

Time
and
Technicalities

by RP Halliway

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First edition

Cover art by Casey Gerber

What then is time? If no one asks me, I know what it is. If I wish to explain it to him who asks, I do not know.

Saint Augustine

Time is nature's way of keeping everything from happening at once.

John Archibald Wheeler

Preface

Thanks for choosing my book to read. I hope you thoroughly enjoy it and it enhances your thought process about the world we live in.

Time and Technicalities is the first book in the Timewalker series, and is a very non-traditional book in many ways, while trying to look like a traditional book. My actual category for this first book would be 'semi-non-fiction' due to the fact that most of the ideas presented are based on real events, whether accepted as real or hoaxes is up to the reader. I try to deal with the topic of Time with a logical approach and discuss ideas that may or may not be provable or true, but are very interesting to think about.

The rest of the Timewalker series falls more in line with the typical science-fiction genre.

Time and Technicalities explores the theory of Time, while also adding information about the crafted storybook universe the characters will explore. The goal of this first book is to explain the theory, while still providing the dear reader with an engaging story.

A companion 'textbook' for Time and Technicalities, available at rphallway.com, presents the theory in a more formal way, providing another way for readers to digest the ideas directly, making the story less cumbersome when trying to explain the theory.

I initially presented a lot more scientific exposition to the theory, but my wonderful editor suggested cutting much for the sake of readability. The surviving pieces still require effort to fully comprehend, even (or especially?) in story format, and I hope leads to an enjoyable reading experience for everyone.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1	1
Chapter 2	11
Chapter 3	25
Chapter 4	37
Chapter 5	47
Chapter 6	53
Chapter 7	67
Chapter 8	83
Chapter 9	95
Chapter 10	109
Chapter 11	121
Chapter 12	131
Chapter 13	147
Chapter 14	155
Chapter 15	165
Chapter 16	177
Chapter 17	191
Chapter 18	199
Chapter 19	205
Chapter 20	219
Chapter 21	235
Chapter 22	243
Chapter 23	257
Chapter 24	265
Chapter 1: Observation	285
Chapter 2: What is 'time'	293
Chapter 3: Contradictions	305
Chapter 4: Time travel	323

Acknowledgement

Time and Technicalities has been several years in the making. The flash of an idea for the theory of Time came in early 2011, and finally became coherent enough to start writing about several years later.

Along the way, several people have proved instrumental in putting the words on the page.

These are in no particular order:

My parents, whose love and affection allowed me to explore so many ideas.

D - a wonderful mentor and professional questioner, who kept me thinking over and over about so many parts of the book.

S - I couldn't imagine a better person and motivator, always willing to hear my crazy ideas and provide insightful thoughts.

P - I didn't think editing could be fun, but as my first book took shape, I learned so much from the experience.

A - The talks about the universe and our existence, along with the inspiration for the cover, were always enjoyable.

And to you, dear reader, for taking the time to read my book and provide comments and feedback to improve it.

Thanks to all.

To the Giants that have gone before, and the educators that
desire to inspire students of all ages.

May we never give up the quest for truth and never silence
voices.

It doesn't matter who you are - everybody can learn something
from everyone else.

“Recognizing that you know what you know, and recognizing
that you do not know what you do not know, this is knowledge.”

Confucius Analects 2:17

Time
and
Technicalities

Send any comments and discussion to:

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Chapter 1

The image stuck sharply in his mind, as if drawn in marker on the inside of his eyelids. Silas Coleson awoke with a start, but didn't open his eyes.

The sounds of the city just waking up started to invade his small room in the apartment. He plugged his ears with his fingers and focused all of his energy on remembering. All too often his dreams faded into nothing. This dream he wanted to remember.

Keeping his eyes closed, Silas reached for his dream notebook and started writing down key moments from before he fully awoke. He added notes about how parts became almost tangible during sleep—another 'feel-dream' he wrote. But the tangible moments took a back seat to what he really wanted to capture. The face. Her face.

Quickly scribbling the key details he remembered with his eyes still closed, Silas wanted to keep her face in focus as best as he could. He dreaded thinking that her face would slip away. There was something about it. It represented more about the dream. He was sure of it.

Silas knew his writing would be hard to read later. He silently cursed himself for not getting that small tablet computer he wanted. Finances didn't

seem to justify the expense, but he'd much rather be typing the words, instead of feeling his way around blindly, with pen and paper.

Resigned to the inevitable loss, he allowed himself to move toward wakefulness, but still kept his eyes closed. The city sounds—the few cars passing by, the birds in the few trees lining the streets, a dog barking—grew louder, and his dream state started to fall away.

He recounted the dream one more time, trying to keep it fresh, then he opened his eyes. Reading his blind scribblings, he tied them back to the memories of the dream and wrote a better description in the notebook.

The lifting of an object. An ancient artifact? Then another distinct object. He kept trying to imagine the two objects together, but they didn't fit. He could feel the abrasive texture of the corroded metal as he held one of the objects. He ran his fingers over the grooves in the metal face. It looked like some kind of reptile, a crocodile perhaps? Silas turned the cylinder over several times, imagining how each of the three pieces fit, but he wasn't having much luck. He felt a tug on his chest as the girl grabbed his shirt to get his attention.

The girl. Not overly glamorous in "plastic beauty," as Hollywood would adore, but having a refined elegance and definitely very attractive. Brown hair, just below the shoulders, cute nose, hazel eyes. A mouth trying to express something. Danger? He looked toward the girl, then back to the corroded artifact for a frantic second. Artifact or girl? He had to choose.

He turned and grabbed the girl's hand, and they both stepped away from the artifact. The dream ended. Silas woke up feeling his heart beat fast, and an impossibly real hand grasping his.

He and the girl had seemed to know each other. But how did he know her? What was their connection? It felt much more real than just a dream. He needed to know more. Where were they? What was the artifact? What did it do? Why the etching? And what was the danger?

Silas finally rolled out of bed a few minutes later and headed to the shower. He heard the buzz of his roommate's alarm, knowing he had several minutes before Eric woke up, courtesy of the phone's snooze feature. The shower was hot and powerful, and he reveled in the water pressure. He managed to convince his boss that the old higher pressure nozzle would be better off in his hands than in the recycle bin. The small acquisition allowed Silas to enjoy hot 'soul cleansing' showers.

After toweling off, Silas pulled on his clothes. Denim jeans and a thick shirt helped to protect from the exposed dangers on the construction site. After strapping his watch on, he checked the time with his phone. Wearing a watch proved to be quicker than reaching for his phone over and over. Grabbing his tool belt and phone, he headed to the kitchen and stuck a couple of granola bars into an empty pouch on his tool belt. He filled his travel mug with two cups of coffee.

“Three cups left!” he called out to Eric as he left for the morning.

Silas placed his tool belt into the back seat of his car, a 1999 Toyota Camry. Purchased from a mechanic and with Eric’s help, the car behaved almost as new. He started the engine then reached for the radio out of muscle memory. But he stopped himself, wanting to keep the dream fresh the entire drive to work.

“Hi boss,” Silas greeted Myron, smiling as he wrapped his tool belt around his waist.

“Morning Silas,” Myron replied. He looked up briefly but didn’t return the smile. That could only mean the day was already busy.

Silas cinched the tool belt a little tighter and did a survey of the planning desk and the building under construction. He’d taken on the role of assistant to the manager, which meant he controlled a team of four to six workers at different times.

“Gonna need you up high today,” Myron said, first pointing to the roof and framed-in upper spaces on the plans, and then turning to the work in progress on the roof. “Gotta run pipes and venting. You good with that?”

Silas did a survey of the skeleton roof and the people around him. He calculated that with the lower skilled people working around him, and attention required to stay safe up in the space, he would have to focus all of his attention on the work.

“Uh, boss . . .” Silas trailed off. “I don’t know if that works for me.”

Myron stopped in his tracks, having never heard Silas turn down an assignment.

“What’s up?” Myron asked, growing more concerned.

Silas blushed slightly, seeing the disappointment registering in Myron’s eyes. “It’s kinda hard to say.”

Myron paused, waiting for him to speak.

Silas, still checking for anger in Myron's face, started slowly. "It's weird, but I had this dream . . ."

Myron chuckled a bit when hearing the word "dream," his weathered face cracking into an uneven smile.

The small chuckle from Myron set Silas at ease a bit more. "I had this dream," Silas started again, "I don't know how to describe it, other than to say it actually 'felt' real. It seems like it is a sign."

"A sign?" Myron asked, his face turning sour. "What? Are you a psychic now?"

"I don't know," Silas answered with a small laugh. Hearing himself say it, he realized how ridiculous it sounded. "I'm not saying I'm psychic. But I saw a face in the dream."

"A face?" Myron asked, still staring down Silas, like he was trying to digest whatever was going on in Silas' mind.

"Yeah . . . A girl," he said.

"Ah," Myron replied with a laugh. "Yeah, those girl dreams get to you."

But this wasn't just about the fact that it was a girl. "The face was only part of it," he said. "The rest of the dream seemed so real too. Like I even felt parts of it, and that's what made it stand out. It was so real."

"And what does that have to do with you working high up today?"

Silas knew his boss was reaching maximum impatience.

"Well, I feel like . . . like I'm going to be too distracted," Silas said. "And that could be dangerous."

He knew all he had to do was mention possible danger and Myron would take note. He should have started off with that.

Myron glanced up at the high space. "The last thing we need is an accident on our record," he said. Then he walked back to the planning desk. "You know what? Take the day off. Call it an unscheduled vacation day. Get your head in order. But you better be here tomorrow."

That was way more than Silas could have hoped for. Somehow things seemed to be working out okay—so far.

"I'll be here for sure!" Just the relief of not having to focus on work was already helping the dream filter back into his mind.

"Hey, you know what?" Myron seemed to stare off into space for a few seconds, and then settle on a thought. "Remember that studio project we finished up about 3 months ago? The artist?"

Silas remembered it well. “Yep. I remember.”

“You should head there and ask for a sketch. I remember seeing a lot of faces and portraits and that kind of stuff. Might be a worthwhile effort to put your face to paper.”

A sketch! Great idea. “You’re a genius, Myron!” Silas said.

“Yeah, I know,” Myron said. “Just be here tomorrow on time.”

The morning drive passed easily, with the rush hour traffic thinning before Silas. The timing of the drive from the construction site to downtown coincided with the beginning of the work day, and cars melted away into parking lots as he exited the suburb and turned onto downtown Main Avenue.

Fifteen minutes later, Silas arrived in the parking lot of the art studio. He quickly noticed the outer advertisements and new interior displays, put up after the crew finished the remodel. It was modern and flashy, so unlike him.

“What am I doing here?” He gripped the steering wheel. “Am I really trying to get a picture done of some girl in my dream?” He hoped they wouldn’t laugh him out of the place.

He exited the car and walked toward the door of the studio. Approaching the main doors, Silas noticed the “OPEN” sign in the window. At least he wasn’t too early. The studio door opened smoothly, and Silas heard a small chime ring out toward the rear of the studio. He stepped through the door and walked toward the closest display, pretending to be interested.

“I’ll be right out!” a voice called from what he knew was the back room. He continued scanning several of the displays and started to feel butterflies growing restless in his gut. He knew nothing about art. What should he ask for to get a painting of a picture that only existed in his head? How does that even work?

A familiar face greeted Silas as the door to the back room opened. A young woman walked out, drying her hands on a rag. “Hi there. Anything I can help you with this morning?”

“Hello.” He returned the smile. “You might not remember me, but I helped remodel the studio here.”

“Oh, yeah. You do look familiar. I’m Jenny. My mom owns the studio,” Jenny said, extending her hand politely.

“Hi. I’m Silas.” He gently shook her extended hand. “And I’m not sure how to ask this question.” Silas let out a nervous laugh.

Jenny shot Silas a sly look with a one-sided smile, “Well, I’m always up for a challenge.” She placed her elbows on the glass counter with her hands together, fingers steepled and wiggling just under her nose, her chin resting on her thumbs. “What do you need?”

He cleared his throat. “I’d like a picture drawn of somebody,” Silas finally said, after rehearsing different opening statements for a few seconds.

“Oh, that doesn’t seem too hard to ask,” she said, turning to a pick up a lined order pad. “Who is the picture of?”

Silas laughed, feeling his face warm, and starting to rock slowly on his feet. “That’s the trouble. I don’t know who it is or even if she exists.”

Jenny cocked her head and squinted at him. “You want to run that by me again?”

Silas hesitated for a second, finally deciding that recounting the dream seemed the best action.

“I had a dream this morning,” he said, shuffling back and forth faster. “And it felt so real. I saw this girl in it, and I’m wondering if she exists.”

Jenny’s shoulders relaxed and her eyes brightened, followed by a quick nod. She put down the order pad. “Oh, I get it. What you want is a character sketch.”

Was that what it was called?

“Follow me.” She walked from behind the counter toward the back of the studio. Silas followed a few steps behind. She stopped at a desk near the back corner of the studio. The computer workstation hummed with the screen darkened.

“This is an art workstation. We’ve been evaluating some ‘sketch artist’ software. You know, like the police use for making a sketch. I don’t think anyone has used it much,” She woke up the computer screen and searched through the desktop icons for her intended target. “Here it is.” She double clicked an icon.

The application splash screen appeared. “It takes a while to load,” she said, as the progress bar filled from 10% to 70%.

“You think this will work?” he asked, hoping for something easy.

“I hope so,” she said. “I’m not very good at paper sketches just from descriptions. I usually work from pictures and personal sittings and such.”

The application finished loading and presented a dizzying array of options and icons.

“Yikes.” He had no clue what to do.

