern in his eyes.

“What the hell was that?”

“Nothing,” Jason said, and sat heavily, shoulders slumping under an impossible weight. “Not anymore, at least.” Outside the rain beat against his windows with renewed energy, distorting reality with an ocean of water every second, falling across every universe at once.

#

“He’s been like this for three days, ma’am,” Ben whispered into his phone in the living room while Jason lay on his bed. “Maybe you should come see him or something.”

He no longer cared what was being said about him, but it was difficult to block it out.

“No, ma’am, I don’t know what caused it, but he called someone named Kathy when it started. He’s been a basket case ever since.” The person--his mom, most likely--said something on the other end. “No. I thought maybe *you* knew who she was.”

She *wouldn't* know, of course. Kat and his mom never met in this universe. And this *was* another universe--he was sure of that, now. Throughout the first day of his exile, he waited for the process to reverse itself, hoping whatever cosmic event sent him here brought him home as well. After that first day he worried it might be permanent. Today he knew. Even if it were not, there was no guarantee the next would take him back to his original reality.

He was stuck here.

While he retained his own memories, those of *this* Jason were now fully accessible--if not fully incorporated. He could act like this Jason, but could never *be* him. Could never be satisfied with this life knowing what he lost from the last. On that first day, he thought about starting over in school with physics as a major. He knew he could pass the department’s

entrance exam, but he would only have two years left on his athletic scholarship to catch up. After that, student loans would have to suffice.

That was assuming the coaches would allow it.

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll keep an eye on him until you get here.” Ben set the phone down and walked into Jason’s room. “Your mom’s coming for a visit in a few days, Jay.”

“I know... I heard,” he said without turning his head, or even opening his eyes. “I told you, Ben, I’m fine.”

“No, you’re *not*, Jason. Moping around over some girl is one thing, but you’ve completely shut down, dude. I don’t think you’ve eaten in two days.”

“Not hungry.”

“Why don’t you just *talk* about it? If not to me, then, you know... *someone*.” He threw his hands in the air, and Jason felt a wave of sympathy for his friend. *I would probably feel the same way if he were acting like me.*

“Not in a talkin’ mood, either, Ben,” he said, still not moving. But he did need to talk to someone, and for the first time he understood that. He put his hands behind his head, finally opening his eyes to stare at the ceiling. This wasn’t his life, and it never would be. He had to get *his* life back, even if he had to start over and make it happen here. There was a lot to do--visiting his guidance counselor Monday morning was one--but one thing was sure... when his mom arrived, he wouldn’t be here.

#

“All of it?” The bank teller looked at him with sympathy. This was clearly a young man who did not know how the world worked.

“Did I stutter?” Jason said, tapping his fingers on the little ledge in front of the window.

“Yes... all of it.”

“Aren’t you sure you don’t want to leave most of it in savings?”

“Nope,” he smiled, “I’ve handled money before. I think I know how it works.” In truth, Jason was sympathetic to the young man’s plight. There was quite a hefty sum sitting in that account, compliments of an enthusiastic alumnus, and it was the teller’s job to keep it tucked safely away in the bank’s vault. Once that little tidbit of a memory bubbled to the surface, his path became clearer than ever.

The teller sighed, knowing the battle was lost. “How would you like that?”

“A thousand in twenties and fifties, and the rest in a cashier’s check will be fine.”

“Very good, sir,” the little man said, and then disappeared into the back.

Well, that was easier than I thought it would be, he mused. No, the *hard* part was when he told coach he was giving up his scholarship and leaving school. The old man did everything he could to talk Jason into staying, practically promising him he would start, but his mind was made up. There was nothing keeping him here, and starting over at the same school was a depressing thought. No, he had to transfer... find another school where no one knew him.

The teller appeared again at the window and counted out the cash Jason asked for, then slid it under the glass through the little opening.

“There you go, sir. One thousand dollars. Twenty-five in twenties, and ten fifties.”

He slid another slip of paper through, “And your cashier’s check.” He looked up, and in his eyes was something close to envy. “Will that be all, sir?”

“That should do it,” Jason said, pocketing the cash, then carefully folding the check and placing it in his wallet.

“Thank you for your business,” the teller said, smiling.

“Thanks,” Jason said, and turned to leave.

Outside the bank, he stopped to pull his sunglasses down from the top of his head. The sun was shining down with a vengeance after the week of unrelenting rain, and the streets and ditches were already dry. The on-ramp to I35 was close enough to see from the bank’s parking lot, and he turned his gaze north. *With luck, I’ll make it to Oklahoma before I have to stop for the night*, he thought as he walked to his car. Even then, it was a two day trip.

He opened the long door to the Dodge Challenger, looked around one last time, and climbed into the car.

“Two, three days max, and we’ll see if there’s anything left in the tank for my life.”

Firing up the engine made him smile, and he threw the shifter into drive and drove toward the highway. The classics radio station powered out “Jessica” by the Allman Brothers, and he turned it up as loud as he could stand. Ten miles later his smile melted, the DJ deciding to reach back even farther to spin up Eddy Arnold’s “Black Cloud.”

And if it wasn't for the help of the one

I love to tell my troubles to

There just ain't no tellin' what that old black cloud

Might drive this poor boy to.

Black cloud hanging over my head

Down to my last buck

With that old black cloud hanging over my head

There ain't no such thing as good luck.

It wasn't a cloud hanging over Jason's head, but a stone poised to crush his soul the longer he stayed. The light faded while he drove north, the sun now low enough to blind him from the left, and he angrily pulled the visor over to that side. "Fuckin' *hate* country music," he mumbled as he snapped the radio off.

#

Northwestern University wasn't what he expected, the campus looking more like a small town than what he knew in Austin. Jason certainly wasn't what Kat expected.

"What are you *doing* here?" she said, more amused than worried or angry.

"Transferring," he said, still unsure how she was taking his surprise presence. The crazy part was he hadn't been looking for her when they met. He was just going into the administration building to apply for the summer, and she was on her way out and ran straight into him while she was texting.

"Here?"

"Do you see another university nearby?"

She laughed, "I guess I deserved that." Kat smiled at him the way she always did when trying to understand something stupid he just did, "I thought you were a big football star at UT?"

"I wouldn't say *star*..."

"But what about your scholarship?"

"Gave it back," he shrugged. "Kinesiology really isn't my thing."

"You always were a little smarter than you let on." She smiled again, brushing her hair over her left ear.

"Then you *do* remember me," he said, grinning. And just like that, it felt right. Standing there, bantering like they always did, the familiarity of the moment comforted him like nothing

else had since his nightmare began. *Everything's gonna be okay*, he thought. He would court her all over again, only this time without all the false starts while he figured her out. The sad thing was that the Jason he inhabited seemed to have no memories of her at all. It was like she was invisible to him all through their seven years of school together.

“Hey,” he said, “after I get out of here, would you like--”

Her phone rang, and she held up a finger to shush him as she answered it. “Hey, babe,” she said, brightening. “Yeah, I’m just catching up at the admin building with an old friend.” Jason did his best to keep the hurt from his face, but he couldn’t do anything about his eyes. She saw it at once. “Hey, I’ve got to go, but I’ll see you at noon for lunch.” *Don’t say it, don’t...* “Love you too, baby.” She hung up, then smiled at him with a look that made him angry. *Pity.*

“I’m sorry,” she said, “I really have to run, but if you want to join my boyfriend and me for lunch, I’d like to catch up.” *That look again.* “Is that okay?”

He smiled back as best as he could, “I don’t know how long this will take.” He tore a corner from a page in the catalog he held, and quickly scribbled his number. “Text me where you’re going, and if I get out in time, I’ll meet up with you.”

She took it. “Uh... okay. Guess I’ll see you later.” *No you won’t. Not today, at least.*

“Yeah, catch you later Kat.” He turned away and walked through the doors into the administration building without looking back.

Boyfriend, he thought as he walked the long hallway, *not fiancé.* *She took the number, and if she texts, it means she’s interested.* Better yet, if she texted back, she was giving him her number without him ever asking for it.

Sooner or later, *every* boyfriend screwed up. Like it was a law of nature or something.

He'd done it enough times to know exactly how she'd react, but never bad enough for them to break up. Part of him knew this was nothing less than manipulation, but he didn't care. When the inevitable happened, he would be there for her. It wouldn't be easy, but he could get her back. He had to.