Jenny chuckled at his reaction, “Don’t worry, I’ll get you started.” She sat down and took the mouse, clicking several times. “Here you go. I got you set up to start with a template face.”

“Template face?”

“Exactly. A face of someone that looks kinda close to who you want. I do it with pictures a bit, and it helps to get started. Did the dream look like anyone?”

“Hmmm . . .” Who did the face most look like? “I don’t know for sure, but I remember a long time ago seeing this show, *The Flying Nun* or something like that, and that sorta seems close, but not exact.”

She stifled a small laugh. “Flying Nun. Interesting.” She opened an internet browser page on the second monitor and did a quick search. “Oh, Sally Fields,” she said, recognizing the face after seeing a few pictures. “Ok, here is a page of pictures, pick one that you think is close.”

He skimmed the page, looking for different angles and expressions, and finally settled on one of just Sally Fields, without the nun accoutrements. “This one seems good to start with.”

Jenny enlarged the picture on the second monitor. “Nice. What is similar?”

“Hmm . . . The shape of the face seems pretty close, and the shape of the nose, too.” Silas pointed to those features on the pulled up image.

“Good.” She started to import and draw those shapes onto the blank digital canvas. In a few minutes she had a rough sketch that Silas approved of.

She stood up and motioned for Silas to take chair, “Here you go. Over here you have the options for different features. If you click on one, several adjustment sliders appear that let you change the characteristics. Drag and adjust until it shows kinda what you are looking for. You’ll probably have to repeat the process several times as changing one feature can tend to cause the others to look different.”

He sat down at the computer and grabbed the mouse. Performing the stated tasks seemed straight-forward, but he wasn’t sure how well the memory of his dream would survive having to think about so many actions for so long. “Thanks for the help,” he called out as Jenny walked away.

He paused and tried to focus on the memory. Past dreams always faded quickly unless directly thinking about them, and his shoulders tightened

thinking about losing the face. Looking at other faces accelerated the threat and reduced Silas' confidence in what the face actually looked like. He straightened up and started by dragging eyes to the face. Setting the eyes to where they seemed most accurate, he then adjusted the eye size and spacing and shape with the many adjustments available.

Never was Silas more unsure of what he wanted than while trying to digitize a face that only existed in the memory of his dream. Every tweak seemed to create the conflict: is this what I remember? Or is it something that looks best to me right now?

Feature after added feature presented him with an ever growing uncertainty, but he kept working to put to paper—or screen in this case—his dream face. Nose shape, bridge shape, eyebrows, eyes, ears, cheeks, jaw, mouth, and finally hair, went onto the computerized sketchpad. Finally, after over two hours of learning-by-doing and adjusting and readjusting, Silas felt the image captured some semblance of the girl in his dream.

Jenny noticed him stretch and stand up and walked over to the computer. “How’s it going?” she asked, examining the sketch.

“I think I pretty much got close,” he said with a small chuckle, feeling his face warm as his work faced scrutiny from the young woman.

Jenny leaned forward and examined the sketch closely. “Any touchups needed?” she asked, reaching for the mouse.

“I don’t know. There were a few odd things I couldn’t figure out,” he said, standing to get out of her way.

She sat down in the chair and for the next ten minutes worked out some of the more delicate changes needed to get just a bit closer to the actual image from Silas’ dream.

“I think that is as close as I can remember.” Silas took a step back to get a better view, and gave a satisfied nod.

“She looks cute,” Jenny said, clicking the Save button. “This is from a dream?”

“It felt like more than a dream, but yes, I was sleeping,” he said. “It seems like there must be a reason for me to feel and remember this dream so vividly, I think.”

She rolled the chair back and pulled out the USB stick from the computer. “I get inspiration from dreams all the time. I don’t think it’s odd to have dreams like that.” She patted Silas’ arm.

“The weirdest part is that it feels like this girl is out there. Just . . .” He trailed off. That was the weird part. He was sure it all meant something. He just wasn’t sure what.

Chapter 2

The studio door swung shut smoothly behind Silas and he stopped a few steps down the sidewalk. He stared into the distance for a few moments, composing his thoughts for his next step, failing to grasp any resolution.

His watch showed just after noon, so he walked to his car with thoughts about lunch as he opened the door. Looking around to collect his bearings, he decided the small deli he knew well would provide multiple solutions.

Silas' good friend, Noel, worked there. Noel loved meeting new people and remembered faces well. He hoped that Noel might recognize the sketch of her.

"It's as good as any place to start." He thought to himself as he merged the car into the thick lunchtime traffic. Even though the dream image was clear in his mind, each look at the drawing still evoked a loss of confidence in his objectivity. Did the final picture really capture the dream image, or just how he wanted her to look?

He concentrated on the dream, mindlessly flowing with the traffic, arriving at the deli after the lunch hour. Turning his thoughts to food, he suddenly realized that he had been listening and singing along with the radio,

but couldn't remember the last songs, or any of the drive time. "Different parts of the brain." He laughed as he exited the car and walked toward the deli.

He opened the glass door to let a couple of college age men step out, then entered the deli. The deli sat a maximum of sixteen people in the four booths, and one table for a group of six more customers. It had built a huge business around takeout, frequented mainly by working professionals and college students due to the convenient location and quick service. During the busy times, the line would almost extend out the door.

Silas looked around, seeing only four people in the booths and one person in line at the counter. He joined the queue and scanned the menu. Already knowing his order, he didn't really need to read the menu board. Of course there might be new sandwich combos or current deals he kept watch for.

Noel looked up quickly as he dropped a tray of pickles into the 'pickles' slot in the sandwich lineup, and noticed Silas. The pair exchanged a quick wave and then Noel went off to get more fixins for restocking.

Silas ordered his sandwich, a hot turkey with all the fixins. While the sandwich was built, Noel waited for him at the register to collect the payment.

"How goes it?" Noel punched in the order.

"Going okay," he replied, pulling out a ten dollar bill from his wallet. "I have a question later, if you get a few minutes to stop by."

"Sure thing. Shouldn't be too long, gonna be slow for at least a little while," Noel answered, collecting the cash and giving the change back to Silas.

"Great." Silas grabbed the sandwich and the change. He dropped an extra penny in the "penny pot" and walked toward the booth furthest from the counter to eat his lunch, sitting by the outer window.

He spread out the paper sandwich wrapper and made a catchall for the well topped sandwich. He slowly ate the creation, watching Noel and the other counter worker clean and organize after the lunch crowd. Noel worked fast and thoroughly, cleaning all of the trays and counter spaces to make everything ready for the next customer and dinner rush.

Noel looked toward Silas and gave a quick wave as he threw a towel over his shoulder and headed to the back to clean the metal pans and wash up. A couple minutes later he walked around the counter and jumped into the booth next to Silas.

“What’s up, Silas?”

Silas wiped his hands on a napkin and slid the last half of the sandwich to his right. “Ever had a really vivid dream?”

“Sure,” Noel said. After a quick pause he continued. “I think everyone has.”

“I think so too, but the dream I had this morning felt way more real than anything I’ve ever had before. I actually think I ‘felt’ the dream happening.”

“And?”

“And the weird thing was that the dream had this girl in it.”

Noel looked at his friend for a few seconds, with a very sly grin on his face.

“Ha Ha,” Silas said, tilting his head left and right, guessing Noel’s thoughts. “Not that kind of dream. We were looking for something. And I can still see her face. It was weird that her face was so clear.”

“And you think it means something?”

“It has to.”

“You have been searching for your dream girl for years, bud,” Noel said. “You could be reading too much into an actual dream with this girl. Our subconscious desires can be quite strong.”

Silas nodded to Noel. “Maybe.”

“A lot of people think dreams have meaning, but they usually reduce to something you have been thinking about at some point. Any single dream probably doesn’t really have any metaphysical meaning, if that is what you are asking. And since you’ve spent years thinking about this dream girl, that seems a likely source for a dream.”

“I don’t know. This didn’t fit a normal dream. It almost feels like I need to find her,” Silas said. “It sounds so weird, but man, it feels so real. So clear.”

“I see.”

“It gets weirder, too,” Silas said. “I actually took the day off and went to an art studio, and got a drawing of her.” He patted his shirt pocket with the printout.

“A drawing? From an artist?” Noel asked, staring at Silas with a half smile.

“Kinda. They had a computer program that did the police sketch type things. And I put most of it together from there.”

Noel laughed at Silas, leaning back in the booth. “That’s dedication.”

“Yeah.” Silas wiped his hands thoroughly with the napkins on the table, not too embarrassed to admit it to his friend. Reaching into his pocket and pulling out the printout of the drawing he unfolded it and handed it to Noel. “Take a look.”

Noel looked at it for a few seconds, taking in the image “She’s cute.”

“I guess, but I’m more interested in the reason for the dream. Do you recognize her?” Maybe impossibly, his search would be completed quickly.

Noel took a longer look, as if he were considering options. “Nope, can’t say I do, dude. Haven’t seen a girl that looks like that.”

And with that, Silas’ hopes were crushed.

“Darn,” he sighed. “I knew you were a long shot. But if anyone could remember a face, it would be you.”

“You should internet her,” Noel said, handing back the printout.

“Internet her?” He put the picture back into his pocket and grabbed the second half of the sandwich. He took a large bite, waiting for Noel to explain.

“You could scan and upload the picture, and then do an image lookup and see if she is out there. They do that on those investigation shows all the time.”

“Hmm . . .” Silas mumbled with a full mouth. “You think that would work?”

“It’s not at all foolproof. The search typically looks for an exact copy, not facial recognition. If you created that picture, chances are you won’t get an easy match. But you might get something.”

“Guess that makes sense. Would facial recognition work?” That sounded hopeful.

Noel chuckled and shook his head. “Not a chance. I don’t think most facial recognition sites are reachable by the general internet. But you could try social media. Ask users. People love a challenge.”

Silas pondered Noel’s suggestion. “That might be a good idea. See if there is anybody out there that recognizes the face.”

“Yeah, crowd source the facial recognition part.”

Silas finished the sandwich as he and Noel switched to talking about the old times and future plans.

The door opened and the bell sounded as a group of four college age students walked in. Noel shimmied out of the booth. “Time to get to work.”

“Thanks again for the help,” Silas said, crumpling up the used paper sandwich sheet and napkins, and wiping his hands. “Always such good eating when coming here.”

“Hope you find your dream girl.”

Silas left the deli and walked back toward his car. A feeling of unease still lingered as he pondered how to complete the search. He wondered if his quest to find a dream girl, not in his usual romantic way, but rather the literal sense, were even possible. He started the car and turned up the radio, hoping the music would keep him from dwelling too long on the question.

Silas returned to the apartment and grabbed his laptop before sitting on the couch. Opening the laptop, he pressed the wakeup button and waited.

The familiar wakeup sound of his Linux distribution, with the KDE desktop sounded, and the logo flashed on the screen. The familiarity felt soothing for a second.

He then started the browser and navigated to a popular social networking site he visited often, and clicked on the “Add new post” link. Then he plugged in the thumb drive.

“Hmmm, what to say . . .” Silas said, talking to himself aloud. He tapped his fingers on the laptop hand rest, trying to create a good introduction.

“Hello, dear readers..”

“This will be a strange request, but I feel I have to tell this story. I woke up today from a very vivid dream, and an image was seared into my mind. An image that I couldn’t shake, and that didn’t want to fade like all my other dreams eventually do. This image seemed to call to me.

“It was the image of a girl—yeah, I know, this isn’t that kind of dream tho. So I did something I wasn’t sure I could even do. It was such a vivid and real dream that I had to take action. I took the day off work and created the most accurate drawing of her face that I could manage.

“I am here now to try to see if this girl is even real, and if there is some cosmic force at play trying to send me a message, or maybe it is just the last bits of sanity leaving me.

“Posted here is the drawing of the girl that was in my dreams. I would very much like to know, maybe just for sanity’s sake, if this person

is real. And if anyone knows this person, it would be great to know who it is, and any other details that might lead to eventually talking.

Thanks.”

He composed the post, reread it a couple times, and looked at all the spelling. The site was notorious for attacking spelling and grammatical errors. He waited a few moments then clicked the ‘Add Attachment’ button and navigated to the saved image. The status bar slowly indicated the upload progress, eventually reaching one hundred percent.

He hovered the mouse over the “Post” icon, starting to feel his palms sweating. All he had to do was click the button.

“Now or never!” He summoned the courage and clicked the mouse.

The web browser loaded for a second and the “Post accepted” page appeared for the four second countdown, and then refreshed to the home page.

“Guess that settles it,” he said, knowing that the most ardent users of the site would see his post in seconds. “The internet is permanent, and never forgets, and is absolutely unforgiving.”

Silas knew that if someone found any errors, that user would probably screenshot it and post it in a mocking manner. If, for any other reason, they found the post had something to exploit—good or bad—he would know soon enough.

Knowing there was nothing else to do but wait, he slowly walked to the refrigerator for a glass of cold tea. He settled back on the couch and pulled up some videos to distract him for a little while, until the post gained a little bit of traction and any feedback.

He spent the next hour watching random videos, then finally checked to see if anyone had commented on his post. He was greeted with a big red “M” icon at the upper corner, indicating that he had received responses to his post. At the top left of the “M” was a number, indicating how many responses had been posted. A chill ran down his spine as the number of responses registered in his brain. In just an hour—three hundred and twenty-eight!

Now in a total panic, he paused as he tried to compose himself, wondering how to proceed. “Do I go to the post? Or start on the messages?”

He clicked on his original post. The online community decided this post deserved much attention, receiving over 1200 downvotes in that first hour,

along with 203 upvotes. Silas felt a panicked chill as he started reading the comments on his post.