#

Lucky for once, Summer I registration opened the week he arrived, so he was able to sign up for two courses. The nice lady at the physics department offices informed him that, while his kinesiology courses were not accepted as creditable classes in their program, he was welcome to take the placement exams in September to earn credit for his first four physics core courses. She also told him, in confidence, that a few professors allowed an informal "credit by exam" where the student only had to pass their final exam. In this way he could sign up for several courses that had time conflicts, allowing him to take up to twenty-four credit hours while only actually attending eighteen. By the end of his first full year, he would be about where he left off in his former life. At least all the basics he had already taken transferred without difficulty.

Kat never did text him after their first meeting. That was okay, as he was too busy that summer to notice. She did call to invite him to lunch when she got back to school in the fall, having heard the stories around town while she was home on break.

"Why haven't you told your parents you're here?" She sat at the table, her back straight, picking at her salad while she spoke.

"I don't know," he shrugged, "just didn't want to talk to them about it, I guess." As a lie, it was close enough to the truth that he didn't feel bad for deceiving her. Other than Kat, he couldn't face anyone in this reality. They sat beside a large window, and he watched people walking along the sidewalks going about their daily lives. All perfectly clueless to the greater

universe around them.

He wished he were still one of them.

“A pretty big jump from football to physics, don’t you think?” she said, looking down at her plate.

“Don’t think I can handle it?” He expected this reaction, but his other Kat would have never voiced it.

She stopped pushing her salad around the plate and looked up, saying, “Someone as dedicated to sports as you were rarely has time for another subject. Especially something as time-consuming as quantum physics.”

“Quantum gravity, actually.”

“Specializing already?” she smiled.

“Well... the Many Worlds Interpretation is a special case arising from quantum gravity research. *That’s* my area of specialization,” he said, smiling back.

“I see,” she said, placing her fork primly on the table beside the plate. She laced her fingers in front of her, then rested her chin on them. Jason nearly laughed at her “tell me more of your silly plans” posture. He witnessed this many times while they were dating.

“I’ve got a question for you,” he said, trying to change the subject, “why aren’t we having lunch with your boyfriend?”

“Oh... well,” she sat back, “let’s just say he didn’t handle the separation during the summer very well, and leave it at that.”

“Ah,” he said, nodding. “Got it.” *Boyfriends* always *screw up*, he thought, with no small degree of satisfaction. What he must *not* do, however, is smile about it. He scooped a healthy forkful of his meal, and shoveled it into his mouth before that particular orifice got him

into trouble.

“Speaking of not handling things well,” she began, then hesitated. “Oh hell, I’ll just say it. Your dad went ballistic at work about you leaving UT.”

She would know. His dad worked for hers.

He swallowed hastily, then wiped his mouth with a napkin, and said, “Nothing I can do about that.”

“You could talk--”

“No I can’t,” he said, much harsher than he intended.

“But--”

“Just drop it, okay?”

She stopped and stared at him for a few seconds, then shrugged her shoulders. “Have it your way.” She smiled thinly and added, “I guess I can relate to not being able to talk to one’s parents.”

That surprised him. Her family was, though not wealthy in the classical sense, at least comfortable. In his old universe they always had money for whatever she needed, and spent a lot of time supporting her various school activities. Compared to his, they were damn near perfect. Sure, they were strict, but this was the first time he’d heard of any discontent in the Nichols household. When he first crossed over, he believed that all the changes to each universe were strictly local; ripples on a pond, flattening as they spread from the central point of change. *Is it possible a single person could have so much effect on the people peripheral to them?* He hoped not.

He opened his mouth to say something, but a noise outside their window stopped him. The sound registered as overtaxed brakes locking four tires to the pavement, rubber squealing as

the heavy truck did its best to stop. But there was no stopping this juggernaut, and before Jason's brain processed the sound as a danger signal, the truck slammed into and through the plate glass beside their table. The large sheet of glass and its frame collapsed inward, and the truck pushed through as if it weren't even there, scattering the other patrons and pulling down a rain of ceiling tile. Jason was just outside the area of impact, tossed aside like a rag doll, but Kat took the full force of the beast head-on.

Seconds passed before Jason gathered enough of his wits to call out to Kat. Pieces of the building were still falling, and the truck's horn was stuck on a single pitch--the other having been destroyed on impact. He looked where their table had been, but saw no sign of her, and he began pulling pieces of ceiling tile and glass shards from the floor in a desperate search.

He found her near the back of the room under what was left of their table. There was no obvious sign of injury, but a single look at her glassy stare and he knew. Kneeling beside her, then crumbling to the floor, he sat and lifted her head into his lap, stroking her hair as he cried. The ripples of causality grew, becoming vast waves crashing against a ruined and crumbling shore. Everything they touched shattered and fell, etching the shores of time and creating new boundaries with the sea of realities. Jason felt a familiar pull, and bent to kiss his love one last time, then welcomed the engulfing darkness as he fell into the yawning abyss.

#

“Are you with us, Mr. Callahan?”

Jason opened his eyes. The students around him in the class were smiling or laughing quietly. He raised his chin to meet the gaze of the professor standing in front of his desk.

“Ma'am?”

“The question was, I believe, what effect does high-stakes standardized testing have on

the educational environment.”

“Depends on who you listen to,” he said, stalling. The last time he shifted, the information held in the new Jason’s brain took days to bubble to the surface. This time he was used to the experience and was able to access it much quicker. “Diana Ravtich, who I happen to agree with, thinks the whole thing is a palliative at best, and distracting from the core goal of education at worst.” He could still smell the gasoline and dust from the drywall. Could still see Kat’s face in death. He closed his eyes again and concentrated on the memories of *this* Jason.

“Mr. Callahan is correct,” the woman said, smiling. “At least in his interpretation of Ms. Ravtich’s opinion.” She leaned over and tapped once on his desk, “And for the record... I agree with her as well.” Her face grew stern, and she said, “But if you’re going to be teaching math in public school, Mr. Callahan, I suggest you keep those opinions to yourself.” She walked back to her own desk near the whiteboard, and lifted a sheaf of papers from its surface. “Speaking of tests,” she said, followed by a chorus of groans from the class, “here are the results from the last exam. We will go over these in detail in the next class, *including* statistical analysis of the answer selections.” Another groan.

Like the rest of the students, Jason couldn’t get out of there fast enough. He only glanced at the “A” at the top of his test paper before shoving it into his pack and scrambling out of the desk. The others, also making a mad dash for the door, bunched at the opening and made it nearly impossible to squeeze out. Squeeze they did, though, like all college students, able to navigate the obstacle course of higher education with aplomb.

Once in the hallway, Jason threw his pack to the floor and fished inside the front pocket of his jeans for his phone. Checking frantically in the contacts list, he couldn’t find her name

anywhere. Dialing from memory--again--and hoping against hope it was still the same, he leaned against the wall as he listened to the ringing on the other end.

“Hello?” Kat answered.

“Oh, thank *God*,” he said, sliding to the floor and ending the call with a flick of his thumb. He pulled his knees in tight, hugging himself, and rocked against the wall as he sobbed quietly.

CHAPTER THREE

The cabin, dark and silent, chilled rapidly in the late fall air. Outside, wind cut and slashed icy blades between shafts of barren old growth. Inside, at a small table near the rough stone hearth holding the last dying embers of a warm fire, Jason took a quick, stuttering breath and jerked spasmodically, dropping the snub-nosed revolver from the hand at his temple. It tumbled with a clatter to the wooden floor, spun for a few turns, then lay still. He watched it with calm detachment, then stood on shaking legs and looked around the interior of the cabin. There was no hint of recognition on his face for his surroundings. He looked down at the gun, but like the new backpack in the corner, it registered as just one more thing to inventory—one more piece of clutter to add to the puzzle of a new world.

This was his tenth trip down the rabbit hole, as far as he knew, but his only concern was with how much farther from home this trip took him. He placed a shaking hand on the chair’s back to steady himself, then walked the short distance to the heavy oak door separating this warm haven from the ravening wind on the other side. His boots pounded a dull tattoo as he walked, and he looked down at the detailed stitching on top of what appeared to be alligator skin. He curled his lip. Not again, he thought, rolling his eyes skyward. With one more deep breath, he reached for the handle and pulled the door inward on creaking hinges. The lashing air, chill

and damp, chased the remaining warmth in the room up the chimney, and left him shivering in the doorway.

Jason surveyed the landscape beyond the cabin. Where the clearing in front of the porch ended abruptly forty yards out at a stand of trees, a gravel road cut neatly through and away. The tall trees stood like sentries around a prison yard. They groaned and swayed dangerously in the wind, speaking words only they understood, but whose meaning was clear—go away, you don't belong here.

He stepped over the threshold out onto the wooden front porch, and crossed his arms to hug himself tightly, a thick denim shirt his only proof against the chill.

Where the hell am I this time?