“Are you serious? Asking people to Dox this girl for you?” occurred many times in the responses.

“Get a life. Why would she want to talk to you?” many other responses read.

“Are you a noob? Why?”

“You first! Post your info!” some demanded.

There were a few encouraging comments, which the community quickly attacked as well. *“I don’t think this request is too beyond the pale,”* one commenter wrote. *“The idea was to see if this person he dreamt about exists. Is it no longer allowed to ask a question?”*

“He SAYS it’s from a dream. How do we know that?” another commenter replied to the first. *“He could be a stalker. How do we know he didn’t see this girl walking down the street?”*

Silas went back and clicked on the big “M” icon, and waded through the responses, which were the same as the direct comments to his post. On the mail page, he also noticed a blue “P” lit up, with a nine in the upper corner, indicating he had nine personal messages. He clicked the “P” and loaded the personal messages.

“Not cool, man. I just wanted to say that I’ve been doxxed and it isn’t fun. I have had several stalkers, and used to be a fun person, now I just stay in my house, and have to check everywhere before I leave the house and when I come back. Internet fame isn’t worth it.”

“Kill yourself, LOSER! Don’t expect any of us to help you get a date.”

“This is a very interesting method. I am a psychology student, and I don’t know much about dreams yet, but it is hard to know what causes them, or what they mean. This could be just a strong response to something you did. Any drugs used that might induce this?”

The next message stood out a bit. *“How vivid was it? Was it a lucid dream? Or was it something you felt like an ‘experience’?”* And the message just left it at that.

Silas suddenly felt empty and drained from being shamed and attacked on the website. His enthusiasm for his quest quickly waned, and he sunk down

into the couch. Almost in real-time he could hear the sound of the keyboard tappings of his haters as the mailbox numbers kept clicking upward. The fog over his mind kept growing and he thought of deleting his account. He felt a chill run down his spine realizing that other factions of internet users—the black hat and dark web hackers—were trying to glean his information and dox him back.

Had he taken any precautions when he created the account? Where had he been? What Wi-Fi had he connected to? He looked at the email address he signed up with and wondered how easily tracked it was.

He clicked the account settings button and looked at the delete button. Waiting a few moments, he decided to first see what other posts captured his huge mistake. Clicking the home page link for the social platform, he noticed four other posts appear on the screen that mocked the picture and his username.

“I’ve become a meme.” He tried to control the negative emotions flooding through his normally happy self. “People hate me so much for this,” he declared aloud, almost disbelieving, but resigned to the fact.

Looking at the clock, he noticed it was just before four. The deli would be starting to get busy, but Silas wondered if he could call Noel for support. Torn about calling, but not wanting to suffer alone until after the dinner rush, he dialed Noel’s number.

“Hey bud,” Noel answered, speaking quickly.

“Hey.” He was pretty sure the tone of his voice conveyed everything.

“Dude, what’s up?”

He blew out a deep breath. “The internet is blowing up against me. I posted the drawing and asked for any information, and people are hating on me hard. Claiming I’m a stalker and want to dox this girl to get a date, or something worse.”

“Whoa. That’s shitty bud. I didn’t expect anything like that,” Noel said. The background noises disappeared, indicating Noel stopped working to focus on the conversation for a minute.

“Me either. I had no intentions of doxing anybody, but I guess that this could be a pretty clever way of getting to somebody. And now I don’t know if I should apologize or just delete the account.”

“Hmm . . . It’s getting busy here, can this wait?” Noel asked, now understanding the reason for the call, starting back to cleaning the metal pans and utensils, producing clanking in the background.

“If you have a quick solution, I’m all ears, but otherwise, I can probably wait. I am just in shock right now, so I don’t think I’ll be going anywhere.”

“Yeah, I don’t have anything, right now, but put on some good loud music and take a long shower, or even a bath, dude. Get away from the computer and don’t think about it, and try to relax. When the rush is over, and we can bang our heads together.”

Silas was silent and thought for a few seconds. “I guess that is a good idea—at least as good as mine. Thanks Noel.”

“Stay positive, dude. All things shall pass,” Noel said with a louder clanging starting. “Gotta go! We’ll talk later.” Then he hung up.

Silas shut the laptop and used the remote to turn the radio to an oldies station. He turned the volume up loud enough to drown his own thoughts but not loud enough to bother any neighbors. Then he turned on the shower and let it warm up.

Stepping into the shower, he let the hot water powerfully cascade over him. Silas stood under the shower, letting the massaging flow try to wash away the mortification he felt. After what seemed like twenty minutes, Silas stepped out, a little more relaxed but still feeling the weight of the negative energy from the whole situation.

Jumping straight into his comfortable apartment ensemble—flannel pants and a loose fitting hoodie—he went to his bedroom and sunk into the bed. He wasn’t sure the negative thoughts would let him nap, or at least let the music take over, but after a few minutes of lying there, he managed to fall into a light sleep.

During the sleep, he managed to process the intense shock of being hated by the internet, at least a little. Waking after an hour, his thoughts turned to how to manage instead of just being hated and deleting the account. Lying there until the sun set, he felt a little refreshed, and less shocked and stunned by the misinterpretation of his intentions, although the mortification hadn’t let up much.

The clock crept slowly up to the 8PM time when he knew Noel would finish working, and drive home. Silas wanted this to be over, or to at least

have an answer to calm his frazzled emotional shock. Calculating the time until Noel would call, he got up and opened the laptop.

Returning to the social media site, he logged in, and looked at the messages. Another two hundred seventy three messages greeted him, and he clicked on the “M” to start reading them.

This new set of messages were still of the same nature—condemning him for being a stalker, and trying to find this girl to harm her. Many responses of this second set were more angry and threatening, although it was against the rules of the site to directly threaten someone or even to say “kill yourself” on the posts. Those were all sent to his personal messages.

The personal messages were also ticking upwards, although at a much slower rate than the posted messages. He read the more direct threats and more positive messages that people were afraid to write to the actual post. A few also mentioned having vivid dreams, and how they admitted they would have liked to do something similar. This gave him a little boost from feeling totally mortified.

Another message stood out, being a completely different feel from the others. *“Did you talk to anybody in the dream? Did the conversation feel real and logical?”*

Silas disregarded the message, but noted the different tone. “All dreams have conversations that make sense,” he thought after reading it.

Silas was still scrolling through the social media site when Noel finally called back. He fumbled with the phone, trying to answer it immediately.

“How are you doing, bud?”

“A little better, but still feel like I’ve been crushed by the world,” Silas admitted, clicking through a few more messages.

“That’s shock for you. Fight or flight mode on the emotional level. Most people develop ways of dealing with these shocks on a subconscious level. Distractions, sleep, and tears seem pretty common on the flight side, and anger is probably the most common fight effect.”

Silas sighed audibly. “It’s the internet. I don’t think there is a way to fight it.”

“True. I took a look at the post and saw all the shit that they are saying about you. Don’t worry, none of that is you. They are just reacting to a post. This shall pass. I don’t really have any other advice except to just let time handle it.”

“Can you speed up time?” Silas asked, hoping for a more immediate solution.

Noel laughed. “The only thing I can think of is to edit the post and add an apology, and then lock the comments.”

“I guess that’s better than deleting it.” He clicked back to the post page.

“Oh, you wouldn’t be able to stop this. I’ve seen at least a dozen posts already, either reposted as is, mocked, or meme’d with funny comments.”

“That’s what I was afraid of. I didn’t have the nerve to check.”

“The only good news I have is that I went through most of the posts and some of the other hacker spots and while they may be trying to dox you, it doesn’t seem like they have you yet. Just be safe and stop posting things on all media until this dies down.”

“Oh, yeah, I think I’m actually done with social media for a while.” He resolved to not post anything for a long time. He found the post on the site and clicked the ‘edit’ button. “Editing it now.” He scrolled down to the bottom of the post, and added the new text:

“Edit:

It seems that I have crossed a line by posting a drawing of a girl. I am so sorry [you don’t really know how sorry I am for posting this] for trying this. I wasn’t thinking about what would happen if this was a real person. I don’t want to stalk anyone, and I don’t know this person, and if this is a person, I personally apologize for posting your picture anywhere, and having it blow up like this.

My intent was to see if this person existed, who I really did see in my dream.

I am locking this post, and I hope that anybody that feels this was a violation accepts my apology.”

He read it to Noel before hitting “post.”

“Sounds good. I would probably add ‘only in my dreams’ just to make sure that your point is solid that you have never met this person.”

“Good point.” He made the change. “I am so shocked that people are so violently angered by this post.”

“Well, nobody knows who you are, and most of the comments do seem to have that little qualifier ‘if this is a stalker’ to make their anger and violence

acceptable to them. The internet isn't as fun as it used to be, and there is definitely reason to be suspicious."

"Yeah, but it is such a mob. Pitchforks even."

"Exactly. They are both protective and assholes at the same time."

"Protective assholes, protecting a dream person," Silas said, managing to break into a small smile, knowing that he would feel the same way if the roles were reversed.

"Yeah. People are weird. Especially on the internet from their basements."

A few minutes after the phone call ended Eric returned to the apartment.

"Hey Si," Eric said, tossing a bagged sandwich to Silas, "I talked with Noel at the deli and he said you might having a rough night. I got a movie too."

Silas gently caught the sandwich and felt his spirits lift slightly. "That sounds perfect."

Eric slid a DVD into the machine and jumped onto the couch beside Silas. Pulling two trays from next to the couch, he slid one to Silas and used one for his own sandwich.

"I would have never guessed your literal dream girl would turn on you," Eric said, giving Silas a playful push. "Almost feels like payback for all the girls you reject for not meeting your standards."

"I don't think my standards are too high, it's just that I can't seem to find anyone that fits them."

Eric laughed as he spread the sandwich paper across the tray. "Potato, tomato."

"Maybe," Silas said, managing a small smile. "I can't help if this feels different. I thought it was worth a try."

"Have you thought about what you will do if you find her?" Eric asked as the movie started.

Hearing the question aloud for the first time shocked Silas again. "Only a little."

"Your own 'happily ever after' fairytale, I guess."

"Something like that," Silas said, shifting his focus to the movie and sandwich.

Silas woke up feeling drained. He checked the time, and did some mental calculations. While there was enough time to make it to work, he wondered

how effective he could be in his current state. A quick analysis told him not very. He called his boss.

“Hi Myron, I can’t come in to work today,” he said. “I don’t feel good. I don’t think I can manage a crew today.”

“Another day? Yesterday you looked fine! I gave you the day off to get your shit organized.” Myron was just barely not shouting. “I need you here to get things running.”

“I know, and I appreciate getting yesterday off, but today is different. I think I might have caught something.”

“I can’t have too many of these unscheduled days off, Silas. I need you to work. But fine. Take another day. I don’t want to get another call tomorrow though.”

Silas ended the call and pulled the covers over his head, hiding from the world. After another hour, Silas managed to pull himself out of bed and head to the shower.

Standing in the third long hot shower in two days under the powerful jets, his body definitely felt a lot more relaxed, although his mind still felt tied in the knots of dozens of emotions.

He sat on the couch slowly drinking the coffee Eric left for him until he summoned up the courage to open his laptop. He logged in with his username, almost dreading the confrontation. Since his post was locked, there shouldn’t be any more negative comments showing up but that didn’t apply to any others. Thankfully those comments didn’t appear in his mailbox.

“I guess they just moved to the personal messaging side,” he said with a sinking feeling, seeing fifty-seven new messages.

He reluctantly clicked the “P” mail icon and loaded the messages. As expected, most of the messages were negative and attacking, accusatory and angry at him for trying to dox an innocent girl. Even the apology and explanation that it was only his dream didn’t assuage the mob’s angry demeanor.

A couple messages from people who did believe him seemed to help ease his anxiety. Two actually apologized for their earlier angry and threatening posts and personal messages, which lifted some of the weight of guilt Silas felt.

One message, which he recognized as from Noel’s username, just said “*This too shall pass*” and Silas let out a much needed little laugh.

He gave each message a quick glance while eagerly hitting the delete button, just to make sure he wasn't missing any information, but didn't really feel like being weighed down with all the anger of the negative posts.

Clicking to the next message, he paused for a second. He scanned the top line of the message, and then he moved the mouse down and read the message completely. The message was short, reading only:

"Seems like you hit a nerve on the internet.

Don't take it personally.

Did you recognize any of the voices?"

"What? How would I know?" he asked himself aloud. "And who thinks they know that there were even voices in my dream?" He felt a little anger bubbling up. "Who is this person that thinks they know my dream?" He looked at the username trying to figure out who it might be but it didn't ring a bell.

"Oh well, away with you!" he said with a mouse click, deleting the message. The other messages were deleted rapidly with no quality content in any of them either.

Silas decided not to look at any other posts.

Chapter 3

“Glad you are with us again,” Myron shouted to Silas as they approached the planning table to start the early morning construction.

“Yeah, I managed to shake whatever I had. I should be good to go for the day.”

“That’s good because I need you on the roofing construction and beaming,” Myron said, slapping him on the back. “Gonna be a great day to get some real progress done.”

“I hope so.” Silas checked his belt and walking over to the waiting crew to start assigning tasks for the day.

So began his recovery into a mostly normal life of working and relaxing, with the occasional—but not too often—foray into social media. The next two days passed uneventfully, but that all changed when he got home from work and his phone rang.

“You should watch channel 42 news for yesterday,” Noel said without so much as a hello.

“Why?” Silas moved to the couch and grabbed the remote from the coffee table.

“There is a small blurb about your post,” Noel said. Silas could hear a hint of laughter in his voice. “I thought you should know.”

“Ugh. I don’t want to think about that anymore,” Silas said, plopping loudly onto the couch. Two days with no mention of the post had been bliss.