Joan popped the top on another beer, held the frigid can to her forehead for a couple of seconds, and then took a long, sweet pull. The liquid made an icy trail down her throat that radiated outward, drawing the heat of her body to her core. She sighed as she shivered in spite of the warm day. Lean, tanned, and still pretty at forty-one, she sat on an old fold-up lounge chair at the edge of the wood deck of her trailer, dressed for the sun in her favorite yellow bikini. She liked the way the bright solid color contrasted with her dark hair and the light mocha color of her skin she worked so hard to maintain. She especially liked the way the men who passed her by leered, the hunger clear in their eyes. Leaning back with beer in hand, she crossed her legs, dropped the large-rimmed dark sunglasses onto her nose, and sneered at the world around her.

The one-time homecoming queen, girlfriend of the star running back, and salutatorian of her class with scholarship in hand, reveled in her disgust at the life she lived. Everything was

lost the day she gave herself up to that star, even as he abandoned his dreams of college to join the Marines and accept the role of provider. Dale promised her a house with a yard and a fence. Dale promised her a lot of things, but in the end all he gave her was a son she never saw anymore, a lot of lonely days, and this double-wide. Of course, her days weren't always lonely, but what Dale didn't know wouldn't hurt him. Or her.

A bead of sweat rolled slowly down her spine, stopping at the small of her back for only a second before leaping to its demise on the deck below. She smiled to herself. "Gotta love Southeast Texas in December. At least the humidity's bearable now," she said to the can in her hand.

Swirling her beer while she watched the few neighbors working in the heat of the trailer park, Joan noticed the can was light. She finished it off in one long gulp, and then tossed the empty over the side of the deck in the general direction of the trashcan. The soft thud as it hit the ground told her she missed again. As she fished another out of the ice chest at the foot of the lounge, her cell phone buzzed angrily on the plastic table beside her. She sighed heavily and looked down at the instrument of her distraction. Not only did she not recognize the number, but she had never seen that particular area code before.

"Telemarketer, or bill collector. Either way," she smiled sweetly at the phone, "fuck you." She popped the top on the next future empty. After a minute of blessed silence, the phone jittered again, just once, to indicate a voicemail message was waiting.

"That's new. Those guys don't usually bother leaving messages anymore." She was just about to delete it and turn the phone off when it began vibrating again. She looked at the offending little brick of plastic and glass in her hand. Seeing it was the same number, she grumbled, "Holy hell, do these guys ever quit?" She debated for a second about letting it go to

voicemail a second time, then stabbed at the "answer" button on the phone.

"What," she snapped.

"Mom?"

Joan's eyes grew wide as she drew in a quick shuddering breath and dropped her beer. There was no mistaking that voice, even if she hadn't heard it in three years. Tears quickly threatened to cloud her vision, and she sat up and pulled off her sunglasses with trembling fingers.

"Jason? Is it really you?" Her voice quivered in spite of her best efforts.

"Yeah, it's me. How long has it been?"

That's an odd question, she thought. "Three years. And where the hell have you been anyway?" Her voice raised a bit in pitch as she shook her head and waved her free hand, "Never mind. Where the hell are you now?"

"Um, the Rocky Mountains, I think. Somewhere Northwest of Denver."

"The hell you say!"

"No, really. I'm stuck up here in the cold, frozen wilderness." She heard Jason chuckle a bit on the other end, "At least there hasn't been much snow yet, though the weatherman says a big blast is coming soon."

"Stuck? What do you mean 'stuck'?" She couldn't believe she was having this conversation right now. Three years between phone calls, and he was talking about the weather?

"Mom, I'd like to come home."

"Then come home, already. Ain't no one stopping you."

"Well, that's the problem. I don't have enough money to get there." There was a long

pause, then, "I don't suppose you could send me a bit for bus fare or something, could you?"

Joan couldn't help it, and she laughed out loud at the sheer stupidity of the boy. "Son, I love you, but there ain't no way your daddy's gonna send you a dime after what you did."

There was a brief silence, then, "Oh hell. What did I do?"

Had the kid gone off his nut, or something? "Boy, if you think tossing your football scholarship and leaving UT was no big deal, you should have seen your daddy's reaction." That was a bad time, and getting only one other phone call over the next five years didn't help matters. In fact that last call set Dale off again—a minor rampage that lasted a whole week. "To tell you the truth, son, I'm glad he's at work right now, just so I don't have to listen to him go on about it again."

She heard him sigh on the other end. "Huh," he muttered to himself, "what are the odds?" Then to her, "Well, I guess I could try hitchin' it or something."

"The hell you will! There's too many nuts out there on the roads these days." She drummed her fingers on the table beside her for a few seconds, then sighed and said, "All right. I've got a bit of money stashed away for a rainy day. I'll wire you some, but only if you promise not to come knockin' on the door until I have a chance to talk to your daddy."

"Sure. No problem." She could hear Jason fumbling with something, a rustling of paper. "Hey, did you get a job or something?"

"Something like that, yeah." In fact, Walter, a regular customer, would be pulling into the driveway soon.

"Huh. That's cool, I guess. You got a pencil and paper ready for the address?"

"Hang on. I've got to go dig one up from the junk drawer." As she stood, she stumbled a bit, then stopped to look around the trailer park to glare at no one in particular. Satisfied that

no one cared what she was doing, she pulled the handle of the tattered screen door and stepped into her castle.

Football?

Even growing up in Texas, he was never interested in playing football, though he was surely built for it. The coaches in middle school bugged him regularly to go out for the team, but he was only interested in science. He saw how many of the former football stars in town ended up, and he was tired of living in a trailer. At the age of six he read his first Fantastic Four comic and fell in love with Reed Richards as a role model. The scientist who could solve any scientific puzzle, or create any technology. It was only when he studied science in earnest that he realized such a super-scientist was ludicrous, but it didn't matter anymore—the bug bit him hard, and he wanted to learn more.

And, once again, he was a dropout with a football scholarship. Worse, he was wearing cowboy boots again. If God were real, he had a wicked sense of humor. Not to mention a nasty bully streak.

Jason waited in a motel lobby backed up against a decaying convenience store. The store was formerly a member of a chain he and his friends referred to generically as a “Sack Some Shit.” The motel's desk clerk was kind enough to let him use the phone, then sit in one of the worn plastic chairs to wait for his mother to wire him the money. He spent his last five dollars earlier at the store on something resembling a sandwich, which he was sure was just cardboard and cheese. This Jason didn't carry much cash, and nothing in the way of a credit card. He wasn't sure what the man was doing up in the mountains with no provisions or money to buy them, but the handgun he left on the floor was a strong clue. In the years since his first trip, he

never contemplated what this Jason obviously had, and he wondered how bad it must have been to push this one over the edge.

“Probably the boots,” he muttered.

“What was that?” The clerk peeked over the desk to where Jason sat.

“Nothing,” he said. “Just talking to myself.”

The clerk made a face, then slowly sat back in his chair as he kept an eye on the crazy man in his lobby.

People looked at him like that a lot over the years. Every time he shifted he spent precious days learning about the world he was dumped into, and even with his new host’s memories slowly drifting into his head like so much fog, he still spent a lot of time looking stupid to the people who knew him. He didn’t remember it happening before he turned eighteen, so he was reasonably sure his childhood was his own. At least he hoped so. There were so many happy memories from those days when his mom and dad loved one another. In none of the realities he had visited did he find parents as happy as his own.

Jason turned to look out the window. Daylight was already leaking away, slowly leaching the color from the landscape. He shivered, though he knew the growing cold he felt was mostly psychological. The street in front of the motel saw little traffic, but here and there a few people walked to and fro with purpose, crossing paths in a loosely choreographed dance. Most were dressed lightly, having grown used to the weather. The wind outside was beginning to pick up, and the cold would follow. He wondered how long before the snow came to Denver, and did the residents still wear shorts when it did.

He checked his watch again as he shivered at the thought, and hoped the money would arrive before the next bus was scheduled to leave.

Three hours later, after shooining Walter out the door and then driving to the Western Union office to send what cash she was willing to spare, she pulled onto the weed infested patch of gravel that served as the trailer's driveway. Dale's truck was already there.

Shit, that man is completely unreliable. Every other day he finished work early, he made his way to Granny's Ice House for a few beers before coming home. But not today. Of course, not today, she thought. Why would I think I could catch a break. Ever.

Joan was sure that, on some level, Dale knew how she spent her days while he was at work, but he never came right out and accused her. No, the outward expression took the form of anger and depression; and though he never became violent, the arguments over every other topic were epic by anyone's standards. She knew as soon as she walked through the door that his ire had been building for a while, sitting in his beer-stained La-Z-Boy, feet propped up, with a Bud in his hand and watching the evening news.