“Don’t worry bud, it isn’t a hit piece. It’s more of an exposition. They called it dream drawing.” Then Noel hung up.

There was no putting it off. Opening his laptop, he typed in a web search of the local channel 42 news and dream drawing. The laptop screen filled almost completely with hits.

He felt the blood drain out of his face. The links were all newscasts about his post—and not just local news channels. Silas clicked on a highly viewed video, and waited briefly for it to load.

“In light-hearted news today, a post went viral two days ago, drawing both anger and condemnation from the online community. One user, PS513, posted a drawing of a girl he seemed to have seen in his dreams. The immediate reaction focused on stalking and doxing. Doxing being the action of exposing someone’s real life identity and location and other personal information while tying it to an online identity. The act of doxing allows unstable people to target online individuals for physical violence or other acts, and should be avoided as much as possible. The poster apologized profusely for trying to start anything, claiming that the drawing did in fact only come from the dream. Some users accepted the apology, but others still decried the practice, saying it could be used for copycats or by actual stalkers to learn real identities.

On the other hand, one psychologist says that, with some caveats, most people actually have this desire, although most people aren’t able to remember dreams vividly enough to create a sketch of anybody from their dreams. Dreams are one of the realms that are vastly unexplored in the human psyche, and people have been trying for generations to make sense of the dream world, and attempting to find connections between dreams and reality.

Here’s hoping for the best with this poster and wishing everything works out. It would be an amazing story if that actually happened.”

The news segment ended with a faint image of the post and the drawing showing behind the psychologist. This was even worse than before. Now anyone who watched the news knew about his post. He had to just hope this would pass.

His heart sunk as all the mortification and exposure of being dumb for posting it in the first place came rushing back.

“Dude, this sucks,” he told Noel, after calling him back. “I don’t want to be on the news like that.”

“It’s not that bad really, more of a cautionary tale. But also something that most people want to do,” Noel said, echoing the key points of the broadcast.

“Still. This is such a shitty place. I feel like a worm. Now the news has it all over—not just channel 42. I saw links to TV stations all over the country.”

“Yeah, the news is more consolidated than people think. Local news isn’t really local,” Noel said, trying to steer the conversation away from the personal side of the broadcast. “Every station is owned by a big media conglomerate and each one gets the same script of stories to cover each day.”

“I know. You’ve taught me that before. Still makes me angry that I am now national news.”

“This will blow over, and besides, nobody knows it is you. Only you know that.”

“Are you sure? Have you checked?”

“I have done a few cursory checks each day for you. And I haven’t found your name associated with anything out of the ordinary so far. I think your identity is still pretty safe. I wouldn’t get too scared just yet.”

“Thanks,” Silas said, trusting his good friend’s skills and information. “I would hate to have this allow hackers to attack me.”

“I think the apology edit made a big difference,” Noel said. “You did seem sincere, and that sometimes makes people rethink their immediate reactions.”

“True, but this whole situation makes me feel so bad—lots of anger and just embarrassed by everything associated with this stupid post,” Silas said, his feelings sliding from shame to anger.

“And this too shall pass. This is just a blip for you, my friend,” Noel said, his positive confidence evident in his voice. “In a few years it will be all over, and probably a funny memory.”

“I know you are right, but I don’t want to think of it taking years to get back to normal. I am living in the now, which sucks, and I don’t fully realize what will happen to get me to there,” Silas said.

“Yeah, just gotta put on a brave face and try to be yourself until this all dies down. Probably won’t take long for this whole affair to fall off the news cycle,” Noel said. “You can tough it out for a few days.”

“I guess,” Silas said, not sharing Noel’s confidence, “it is just so demoralizing to have something that I thought would be very simple. I expected this would probably just entail waiting for a few weeks for a reply, then forgetting I even posted it. And now it is blowing up everywhere and I feel I’m being attacked for it.”

“I’d say you are legitimately allowed to be angry at the attacks. They don’t know you and what you are trying to do is innocent, but they come at you violently and savagely. And trying to throw this all back on you by possibly doxing you too. That’s the worst part,” Noel said. “That’s why I have been trying to keep an eye out for any hacks.”

“It is,” Silas replied, softly, “All these attacks just dehumanizes and crushes your soul. It’s hard for words to describe how much of an effort it takes to ignore it.”

“I think we’ve all been there in some capacity,” Noel said, “but most of our mistakes are done offline, so the internet doesn’t get to chime in. You bravely tried something new, and wound up on the wrong end of a bunch of bullies. You will get over this.”

“Thanks for the encouragement,” Silas nodded to himself, feeling a little better about the situation and trusting Noel’s opinion. “I guess I’ll pretend it never happened, and never admit that I am the poster from the news.”

“Good!” Noel said. “That is the first step to putting this all behind you. Have a good night.”

Silas leaned back into the couch, almost in a daze at the surprise of seeing the post go viral, both on the internet and over nationwide news.

Three days after watching the news segment, Silas finally started to feel a little bit of his former self creep back. Work also kept Silas distracted, and he managed to hide much of the internal struggle with the post from the rest of the crew. Silas found solace in the loud din and constant activity of the worksite.

It was only on the third day after seeing the news broadcast that Silas worked up the courage to log back onto the social media site. Seven new personal messages waited for him.

“Not too bad,” he thought, though zero new messages would have been better.

The first personal messages were carryovers from the time around the posting, and a couple were from the news segment, but the last two were different.

Silas sat back on the couch, stunned, as he read the first line.

“I’M THE GIRL.”

Silas’ hands shook as he clicked on the subject line and opened the message.

‘Hi. I can imagine you have taken a lot of abuse for posting the picture, and I wasn’t sure what the deal was with the drawing. My friends told me about to the post and I wasn’t sure how to reply.

I do look like the girl in the drawing, except I have green-blue eyes instead of the brown in the drawing. I don’t know what we could have in common if you have never met me before.

My friends helped me set up an anonymous email on this site—anonuser777, so you can reply there and maybe we can chat.’

Silas’ heart pounded in his chest at the correction to the drawing. In the haste to get the drawing done, he hadn’t changed the eye color to the green from his dream and left it as brown. The poster described the correct eye color!

He took a few deep breaths to try to calm himself and then clicked the next button for the last personal message. The message contained a simple sentence.

The message simply read: *“Now that you two have met, you can talk about the dream.”*

What was that about? How could anybody know? Maybe it was an administrator? Spying on the post. Whatever the case, it should be impossible.

Silas wasted no time clicking back to the previous message and rereading it several times. Someone had actually answered—someone who looked like the girl! He spent the next several minutes trying to formulate a response.

Evie typed numbers as quickly as she could. She wanted to finish the data entry before the end of the day. The analysis would take a few hours to run, and she was hoping to get it all set up before leaving for the day.

“Racing the clock?” her friend, Red, asked, and walking up.

“Exactly,” Evie said, continuing with her routine, not looking up.

Evie knew Red from middle school, eighth grade to be exact. Red moved to California from Australia that year, and they became quick friends.

Evie finished one column of data and looked at Red. Ever since the first day she met Red Evie enjoyed the small game Red played in her choice of apparel. The very first day as a new student, Red, legal name Rebecca, wore a big red shirt, with a red scarf, and red shoes, all because of a joke her parents played during the move. They’d told Red that everyone in America wore red, white or blue every day.

Evie helped Red avoid the bullying from the seemingly innocent joke, and the pair quickly became inseparable friends.

“Nice earrings,” Evie said after looking up for the quick second or two. The bright dangling jewelry her piece of red attire for the day.

“Thanks.”

“Anything I can help you with?” Evie asked, starting back to her data entry. Evie worked in the supporting division for Red, Evie doing data analysis and Red doing research writing.

“I have a new movie that would be good to watch tonight.”

Evie crinkled her nose. “It better be a good one. There aren’t many good movies out nowadays.”

Red laughed at Evie’s reaction. “Don’t worry. This should meet your standards.”

A movie sounded perfect. “Give me twenty more minutes,” Evie said. “I have just one more page to enter, and then the proofing before letting the analysis run.”

“Sounds good. I’ll see you in the car. Try not to be too late again.”

Evie finished entering the data and performed a matching proof on it. It was good to go. Closing the data entry books, Evie clicked the analysis icon and started the processing. She waited for a few minutes to make sure the analysis script didn’t crash, as she collected her belongings. All seemed to be working. Evie locked the computer screen and put the data logs into her desk drawer. Then she checked the time. The data entry took way more than

twenty minutes! She grabbed her bag and light jacket and rushed out to meet Red.

“Sorry! I didn’t think it would take that long.”

“I was about to drive off.” Red scowled for a second, but then her face broke into a slight smile. “I’ve come to expect you to be running late.”

“Thanks.” Evie buckled into her seatbelt and adjusting the fit for the ride home. She was pretty sure that wasn’t a compliment.

“Home, Dad!” Evie called when they walked in the door. “And I brought Red. We’re gonna watch a movie.”

“Have fun,” her dad called from the den.

Red shouted with extra emphasis towards Evie’s dad in the other room. “Nice to see you Mr. Besser!”

“Hello Red,” he replied, a cordial laugh echoing from the den.

The duo made a quick dinner, and then popped some popcorn for snacking.

“This better be good,” Evie said, admonishing Red by mimicking the stern look from Red in the car. They both laughed as the production logos flashed on the screen.

“That was actually pretty good,” Evie said, watching the credits roll. “Thanks for picking it. I don’t have too many complaints about plot or execution.”

“You better thank me,” Red said, “picking a movie that you will like is soooo hard. And not ‘too many’ complaints?”

“I can’t help it if I rate the movies as a whole, rather than the scenes,” Evie said. “One scene they can fly, and the next scene they are afraid of falling—‘doubleU’ ‘tee’‘eff’,” she spelled out. “I demand consistency in the suspension of disbelief.”

“I’m aware,” Red said, adding her friendly laugh. “You like things that follow logically. And if there is any connection to reality, you need it to be plausible. The original mythbuster!”

Evie smiled and nodded in agreement with Red.

Before they could discuss the movie further, her dad called to them from the den. “Hey, Evie! Turn on the ‘Best’ news quick! You won’t believe it.”

The shout caught Evie by surprise. Her dad didn’t usually shout and didn’t ever call for her to watch anything in particular. They shared simple

texts and memes and stories during the day, but the urgency she heard seemed out of character.

Quickly finding the channel, Evie and Red watched as a news segment appeared on the screen.

“... poster seems to have remembered the dream quite vividly, which isn't rare, but over time dreams fade quite rapidly for most of us,” the psychologist said to the interviewer, while a split image of a social media post and an image of Evie filled the display behind him.

“Hoooooolllyyyy Shiiiiittttt!” Red said, watching the screen.

Evie sat with her mouth agape as the resemblance in the image made it seem like she was looking in a cartoon mirror.

“What the actual fuck?” Red shouted with a mix of shock and humor. She grabbed Evie's laptop from the side table and nearly threw it to her. “Get on that site now!”

Evie lifted the cover of the laptop and opened up a browser. Typing in the name of the popular social media site, she pulled up the front page.

“Do you remember the post name?”

“Something about a dream. Just do a search for dream.” Red crammed in next to Evie, intent on not missing a single pixel of information on the screen.

Evie followed Red's instruction and came up with a search page full of posts.

“Yikes!” Red said. “The poster seems to have stepped in the shit. All those posts—rebukes, and especially the memes.” Red laughed at the situation and glanced at Evie.

Evie didn't reply and scrolled through the list looking for the original. She found the original post near the top of the second page.

“He didn't delete his account,” Evie said, noting that the post still displayed the poster's username.

“Interesting,” Red said. “Either he's legit, or a full on stalker and doesn't care.”

Great. Knots formed in Evie's stomach. “I don't know which would be worse.” She clicked open the post and the duo started reading.

After two long minutes spent reading and rereading and trying to process the post, Red broke the silence. “It does seem pretty legit,” she said, leaning back slowly.

“It does seem that way,” Evie said, “but it's still scary.”

During the search for and reading of the post, Evie's dad emerged from the den to join them. He walked behind the couch and looked over Evie's shoulder.

"What do you think, Dad? He's asking if this is anybody. Should I ignore it?" Common sense told her she should ignore it, but her gut told her to reply.

"As a father, I would kill him if he ever showed up at the door," he said, without the slightest hint of humor.

"I'm well aware of that." Evie sighed impatiently to the non-answer, while Red snickered on the couch. "But what do I do?"

"I appreciate that you still respect my input," her dad said. "You are a twenty six year old young woman, and can make your own choices. But if you really want my opinion, I would tell you to ignore it."

She knew her dad was right. "Yeah, I should ignore it."

"Really!?" Red said. "What about *your* dream?"

Evie's face warmed. She remembered telling Red of her vivid dream the night after dreaming it, also having just recalled it at least six times in the short span since the newscaster mentioned the word 'dream.'

"You think this is my dream, too?" Evie asked Red, finding herself unsure of the next course of action.

"Who knows? You said that it was more conversation than visuals, but that the words were very lucid."

"They were," Evie said, reliving the dream again. Standing at the edge of a hole, looking down into it, holding onto a man's hand, voices of "*they are very ancient, why were they buried, why here, why are there three of them*" and then a feeling of discovery as an object was pulled from the hole. "*now we get to see them, hold them,*" the voice had said and faded away as she woke up.

"Isn't it worth it to at least try?" Red bounced up and down on the couch, her face covered in a big smile. "What can it hurt to at least answer?"

Evie cocked her head and narrowed her eyes at Red. "It's the fucking internet. There are trackers, and stalkers, everywhere!"

"Look, Evie," Red said, pulling the laptop from Evie's grasp. "I'll make an anonymous account, set up through a burner email account. I'll do it all, so that your fingerprints—lit-er-ally—won't be on it, and then I'll type a message out. You can okay it before I hit send." Red was already typing furiously into the browser to get things set up as she described. "I remember the training and have a lot of practice making burner accounts."

“I don’t doubt it,” Evie said with a slightly sarcastic smile. The first smile—although not completely comfortable smile—since watching the newscast. But her friend being there, and helping, made Evie feel a little more secure.

“Ok, burner email setup. Good for twenty-four hours,” Red announced, putting her phone away. “Now change IP address on the laptop with a different VPN server, and clear the cookies.” Red narrated her actions, as she hovered over a button for a second before clicking it, and then shut down the browser. “Restart the browser, clear history again, just to be safe.” She continued to narrate as the social media site took over the screen again. She scanned the screen for the right button to click—then a new registration screen flashed on the screen.

“Username, password, email, captcha,” Red rattled off, as she typed in different boxes to perform the necessary steps. “All standard stuff.” Her phone buzzed for a second, and she clicked on the burner email account. Two taps on the phone later she announced, “All set.”

Evie, her dad, and Red all focused their attention on the laptop as Red logged in and opened the post under the new username.

“What to say?” Red asked herself aloud, and looked around, smiling at the helpless passengers on her internet journey. “Don’t worry. I’ll let you read it before I send it,” Red laughed, knowing that they were internally dreading her sense of humor. She stretched her arms up and interlocked her fingers before pushing her arms out in front of her, as if warming up for a piano recital.

A very direct to the point message, the trio agreed, would be the best approach. “Short, simple, direct,” Red said, looking at the very terse message. Feigning going for the send button, she laughed as the other two tensed and caught their breaths, seeing the arrow move.

“Dad?” Evie asked for just one more assurance.

“Your call, Evie. I trust you. It’s not too late to ignore it.”

Evie sat for a long minute, knots in her stomach, not sure what to do. “I have to use the bathroom,” she finally said.

“Now??” Red exclaimed loudly, laughing. “Okay fine. I’ll do some more searching.”

Red looked at the username and clicked on a link to get past comments and posts. Very little in the way of direct interaction, some helpful comments,

some jokes, nothing that seemed to point to a violent person, or even an asshole troll.

“He seems like a pretty decent guy,” Red told Evie as she walked back to the couch. “Nothing in his post or comment history that stands out. Not even a sarcastic troll comment history.”

That information made Evie a little less apprehensive. “Maybe he’s genuine then?”

“No way to know except to send this message!” Red moved the cursor back and forth over the ‘Send’ button.

“Fine. Send it.”

Red immediately clicked the ‘Send’ button. “Done!”

There was no taking it back now. Now all Evie could do was wait.

“Yuck,” Evie muttered to herself, “so weird.”

“I know. This whole thing is just odd. Your dream, and his dream, and your picture,” Red said, growing serious to give some relief for Evie. “Maybe it won’t amount to anything other than an elaborate trolling.”

“Why me? If anybody randomly created a picture, why would it look like me?”

“You’re kinda cute?” Red said, adding a small laugh to break the tension. “You should know that there are doppelgangers around, and any AI generated face would end up looking like at least one person. You just won the facial lottery.”

Evie’s face warmed and she shot Red a very angry look.

“Phrasing!” Red laughed even louder at what she said. “I just mean that the face is yours.”

“Logically, that makes sense, but it still is weird when it is me,” Evie replied. “It’s like winning the worst lottery ever.”

“Maybe, but maybe not,” Red said, putting a positive spin on the situation. “Maybe he will be cute!”

“Fuck you,” Evie said giving her friend a gentle push. “He is probably 55, fat and bald.” Red laughed and from the kitchen table Evie’s dad added a little chuckle.

“Wouldn’t be much worse than your actual dating pool,” Red said, with a joking smile.

Chapter 4

The next morning Evie checked the account for any replies to Red's post and Evie's anxiety started to ease as the inbox indicated zero messages. The whole thing was probably just some AI trying to see how close it could get.

Red arrived to pick her up, and Evie ran out to the car.

"Nothing?" Red asked immediately, leaning toward Evie with wide eyes.

Evie shook her head, a pressing her lips together to hide her smile. "No replies,"

"Ah well. That's too bad. It would have been a great experiment." She shook her head slowly.

"There are better ways to run experiments."

Around lunchtime Red walked to Evie's desk looking around and crouching down, making Evie a little bit curious as to her motives.

"Wha-" Evie started to ask, but Red shushed her by raising her hand to Evie's face.

Red looked all around the office once more, to see if anyone was watching them, then leaned in close. "I couldn't help it, and had to log in. There is a reply!"

Evie felt a chill shoot down her spine and her face the blood drain from her face. "NO!"

"Yes!" Red poked at her several times.

"What does it say?"

"I don't know. I'm waiting for you to open it. I may be a snoop, but I am not going to do that." She laughed quietly for a few seconds.

Evie sat in stunned silence for a long several seconds. "Should we open it after work?"

"Yikes!" Red said in a hushed tone. "Can't you see this is killing me? I have to *knooowwww now!*"

"It's like Christmas morning. And you'll just have to wait," Evie said, trying to hide her apprehension with a slight smile.

The rest of the afternoon passed slowly for Red, and especially for Evie, as predicted, like a child would experience the anticipation of Christmas Eve. In the car on the drive from work, Red could hardly contain her excitement. She bounced in the her seat at every stop, and the car jolted forward when starting again. Evie only felt dread growing inside her. She almost secretly hoped for a cop to pull them over to delay what was coming, but there was no putting it off.

"Get the laptop!" Red threw her jacket on the hook in the entryway. "Hello Mr. Besser!" Red added loudly, echoing her excitement through the entire house.

Evie got the computer and gently opened it on the kitchen table. She scooted over in small steps, finally allowing room to let Red sit down to log in. Her dad appeared behind them watching over their shoulders.

"The moment of truth," Red said, seeing the login screen briefly process. She clicked on the blue 'P' at the top of the screen to open the waiting personal message. Three sets of eyes scanned the retrieved message.

"Hi. I don't know what to say. I actually wasn't expecting this.

I made the mistake on the drawing and didn't change the eye color from brown to greenish, but that is the color I saw in my dream. I honestly don't know what this means."

Evie felt a chill throughout her body and shivered. The eye color matched hers too. She felt a mixture of relief and dread; while the dread was still winning, the relief was a welcome addition.

“Holy shit,” Red said, after reading the message. Waiting just long enough to glance at the other two to make sure they seemed done reading she started to type.

“If this is real, then send a pic with your face and a handwritten sign saying RED892 and the date!”

Before anyone could object, Red hit the send button and sat back, a slight smile on her face.

“What did you do that for?” Evie asked, jerking the laptop towards her.

“I want to know who this is,” Red said. “Fair is fair. He knows what you look like. We get to know what he looks like. Besides, if he tries to fake it we can block him, and be done with this, but if the pic is real, then we’ll be able to tell if he’s a stalker.”

“I don’t know if I like that idea.” Evie looked up at her dad and he nodded his head in agreement.

“We’re still protected and anonymous,” Red said. “We aren’t giving up any more than what he already knows. He knows what you look like and that’s it.”

Evie slowly digested what Red said. Red was right. “This is just so weird and scary.”

“True,” Red said. She took the laptop and started clicking and typing commands. “But who knows if he’s even online right now.”

“Then what are you doing?”

“I’m screenshotting everything and sending it to my email. That way there’s a record of all this, and if needed we can send it to the police.”

As Red collected files a blue ‘P’ popped up in the corner of the screen.

“Another reply!” Red finished one more command and slid the laptop back to Evie.

Evie gingerly clicked on the message with shaking fingers.

“Hi. I should have thought of that before. Here is my picture, and a sign with RED892 and the date on it.”

All three looked at the picture.

“Holy shit!” Red said loudly, seeing the tall rugged man holding her sign. “If you don’t want him, I’ll take him.”

“He looks like a hard worker,” Evie’s dad said, adding no emotion to his comment.

Evie reserved her words, but the internal turmoil seemed to sink, and the knots in her stomach started to untie slightly. “Could still be a serial killer.”

“True,” her dad said.

Red grabbed the laptop again. “I’ll look for any pictures of him.” She brought up several other websites and pasted the image into the squares. “No matches. Maybe if the sign part is cropped out, then the image search could get enough data points to compare.” She started up an image editing program.

“I thought those searches compare digital fingerprints for previously published photos,” Evie said. “Even with the sign cut out I doubt the search would find a match if this is a new photo. Or even a cropped old picture.”

“Maybe we should just chat with the guy,” Red said, stopping the mouse and killing the editing program.

“What?” Evie wasn’t ready for chatting with him. “Why would we want to do that?”

“To find out if he is a serial killer. All we have is a picture. We need to find out more. I know just the site.” Red typed in a quick message and then brought up a different site and started a chat room.

A few minutes later the laptop emitted a ding that Evie would have sworn echoed throughout the house.

“He’s on!” Red rubbed her palms together as she prepared to type.

“Yay.” Evie muttered quietly, dripping with sarcasm.

PS51399: HI. his side of the chat displayed.

RED892: “Hi back. Who is this?” Red wrote.

PS51399: ‘My name is Silas. and you?’

RED892: “You can call me Red.”

PS51399: ‘Hi Red. Nice to meet you.’

RED892: “I’ll decide how nice it is.”

PS51399: ‘hahaha fair enough.’

Red typed the quick messages. Evie gave Red a little jab in the ribs causing Red to wince as she laughed.

RED892: “How old are you?”

PS51399: ‘I’m 29.’

RED892: *"ok, what do you do?"*

PS51399: *'i work construction. houses mostly.'*

RED892: *"ok. Married?"*

"What the hell, Red?" Evie grabbed the laptop from Red, lifting it completely into the air before finally settling it down in front of her.

"Hey! It's important for my edification. And yours too."

Evie knew Red was right, but the direct questioning became annoying. Still, Red being around for this felt comforting. Evie smiled slightly, imagining how awkward she would feel with just her dad around.

PS51399: *'no. you?'* was the reply on the screen after Evie took control of the laptop.

RED892: *"nope."*

PS51399: *'good.'*

PS51399: *'i mean, that's ok.'*

PS51399: *'no. i don't know what I mean, lmao'*

RED892: *"It's ok."* Evie typed, laughing with Red while imagining the other end of the conversation.

PS51399: *'I never meant to embarrass you, I hope you believe that.'* came the reply after a lengthy pause.

RED892: *"honestly, it was a shock to see my face on the news"*

PS51399: *'i had no control over that. i didn't expect the post to explode or the news to take it viral either'*

RED892: *"did you use AI to create the face?"* Evie asked, very curious as to the process used.

PS51399: *'no, I went to a local computer artist and used police sketch software.'*

RED892: *"all by memory?"*

PS51399: *'yes. I saw the face in a very real feeling dream and had to draw it.'*

RED892: *"why my face?"*

PS51399: *'that's the face I saw. Everything as much as I remember, except the eyes were the wrong color.'*

RED892: *"yeah, that was the only big mistake to me."*

PS51399: 'when you corrected the eye color, it freaked me out.'

RED892: "What was so special about your dream?"

Evie wondered if his dream was anything like hers, though she found it impossible to believe two people shared the same dream.

PS51399: 'I can't say for sure—other than it just stuck out so much, and your face. i also felt your hand, if you could believe that.'

PS51399: 'and I don't know if this means anything but i also got some crazy weird messages from the post. someone asked "did you hear the voices?" or something like that.'

RED892: "In response to the post with my picture?"

PS51399: 'yeah, private messages talking about hearing voices or something. but i deleted them because I thought they were bullshit'

RED892: "Too bad"

PS51399: 'oh, and then after you sent me your eye color someone sent me a message saying something like "now that you have met"'

RED892: "WTF!"

Evie and Red exchanged a look, both finding it hard to imagine someone knowing that information.

PS51399: 'yeah, it's like somebody was reading the messages, but that isn't possible, i don't think.'

RED892: "i think only the admin would have that level of access."

PS51399: 'exactly what i was thinking, and i didn't recognize the username as admin.'

RED892: "weird"

PS51399: 'AF for sure'

Now was Evie's chance to ask more about the dream. To see if it was anything like hers.

Red made a move as if to take the laptop, but ended up miming typing. "You need to tell him your dream."

Evie gave an uncomfortable knowing nod. Thinking she wanted to share information gradually, she took a moment and tried several phrases.

RED892: "did you hear anything in your dream?" Evie finally asked.

There was a pause before Silas' answer appeared on the screen.

PS51399: 'yeah. But i don't remember much of the words, mostly just the images—the big hole, and your face'

PS51399: 'maybe ancient or something like that'

Evie felt a chill run down her spine and shivered visibly. Even Red lost the color in her face. “Did you two actually share the same dream?” Red asked Evie. “That would be so crazy—and impossible.”

“I don't know,” Evie replied. Her face tingled. Hearing confirmation that her dream might be the same spooked her.

PS51399: 'hello?' Silas' response appeared, after a long pause with no typing from Evie.

RED892: "I'm still here"

PS51399: 'good'

PS51399: 'anything wrong?'

RED892: "just freaked out" Evie typed quickly.

PS51399: 'why'

This was the moment. She had to tell him. There was something more going on here, and Evie needed to know what it was.

RED892: "I had a dream too. And I heard that in my dream also. Standing over a big hole"

Now it was Silas' turn to take a long pause from responding. Evie continued sharing her dream.

RED892: "Or why there are three of them" she typed.

PS51399: 'that's it! i heard that too!'

More chills went down Evie's spine, but there was no turning back now.