He looked up at her and smiled as she entered, pretending to just notice her, and said, "Where ya been?" All sweetness and light, though the smile never reached his eyes.

"Out." Two could play the passive-aggressive game.

He smiled again and took another sip of his beer, "I just wonder because I noticed your stash was a bit light."

Crap. The bastard knows where I keep it. She knew instantly there was just one way to short-circuit the major fight that was brewing inside that trailer, and that was to tell him the truth for once.

"I got a call from Jason today." No preamble, no sugarcoating. Just rub his nose in it and wait to see how he reacts.

"I figured as much." He smiled at what she surely knew was a dumbfounded look on her face. "Boss told me some kid claiming to be my son called while I was out on the job site." He considered his beer for a second, then looked up at her and said, "So how much did you send him?"

"Enough for bus fare. Maybe enough left over for a meal or two."

His eyes narrowed, "So about one day's roll in the hay." He swirled his can a couple of times, then downed the last warm dregs.

"Dale--"

"Shut up." It was as quietly stated as a goodnight kiss. "I ain't talkin' about it." He took a long shuddering breath. "So the boy's finally coming home, huh?"

"Two days. He's in Colorado right now."

"That so? I wonder what he was doing up there?" He rubbed the graying stubble on his chin, then tossed the empty beer can a bit more expertly than she. The can cleared the rim of the little Dallas Cowboys trashcan by the TV and rattled into the bottom. "I guess we'll find out when he gets here."

Dale stood up and looked directly into Joan's eyes. He wasn't a big man by any means, but his close-cropped dark hair, and his overweight—though thickly muscled—physique was intimidating in the way that only former marines can be. Especially those marines kicked out for decking an officer. Big Chicken Dinner, he called it. Wore the damn thing as a badge, for Christ's sake.

"How about we see if we can get supper on the table before the game starts." His eyes narrowed to mere slits, and he reached up to pat her gently on the cheek, "Do you think you can do that for me, babe?"

Joan returned his gaze for a second, then lowered her eyes and said, "Sure. I think there's some meatloaf in the fridge I can warm up." She walked away from him then, hoping he wouldn't think of anything to add. She would keep her distance the rest of the night, and with luck he would be a little better in the morning.

Twenty miles from downtown Alvin, a lone patron sat in a diner eating a bowl of soup at the counter. Luckily for him, this was one of those places that didn't use the backless swivel stools so common to diners. If it were, the man surely would have fallen to the floor as he dropped the spoon nearing his mouth and lurched back in his seat, gasping a deep, rasping breath. The waitress behind the counter and the small dark-haired boy she appeared to be helping with his homework turned toward him. The man, now conscious of the attention, settled back to eating his soup as if nothing happened.

Miles Henderson smiled as he hunched over the counter, protecting his bowl from predators. I remember this place. He turned his head this way and that, looking the diner over. I've actually done it! Knowing a thing was possible and doing it were two very different things, but for the second time in his life he felt the thrill of controlling his fate.

He reached into the pocket of his worn pea coat, feeling for the car keys he knew would be there. He looked across the bar to the mirror behind, and with a feral, toothy grin, he marveled at the shock of black hair on his head. Not a trace of gray! It was like watching an old video of himself.

Taking another spoonful, he thought, Time to get to it. It has to be here, and it has to be now. In truth, the window was closing even as he sat. If he wasn't on his way to Maryland in three days, everything would change, and there was no way to tell what affect that would have

on his future. Since this was the closest he would pass to his target in any of the timelines he could remember, it was his only shot to clean up the mess he created upstream. Maybe one day he would be able to hire someone to do this type of work for him, but for now he was alone.

He looked over at the waitress to catch her eye. Blonde, young, and pretty, she still carried that look of a short, hard life. On any other night he would have attempted to bed her, but he was pressed for time. "Sweetie," he waved her over and stretched his mouth into a big smile, "can I get my check now?" She smiled back, said a couple of hushed words to the boy, and walked over as she pulled the grease-stained check from the front pocket of her apron and placed it on the counter beside the empty bowl.

"That'll be six-fifty."

Miles took out his wallet, counted out eight ones, and placed them on the counter. She reached for the cash, but Miles held the bills firmly in place, his eyes lingering on her grimy name tag, and said, "You got an Alvin phone book behind that counter, Kathy? I need to look up an old friend."

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