RED892: "this is so weird"

PS51399: 'yes it is.'

RED892: "What do we do now?"

PS51399: 'i have no idea. it was like being struck by lightning just to find a match to the face from my dream, and we had the same dream!?! I have no clue what this means.'

RED892: "and what about those messages you got?"

PS51399: 'i don't know. they just add to the mystery.'

RED892: "some elaborate hoax?"

PS51399: *'how would anyone know about the voices in the dreams? No one could set that up.'*

PS51399: *'and how can two people have the same dream?'*

RED892: *"I don't know that either"*

PS51399: *'have you had any other dreams like that?'*

RED892: *"no. you?"*

PS51399: *'nope. just the dream with your face.'*

RED892: *"where do you live?"*

A long pause and Evie felt she overstepped.

RED892: *"sorry, I don't need to know"*

PS51399: *'i'm in Ohio. i was just thinking. it's a valid question.'*

Red gave Evie a small nod and encouraged her to keep asking.

RED892: *"Right now? Are you in Ohio right now?"*

PS51399: *'yes. i am in my apartment, not out stalking anyone :)'*

RED892: *"ok, lol. just checking."* She paused, then typed. *'I'm in California.'*

PS51399: *'ah. nice to meet you California.:)'*

RED892: *"And you, Silas from Ohio"*

PS51399: *'so what do we do now?'*

The question brought another exchange of looks between Red and Evie, as well as Evie's dad. "What do people do when they both have the same dream?" Evie asked aloud, not expecting an answer.

RED892: *"What do you think?"*

PS51399: *'i don't have a clue. i actually only imagined talking if there was a match for the face. now with the dream, i am completely stumped.'*

RED892: *"did you recognize the voice?"*

PS51399: *'nope, i honestly don't remember much about the voice, just your face, and the artifacts being raised.'*

RED892: *"artifacts?"* Evie wanted to dig deeper into his side of the dream.

PS51399: *'yeah, that's what was being dug, i think. some workers were in the hole bringing things up.'*

PS51399: *'it looked like a very sandy dirt.'*

RED892: "you remember what kind of dirt it was?"

PS51399: 'yes. i work in construction. i've seen lots of different dirt. this one was like a dirt and sand mix. i was gonna do some research to see where you might find dirt like that

PS51399: 'but i got distracted by posting your face. i am sorry for that by the way.'

RED892: "It's ok. Damage is done."

PS51399: 'yeah :('

Evie's phone started to ring, and she glanced at the caller ID, her face brightening.

"That's my cue to leave," Red said, knowing what lie ahead. She gave Evie a quick smile and wave. "It's been fun."

"I'm going to leave you to it as well," Evie's dad said, walking toward the den.

Evie glared at both of them as she picked up the phone. "Just a sec" she told the caller. She typed a quick message to finish the chat with Silas.

RED892: "I have to go. I'll message you later. Goodnight."

PS51399: 'oh ok. goodnight.'

"Okay, I can talk now," Evie said as she ran up the stairs to her room.

Chapter 5

Silas awoke for the second time feeling a phantom hand holding his. Eyes closed, he felt around in the darkened room, trying to remember if his notebook was close. He rolled over and reached toward his nightstand stack of books. No notebook, but he felt an envelope. It was better than nothing. He started scribbling the details in the dark as he recounted the dream in his mind.

“Started out in a large concrete building”

“2nd floor, play room?”

“Virginia?”

“research library?”

“Timmy, 4 years old”

“Robert 8 years old”

“professor”

“no faces, no voices”

Had Red had the dream, too? He looked at the clock, 7:15am. 4:15am in California. Too early to expect an immediate reply.

He found his notebook and transcribed the scribbles, adding a few more notes, then got dressed. When he walked out of his room, his roommate Eric was about to head out the door.

“Early work on Saturday?”

“Yep. Lots to do,” Eric said. “Coffee is in the pot, only one cup left though.”

“Thanks,” Silas walked to the kitchen and grabbed a cup. He poured the dark liquid into the mug and took a small sip. Dark and rich, the coffee flavor produced a small wake-up response, due to the stimulants or the conditioned response, he would probably never know.

Even though she was probably still asleep, Silas logged onto the social media site and posted a quick message to Red.

‘another dream. Virginia mean anything to you?’

He knew he wouldn’t get a response for a while, but still it felt like torture until the response finally came through. Shortly after 9:30AM, Silas noticed a message alert pop up on the website. He clicked the blue ‘P’ and saw the message that made him shiver.

“me too. I had another dream. I have no connections to Virginia, but saw a building very clearly. Kids running around. What does it mean? Chat?”

She’d seen a building, too? This had to be more than coincidence.

“Definitely,” Silas wrote. Then he took another sip of coffee and loaded up the chat site.

At the other end of the message, Evie had woken up with the dream standing out vividly in her memory. Then she’d seen the message. She opened up the chat site and didn’t wait long before the ding sounded on her laptop.

PS51399: ‘morning Red’

RED892: “morning. My name is Evie”

PS51399: ‘oh, sorry.’

RED892: “don’t be sorry, lol. Red is my friend. she was helping me.”

PS51399: ‘ah, that’s nice. nice to meet you Evie.’

RED892: “Nice to formally meet you, Silas. Tell me about your dream.”

PS51399: ‘thanks. my dream started in a building, very impersonal, concrete mostly, halls, rooms, windows in the stairwells. i didn’t see faces this time, just walking around talking to some guy in a lab coat. probably a professor. walking around looking at different playground type things,

with some kids running around. the professor pointed out two kids to me—Timmy, around 4 years old, i think, and Robert, who was 8, but wasn't there.'

It was like he was describing her dream! She couldn't type fast enough.

RED892: "My dream was the same. I was talking to people—lots of voices, kids, having playtime. Then they aged to a certain point and disappeared. One assistant talked at some point."

PS51399: 'any clues about where it was?'

Evie, whether from bravery in the early hour, or trying to find out Silas' sense of humor, smiled as she typed.

RED892: "Virginia"

PS51399: 'hahaha, very funny. anywhere more specific?'

Evie laughed aloud, feeling both comfort and relief as the joke seemed to find its mark. She replayed the dream, hoping to discover a useful clue.

RED892: "no, but the assistant was talking about reclaimed memories. Maybe if we search on that."

PS51399: 'searching now....'

RED892: "me too"

In a search window, Evie typed "Virginia" and "reclaimed memories" not expecting there to actually be results. But the search window filled with results.

PS51399: 'wow'

RED892: "OMG"

PS51399: 'it exists'

RED892: "How crazy is that?"

Evie paused, trying to make sense of it, and with no response from Silas, she figured maybe he was doing the same.

PS51399: 'what do we do now?'

They both seemed to have the same thought.

RED892: "I have no idea."

RED892: "and how can this even happen?"

PS51399: 'i don't know. but if this was a movie it would be a message for us to meet and go there.' Silas typed.

RED892: "Maybe it is a message."

PS51399: *'i would have a hard time going anywhere, especially that far.'*

RED892: *"Me too. The expenses would be hard to cover, I can't afford taking a vacation to chase after a dream"*

PS51399: *'i'm in the same boat.'*

Another long pause ensued as each end of the conversation seemed to be thinking or working on a plan.

RED892: *"We couldn't, could we?"* Evie finally typed.

PS51399: *'no, it would be crazy'*

RED892: *"Exactly. We don't know each other, and we have no idea what it means. It would be insane to chase after a dream."*

PS51399: *'absolutely.'*

Even as she watched the words appear on the screen, she knew she had to do this. She had to find a way.

PS51399: *'if you can fly here, it is only a 7 hour drive from me.'* Silas typed.

RED892: *"OMG"*

PS51399: *'you're thinking about it, aren't you? lol'*

RED892: *"maybe lmao"*

PS51399: *'are we crazy?'*

RED892: *"Totally. Totally crazy"*

PS51399: *'you could fly into columbus.'*

RED892: *"hahaha,"*

But almost like someone else was controlling her common sense, she found herself searching on the airline site.

RED892: *"OMG, there is space available tomorrow morning."*

PS51399: *'arriving when?'*

RED892: *"I can't do it. I don't know you."*

This is the kind of thing that every person, especially females, knew to never do. But this was different. The dreams. It felt like there was more to this. She wanted to know. She *needed* to know.

PS51399: *'i know. And i don't' know you. But i also feel like i do. LOL'*

Evie started to feel a comfort in the connection while talking with Silas, at least understanding his responses.

RED892: *"LOL"* Evie typed, switching back and forth to the search

and the chat.

RED892: *"arriving at 8pm. that's too late to drive to Virginia. oh, there's a red-eye, arriving at 4:30am. Is that too early"*

PS51399: *'no that works. i could pick you up and we could drive to virginia. get there in the afternoon.'*

RED892: *"and they're open on Mondays."*

PS51399: *'who's open?'*

RED892: *"the reclaimed memories institute"*

PS51399: *'holy shit. are we doing this?'*

RED892: *"I gotta run it by my dad. But yeah, we are."*

PS51399: *'your dad? wait how old are you?'*

RED892: *"26. But I am living with dad for now. I just moved here for my job and haven't looked for a place yet."*

PS51399: *'you think he'll be okay with it?'*

RED892: *"as long as you give him all your details so he can track you down."*

PS51399: *'in case he needs to report me to the police?'*

RED892: *"Nope, no police. He will track you down himself, and the police will never find the body. He has mad skills."*

PS51399: *'oh....'* Appeared after a few long seconds.

RED892: *"lmao"*

RED892: *"Don't worry, I don't think we have anything to worry about."*

PS51399: *'ok, if you say so.'*

RED892: *"yeah, pretty crazy that two people who met two days ago, formally an hour ago, are going to chase a crazy dream all the way across the country."*

PS51399: *'very crazy. LOL'*

RED892: *"I'm booked on the 9pm flight tomorrow, arriving Monday morning at 4:30 Ohio time."*

PS51399: *'i will be there to pick you up'*

Chapter 6

The plane arrived 20 minutes later than scheduled. The passengers deplaned as Silas waited by the baggage claim area, watching the mass of tired people from the overnight flight disburse toward other gates and exits. He looked for one face in particular. The face that had started the adventure.

Silas had not predicted how her appearance in person would affect him. His face was hot, and his stomach felt like butterflies were having a full-on dance party inside. If they hadn't planned to drive to Virginia right away, he almost felt like he would bolt and pretend none of this ever happened.

"Hello," Evie said. And she smiled at the almost complete stranger.

"H—" he tried to say, feeling a lump in his throat. It came out more as a croak. "Hello," he managed to vocalize. "Nice to meet you. I admit I'm pretty nervous. I don't know . . ." he realized he was stammering and rambling, and stopped talking.

"I feel the same way," Evie said, seeing his obvious nervousness. "It's so bizarre that we're doing this."

Silas reached for her bag to take it to car, at the same moment Evie also picked it up, their hands touching for a second. Silas' tug on the handle pulled her forward slightly, along with the bag. She relinquished her hold on the bag and grabbed his arm to steady herself. After grabbing his arm and regaining her balance, she didn't let go, but instead continued to hold it gently. She wasn't exactly sure what made her do it, but it seemed like a comfortable thing to do at the moment.

Silas felt her arm lock with his, and all his butterflies disappeared. The pair walked to his waiting car and he placed her bag into the trunk.

"Oh, shit! I forgot to ask if you needed the restroom or anything before we start driving."

"I'm fine," Evie said with a small laugh. "I thought something bad happened."

"Like I said, I'm nervous." Silas closed the trunk and unlocked the car doors. "This type of thing doesn't regularly happen to me. Or to anyone I guess."

"True. I'm nervous too," Evie said. "But you seem normal enough."

Their mutual laugh echoed in the concrete car park. Silas opened her car door, and she responded with a lady-like small bow, and took her seat in the passenger side.

"Did you want to drive?" Silas asked, feeling his face warm anew as he settled in the driver's seat.

"Just be yourself. And, no. I'm fine for now."

"That's the exact thing my friends told me to not do!" He laughed as the car started and he checked for traffic.

"Maybe you need new friends. I think you're doing fine."

"I feel like I am double-thinking everything I'm doing. I don't usually do that." He snapped his phone into a holder on the dash, and opened the GPS app. "I have no idea where I'm going."

"Neither do I," Evie said, watching the app display the route, then smiled at Silas. "So I guess we're up for an adventure."

The car left the airport frontage road and was soon on the Interstate. "Set the temp and fan to whatever you need. And the radio if you want," Silas said, settling into the very early light freeway traffic.

"Actually, if you don't mind, I think I will just sleep for a bit."

“Oh, I should have thought of that too! You must be tired from the red-eye flight.”

“Yeah, I am a little tired. Wake me if you need anything.” Evie shifted around until she was more comfortable in the passenger seat. Then she closed her eyes.

The first three hours of the trip passed without trouble. Around eight thirty the traffic started to back up on the filling interstate.

“Monday morning rush hour?” Evie asked, waking to the stop and go traffic and the small roar of the car noises.

“I guess so. Even West Virginia must have rush hour. Couldn’t say for sure.”

“Where are we?”

“South West Virginia,”

“I thought we were going to central Virginia?” Evie asked, with a laugh.

“Funny. After this we should be headed through the mountains and the traffic should be lighter, I think.” Silas nodded toward the GPS routing directions. “Are you hungry?”

“Not really. I could wait for lunch until we get to Virginia,” Evie said, staring out the window at all the traffic.

“That’s what I was thinking too,” Silas said. “I like to get a good start and then slow down toward the end.”

“That’s how my dad always traveled too. He never wanted to stop until we got where we were going.”

“Did you travel a lot?” Silas asked. “Oh, I’m sorry. You don’t have to answer, I’m just trying to make conversation.”

“Don’t worry about it. I think we should probably get to know each other,” Evie said, with a reassuring pat on his arm. “I guess we traveled a lot, up until I went to college. Each summer we would travel to someplace in California, and that can be a long, long trip sometimes. We like to camp, but not necessarily rough it—if you know what I mean.”

“I get it. I used to spend my teen years doing campground build and repair, cabin types. It wasn’t out in the middle of nowhere usually, with cabins, but sometimes we ended up in tents and not cabins.” Silas felt his face warm again, making Evie laugh a little. “That is what gave me my interest in construction. Making things out of raw materials that will withstand the storms.”

“Nice. Traveling didn’t really inspire me to do anything. I went to college and got into computers and data research.”

“Wow,” Silas said, giving Evie a low whistle. “I had no idea what you did.”

She nodded. “I enter data from research and run computer simulations and analysis on the data.”

“Do you do the research?”

“Usually not. I just enter the data for now. I am working towards running my own research and analysis someday, but for now I am just learning the ropes.” Evie looked out the passenger window for a few seconds.

“What is your degree in?”

“I majored in computer information systems, and minored in stats—statistics,” Evie said. “But have been learning different design aspects, so I can start to learn the research.”

“So you program and stuff? I don’t understand any of that lingo.”

“In a way. I am not a coder—like most people would call it, but I program what I need to. That is one of my goals. I want to try programming some artificial intelligence systems at some point. But I am just beginning to learn about it, and have a long way to go.”

“That’s totally amazing. I just know how to hammer things.” He laughed at the contrast, and Evie laughed with him.

“You look it,” Evie said, and Silas immediately felt his face grow hot. “That’s not what I meant,” she added quickly. “I mean that you look very muscular from . . .” Evie started and just stopped talking, looking out the passenger window to keep from looking at Silas.

“Thanks.” He had no idea how to answer.

“Sure is pretty up here.” Silas nodded slightly toward the mountain pass.

“Yes it is,” Evie said. “And I’m sorry. It’s just that I feel like I already know you.”

“I have the same feeling. It’s—hard to stop myself from talking to you like an old friend. But then I feel that talking like old friends would be considered quite aggressive.”

“I have the same feeling,” Evie said, now it was her turn to blush. “I don’t know what we will end up like, but I think we have to get past this initial awkward phase first.”

“Seems like that is the case. It felt nice when you took my arm at the airport. Felt like an old friend moment.”

“I don’t know what made me do it either,” Evie said, “but it felt comforting . . .”

Evie’s phone rang, stopping the conversation. “Oh, hi Dad. Yep, we are still on the road.” Pause. “Sounds like the car is doing fine, handling the mountain roads like a champ.” Pause. “We decided to get lunch in Virginia. No, he isn’t forcing me to starve.” Pause. “Dad, it isn’t that at all. It is quite pleasant.” Pause. “Yes, he opened the door.” Another short pause as Evie looked over at Silas. “I think I could take him,” Evie said, giving Silas a big smile. “Yes, we have that all figured out so far.” Pause. “Tell everyone not to worry, I’m safe, and feel very safe with him.” Pause. “Dad? Dad? Must be the mountains, I’m losing receptions. I’ll call you from the hotel.” Pause. “From the hotel. Okay, Dad, love you. Bye.”

“Sorry about that,” Evie said, her face turning red. “Dad checking in.”

“You think you could take me?” Silas raised his eyebrows.

Evie laughed. “I’d certainly give it my best. Might be some genetics involved.”

“Well, thankfully we shouldn’t ever have to find out. And you have a nice laugh.”

“So do you,” Evie said. Then, to distract herself, she started looking for places to eat as the reception faded in and out. “Here is a neat looking mom and pop diner. I bet we’d get the full West Virginia/Virginia dining experience.”

“Sounds like a plan. Find a place you like and put it in the GPS.”

The meal was ready quicker than they expected, and within an hour from exiting the highway they were back on the road and headed toward the meeting with the professor.

“Professor William Andrews—renowned expert in past memories and regressions, specializing with children,” Evie read from a website on her phone. “Over 120 publications with his team, on memory reconstruction and three books on what he calls ‘reclaimed memories’.”

“Does it say what a ‘reclaimed memory’ is?” Silas asked.

“A ‘reclaimed memory,’ per the good professor,” Evie said, trying to keep the mood light and sound academic, but laughing a little too hard at the end, “is a memory of another person that inhabits the consciousness of the child.”

“Hmmm,” Silas said. “Sounds totally made up.”

“I agree. But for some reason—here we are! About to visit the good professor,” She finished with a laugh as Silas nodded.

The GPS routed them to the research building. “Looks like a pretty fancy campus,” Silas looked at the older white marble buildings and ornate architecture, along with the newer glass buildings consisting of large inwardly sloping windows with sculptures clinging to several outcrops.

“Maybe a bit,” Evie said with a nod. “Oh, did you go to college?”

“I started, but then dropped out. I liked the working part better.” Silas felt a his face warm as the words came out.

Evie looked up with a comforting smile. “Don’t worry about it. Most people here are just like you. You are probably better than most, actually.”

“How do you know?”

“I can just tell. It’s easy to see actually.”

Evie waited a second inside the entrance, then walked up to the main desk. “Hi. We have an appointment with Professors Andrews this afternoon.”

“Let me have a look,” the female assistant said. “Yep, here you are. It looks like the professor is either done for the day after you, or has blocked off the afternoon.” Then she called out to a young man walking by. “Mark, these two are here to see Professor Andrews. Could you take them to the lab?”

“Sure,” Mark said. He led them up the stairs to a wide hallway with marble floors. “Just go down the hall, right in the middle—can’t miss it.”

Evie walked a step ahead of Silas down the passageway. They walked forward until they found a door with a shiny golden placard that read, “Professor Andrews, Memory Studies.”

Silas and Evie glanced through the narrow glass window on the right side of the door. Inside, a man in a lab coat slowly trailed after a small boy, who was running in circles on the colored mat littered with toys.

Almost instinctively Evie and Silas gasped in unison. “Timmy,” Silas whispered.

“Yep,” Evie whispered back, a small chill running along her spine.

Silas knocked on the door. The professor soon appeared in the window with a wide grin and opened the door to let them in.

“Silas and Evie!” Professor Andrews said, waving them into the play room. “Nice to meet you.”

“Hello, Professor Andrews,” Evie said.

“I trust it wasn’t too hard to find the place?”

“GPS led us right here,” Silas said, trying to smile. He nodded toward Evie for support.

“Good.” Andrews waved them to chairs along the outer wall of the room. “Have a seat if you wish.”

“You’re tall!” Timmy said, running up to Silas and looking up at him.

“Thanks, Timmy,” Silas said without thinking.

Timmy frowned and squinted at Silas. “How did you know my name?”

“We read it from the professor’s clipboard,” Evie said, quickly trying to cover the misstep.

Her answer seemed to satisfy Timmy who then turned to Evie. “You’re pretty.”

“Thanks.” She felt her face warm from the child’s compliment.

“Timmy is four years old,” Professor Andrews said. “And it seems like he is of interest to you, at least from your email. That, and an artifact?”

“Potentially,” Evie said. “And we are curious as to what you do here.”

“A common question,” Professor Andrews said. “The easiest answer is to just say we listen to stories.”

“Stories?” Silas asked.

“Yes. Like Timmy here. At two years old he would talk to his mother in ways that would worry her,” the professor explained. “For example, he said that he lived in a different house. And that his mother wasn’t his mother. Those are quite worrying things for any parent to hear.”

“I bet.” Evie imagined how strange hearing those types of things would be.

“And a little while after that he started saying names of people that nobody in the house recognized,” the professor continued. “Names of people he could not possibly have met or know. And after several months, his ‘memories’ got stronger and he became more adamant about not living there and about having another mother. So his mother brought him here for us to record his story.”

“Is it only kids that have this kind of thing going on?” Evie asked.

“Kids seem to be the most active in these memories. Maybe because as they start making their own memories, their ‘reclaimed’ memories start to fade.”

“What exactly are reclaimed memories?” Silas asked.

Professor Andrews shrugged as the three sat down in the ring of chairs. “Memories that seem to come from another person or another consciousness.”

That confirmed what they’d read on the internet.

“And what age do they fade?” Silas asked.

“Usually they start to fade around age four—which is why Timmy is here. Four is the most active, in terms of getting eloquent answers with the strongest memories, but after that, the memories start to fade fast even though the verbal capacity of the child is improving. By about five to eight the memories completely disappear, and the child has essentially zero recollection of ever having any of them. In fact, during follow up interviews, the former subjects typically remember the sessions vividly, but have only fragments of their ‘reclaimed’ memories, even after reading their own words.”

Silas and Evie looked at each other. “Robert” Evie mouthed to Silas, and he nodded.

“What are these memories like?” Evie asked.

“Honestly, if I wasn’t in this as a researcher, I would be freaked out,” the professor said. “We’re 95% sure Timmy has the memories of one Arthur Nordstrum, shipping magnate in the early half of the 1900s.”

Silas and Evie exchanged looks of confusion and amazement.

“Exactly,” The professor continued, catching their reactions. “Starting at two years old, he said he lived in a different house. He’s slowly built a picture for us. Los Angeles California, palm trees, sunny weather, maybe Long Beach port, a large house on a hill, knowing Al and Edith Gustafson, real people who lived in Long Beach until 1933—real enough so that we have pictures of their house interior, which Timmy can tell which pieces were moved out of place from when he would visit.”

Silas and Evie listened with stunned silence, so the professor continued.

“Timmy names his mother as one Gertrude Nordstrum, Nee Weathersby, of Boston. There was a Gertrude Weathersby of Boston, born 1842, died 1914, mother of Arthur, Grace, Andy, and John. All of this is consistent with Timmy’s memories, but Timmy’s mother and family insist that there was no way for Timmy to pick up this information in their house.”

All this felt impossible to Silas. “It could be a very clever hoax.”

The professor waved his clipboard toward Timmy. “It could. Which is why this research center is here. We strive to dig at the memories to see if any cracks appear. I think we’ve exposed four hoaxes so far. They were very clever

and almost got away with it, but they all eventually developed inconsistencies that showed them to be faking. Timmy doesn't seem to be a hoax—so far.”

“Let's say it is real,” Evie said. “How . . .”

“To be honest, I'm not an expert on that. I am a practical researcher, studying the stories of these children to see if they are true or hoaxes. I'm letting the other groups try to figure the theory out.”

Timmy walked up confidently to the group, not bothered by their conversation and interrupted. “Nordstrum Shipping lost twenty four percent market price on October 30, 1929.”

Professor Andrews quickly wrote down the statement on his clipboard and signaled behind the mirror. Evie imagined a researcher would be quickly searching for that data in old newspaper archives.

“Thanks. Anything else happen that day?” the Professor asked.

Timmy scrunched up his face for a minute. “Nope.” His voice was confident, and growing disinterested.

“What was the price drop?” Andrews asked Timmy.

“Twenty. Four. Percent,” Timmy replied, articulating each word to the professor, almost sarcastically.

“What caused the drop?”

“The loss of the demand futures from the global market,” Timmy answered, not looking up, his lack of interest growing.

“What were the goods shipped?” Andrews asked, pressing for still more information as Timmy's memory lingered.

“Goods shipped . . .” Timmy echoed slowly, sinking deep in thought. “Mainly automobiles and automobile and tractor parts. Typically to South American markets,” Timmy finished.

“What day?” Andrews interrogated again.

“October 30th,” Timmy repeated with a scowl. The child seemed to understand Andrews' process after all of the sessions.

“All out of San Francisco?”

“Mostly out of Long Beach,” Timmy answered, shaking his head at the professor. “We already talked about that.”

Professor Andrews smiled toward Evie and Silas with a shrug.

Timmy seemed to notice a particularly interesting toy, and turned away from his audience. Running back to the center of the play room, Timmy

forgot the adults in the room, along with his memory, and resumed playing with toys.

“Seriously?” Silas asked, his eyes wide as he pointed to Timmy.

“Yes. Exactly,” Professor Andrews replied with a grin as he straightened tall in his chair. “That is what we do here. Listen to the stories, and try to track down any details. That was a particularly high confidence conversation Timmy just had with us, so that will be quite useful to build his case.”

“And the kids can’t be coached to do this?” Evie asked.

“Personally, and this is just my personal opinion, I find it difficult to believe that these children can be coached with such details and not give away the coaching in some form. As a parent myself, I can tell when my child is making up a story, and definitely can tell when my wife and I have coached a child to tell a story to the other.”

Silas and Evie gave the professor a quizzical look.

Professor Andrews laughed. “Yes, while it may be unethical, and not scientific at all, my wife and I did engage in the practice of coaching our children to tell stories to the other, just to see what it looked like, and how easy it was to break the child out of the story. It is what helped to set up this lab format—having a highly distracted child makes the coaching very evident, and the coached facts get lost quite easily. For example, Timmy just said twenty four percent, which is very hard for a four year old to understand, so details like that have to be memorized. Challenging them on the day or the percent can make them interject their own story into the details—because children love making up stories—and distractions make it easy to get them to adjust their coached story.”

“And your interrogation?” Evie asked.

“To press for as much new information as possible relating to the reveal,” Andrews said. “And to also try to get them flustered and to change from memorized or coached answers to their imagination. Children typically panic when pressed, and their imaginations take over from coached or memorized information.”

“This seemed like incredibly detailed information,” Silas said.

“That just makes it easier to confirm or to expose as the hoax,” Andrews said. “All of the information will be looked into for veracity.”

“And the lie?” Evie asked.

“Children are also very likely to try to please an adult—especially in a setting like this,” Andrews said. “And by adding little false statements into a question, a coached child will be more likely to go along with a false statement to please the questioner. As you saw, Timmy rejected the false statement, with somewhat incredible maturity.”

“That did seem very un-childlike,” Evie said, nodding to the professor.

“The maturity level varies along with the information. Sometimes the details come one at a time, and the child doesn’t dwell in the reclaimed memory, but sometimes—like now—the child will stay with the reclaimed memory and act as the original owner of the memory would.”

“Makes sense,” Silas said, somewhat understanding the method of the questioning.

“And the ‘how’ is still unknown for all these memories?” Evie asked.

“Exactly,” Andrews said. “I have no way to look for how memories like this are formed or transferred.”

“Or why children?” Silas asked.

“The why children doesn’t have a concrete answer,” Andrews said. “But children seem to be more open, or suggestible to, or even more aware of, different realms—whether real or not. Their transference of nightmares to the real world, and vice versa is every parent’s experience, at a minimum. Along with possible ghosts or spirits that adults can’t see. Adults can’t even remember that they went through those same experiences when younger for the most part.”

“Is that why children love fairy tales?” Evie asked, fondly remembering her first book—a gift from her parents.

Andrews nodded. “Fairy tales and other magical stories enliven the imaginations in children. Much more, in fact, than with adults—at least in my experience.”

“Because they see those places?” Evie asked.

“I can’t say that for sure,” Andrews admitted, “That would be a possible answer, but I would steer away from that explanation myself. I would say the answer is that most likely that children haven’t seen the reality of the world and just like to believe that everything is possible.”

“So there could be actual connections between different realms and children?” Evie asked.

“It’s one possibility, for sure,” Andrews said, then shook his head. “Not very probable from a scientific standpoint, and definitely not provable by any means.”

“Is there a scientific explanation?” Silas asked, seeing the look on Andrews’ face.

“So far there is insufficient evidence for any scientific reason, so I cannot give any answer as to how this is possible.”

“Do you have a guess?” Evie asked.

“Even if I made a guess it would be outside my area of expertise,” the professor answered. “As a parent, I would be horrified if my child had these memories, and would probably believe a supernatural event more than anything else. In fact we have studied children from all over the world, in many religions. In one case in India, the child was reunited with the ‘family’ from her memories hundreds of miles away, and it was a deeply religious moment actually.”

“She met another family?” Silas asked, stunned at the thought.

Andrews nodded. “Yes. A rare case where the past life and present life with people still living. The child called each person by name and position in the family, as if the child had known them for years. Even some nicknames of the family.”

“And that can’t be faked?” Evie asked.

“Family gatherings are actually one of the easiest to fake,” Andrews said. “A limited information space—just names and faces—all in a controlled setting, such as a house. Very easy to teach to the right child, and offer visual and audible cues during any session.”

“Was that case a hoax or real?” Evie asked.

“That one seemed to be on the level. We do not ever confirm anything as ‘real’, only plausible. But we definitely call out hoaxes that we find.”

“And some religions have higher rates of ‘reclaimed memories’ in children?” Silas asked.

Andrews shook his head. “I haven’t found any indication that the religion of the family makes a difference in the number of children who experience ‘reclaimed memories’, although the number of cases is so low as to trigger the ‘small sample size’ arguments from all sides. But the supposedly ‘true’ cases can’t be explained by any known science at the moment.”

“You think the ‘how?’ answer might be in religion?” Evie asked.

The professor thought for a moment. “My personal opinion? Absolutely supernatural—no other explanation comes close. But that isn’t what you are looking for.”

An alarm sounded on the professor’s wrist. “Timmy, time for milk and a nap.”

Timmy walked over to the table as an assistant emerged from the mirror room with a tray of snacks—milk and a few marshmallows.

“This seems like a good time to move on from here,” the professor said, handing his clipboard to the assistant. “Let me take you to phase two of the project.”

Chapter 7

Professor Andrews walked the pair down the hall to the last door and opened it. A large room greeted them, with an equally large machine centered between all four sterile white walls.

“You mentioned an artifact?” Andrews asked.

Evie nodded. “We both had a dream with an artifact in it. Do you study dreams?”

Andrews shook his head. “I am not involved in dream studies in any way. I also don’t know anything about artifacts, or anyone to direct you to.”

Evie and Silas felt a small part of their hopes dashed with Andrews’ information.

“This is the brain imaging room,” the professor said, waving first to the machine and then to the glass enclosed control room. “When we get a good candidate, we bring them in here and try to image a memory as it happens through brain activity.”

“That has to be scary,” Evie said, looking at the intimidating equipment.

“Oh, it is,” the professor said. “Loud and scary, which is why it isn’t done to every child. I’m not in charge of this research. My colleagues Joy and Frank are. They’re the ones that try to capture the memories—or memory flares as I like to call them—while they’re happening. But it’s very rare. They’ve only captured one or two from children in the years I have been on the project.”

As they were standing around the machine, a woman walked up. “Hello. I’m Joy Parsons, I work with capturing memories in this contraption.” She pointed to the enormous machine.

“Do you capture more than just child memories?” Evie asked.

“If we relied solely on capturing memories of children, we’d be out of work very quickly,” Joy said, smiling to Evie. “We also do base memory mapping of all ages. In fact, we’re currently working on three long term projects of memory mapping for age related studies.”

“Age related?” Silas asked, feeling underwater on the academic nomenclature.

“Yes,” Joy said, moving her smile to Silas. “We’re trying to determine why Alzheimer patients have such a strong connection to memories of long ago and mapping the same memories in subjects at five year intervals. We’re trying to see if the memory ‘strength,’ if you want to call it that, varies. We’re also doing a long term study on Parkinson’s regions to see if there are any physical changes that cause disease progression.”

“Those memory studies are for the subjects’ own memories?” Evie asked. “Unlike the kids?”

“Exactly,” Joy answered. “Every person in the study needs to be able to focus quite clearly on something they experienced in the recent or far past. Recent memories seem to have more trouble sticking for some reason—such as a relative’s visit last week—but long ago memories are easily recalled.”

“And the memory regions are mapped with the imager?” Silas asked.

“Yep,” Joy answered. “The subjects recall the memories, either recent ones, or long ago memories, and the active regions of the brain are imaged and compared.”

“Would a child having someone else’s memory be in a different region than a memory of their own?” Evie asked.

“That’s the biggest question the machine is trying to answer,” Joy said. “But so far the memories and child attention spans are both too elusive to

capture.” She snapped her fingers for effect, as if the memories were being whisked away.

“And you don’t do any work on where these child memories come from?” Evie asked.

“We wouldn’t even know how to begin to characterize that,” Joy said. “We just look at the regions that are active when they have a lucid memory—if we can capture that moment in a very willing and cooperative child. Without accurate data, there isn’t any way to even create a hypothesis.”

“Do you have an opinion on where the children get these memories?” Evie asked.

“Not a clue,” Joy admitted. “The brain is still a huge mystery, and we are hoping our work will produce some small steps to understanding the brain better.”

“Oh, come on Joy,” Professor Andrews said. “You always have an opinion.”

Joy laughed. “I have to be careful about giving professional opinions. I’ve been bitten by that before.”

“Supernatural?” Evie asked.

“That’s definitely a possibility,” Joy said. “Did I hear ‘artifact’ when you walked in?”

Evie nodded. “We came here because of dreams—one about Timmy, and one about an artifact.”

“What kind of artifact?” Joy asked. “I am very interested in history and relics of the past.”

“It looked like a couple cylinders on a stand, maybe three,” Silas said.

“Cylinders?” Joy poured through her memory of historical objects. “I don’t ever recall anything looking like just a cylinder. . .”

“Roger?” Andrews asked Joy.

“Roger?” Silas echoed, hoping for a new lead.

“Roger Borlun,” Professor Andrews said. “Used to be Professor Borlun, physicist, but he gave that up to work on a different topic. He’s the first person I thought of when you mentioned cylinders.”

“He is kind of a joke around here now,” Joy said. “He used to teach and do research, but then he had an epiphany and has gone off the rails for the last few years.”

Silas and Evie exchanged nervous glances.

“I can get you his contact information,” Professor Andrews said, then he motioned for them to follow him.

Back in his office, Professor Andrews led the pair into the mirrored room, with a wall of shelves, filled about half full with notebooks.

Silas studied the construction of the shelves, noting the thick maple boards making sturdy shelving, with a nice light coat of varnish just to bring out the natural grain. The bottom shelf held about sixty notebooks, and each higher shelf contained differing numbers of notebooks, with the top shelf only holding eleven.

“These are the case files,” the professor said, noticing Silas’ gaze. “Each shelf holds the cases that fit into the ‘believable’ ratings. The top shelf contains the cases we think are real, the next down holds the cases that we think are believable, but to a lesser extent, etc. Down to the bottom shelf, where those cases don’t have enough information to make an assessment, with the red labeled books being the fakes.”

Silas and Evie scanned the shelves, taking in the information. “So you have about two hundred cases?” Evie asked.

“Around two hundred in a ‘no more information possible’ state,” Andrews answered, pointing to the shelves. “The current, and possibly true, cases are more protected in terms of access and are more actively studied—so those are in a different room. There are about seventy currently active cases with teams in several countries and different locations, with more being searched for all the time.”

“Incredible,” Silas murmured.

“It really is,” Professor Andrews nodded.

“Are these cases all from the 1920’s like Timmy’s seems to be?” Evie asked. “Or are there some from earlier? Later?”

“It ‘s hard to say—records are scarce for all of the cases so far,” Professor Andrews said. “The paper trail for anything before 1940s is essentially non-existent, which leads to many indeterminate cases, as you could probably guess. But the dates given by several children are, or were, in the 1840s and around there.”

“I see,” Evie said. “I was just wondering if there was a pattern to the dates of the memories.”

“You have a natural curiosity,” Professor Andrews said, giving Evie a warm smile. “We’ve wondered that exact same thing. We do have a group

trying to process that data, but the lack of corroborating sources for early years makes most of them either possible hoaxes or waiting for verification. It is truly disheartening sometimes to have to give up on a case because any memories can't be verified," He finished with a sad look.

"What about famous people?" Silas asked, "Are memories of famous people more popular?"

"Out of all the people to be studied, there really isn't a 'popular' that I am aware of in children," Andrews said.

"Why did you say children?" Evie asked, giving a curious look to Andrews, keying on the word.

Andrews chuckled slightly. "You noticed that, did you? I am not the biggest or only researcher on memories. There are many 'hypnosis' sessions that claim anyone can regress to a past life. In these memories, the subjects—or participants—typically pick a famous person in history. I haven't ever heard or read of a regressed memory being a lowly farmer, or orphan in a gang, and so on. In fact, I've read of at least three 'Julius Caesar' cases," He finished with a big laugh.

"That doesn't seem to work." Evie puzzled her face.

"Exactly!" Andrews laughed harder, "There should really be only one Caesar, right? Which is why I chose to work on the child side of 'reclaimed' memories, rather than adult 'regressed' memories."

"Makes sense," Evie said, smiling with the professor.

The professor rifled through different piles of paper, finally giving up. "I thought I had Roger's info with me, but I can't seem to find it. I'll ask the front desk to give you contact information for Roger."

"Did you see the book on the desk?" Silas whispered quietly to Evie as soon as they were out of earshot.

She nodded. "Yes. Robert, born 8/3/2007. That would make him eight years old. Like Robert in the dream."

"I just got chills," Silas said.

Evie nodded. "You and me both, my friend. You and me both."

At the main desk the assistant looked up as they approached. "Professor Andrews asked me to get Roger's information for you." Her face reddened as she grabbed a clean piece of paper from the printer. She copied something from a small rolodex on her desk onto the paper. "Here's his phone number.

If he answers, he can direct you to his house. He lives pretty close.” Then she immediately went back to work.

“Is Roger okay?” Evie asked.

“He is, as far as I know,” she answered. “It is just a shame, is all. A brilliant guy, loved by all the students, suddenly is out of his mind. I shouldn’t say that.” She corrected herself, with a flustered shake of her head. “He is a great guy.”

“Is he dangerous?” Evie asked, giving a look to Silas.

“Oh, heaven’s no,” she said. “Feel free to contact him, he would never hurt anyone. Visitors might actually do him good. He is just not the same as he was when he was working here.”

“Thanks,” Silas said, taking the paper.

“Tell him that Rose wishes him well,” The assistant said quietly as the couple took the phone number.

The two left through the front doors, and spied a crowd gathered around just off the main path.

“What is that?” Silas asked a student walking toward them, pointing to the gathering.

She half glanced toward the crowd. “That’s the local preacher giving his afternoon sermon. Seems like today is about demons and devils.”

Silas nodded to the girl. “A sermon on demons?” he asked Evie. “That’s new to me. You interested?”

“Talking to Roger interests me more,” Evie replied with a shrug, continuing to the parking lot.

They reached the car and stood outside, contemplating their next move. Silas held up the paper and shrugged, and Evie gave a shrug back and a small nod. Silas handed the paper to Evie. “You should probably call.”

“Why? Because you’re going to be driving?”

“No, because if he’s crazy, maybe he won’t go psycho hearing a woman’s voice first.”

“Good point.” Evie dialed the number from the paper and put her phone on speaker.

“Hello?” a male voice answered.

“Hi. My name is Evie, and I am here with my friend Silas, and we’re looking for Professor Roger Borlun.”

“That’s me,” the man said.

First contact complete. Now on to the next part.

“We just got done visiting the lab of Professor Andrews,” Evie said. “And he mentioned that you might be able to help us.”

“Andrews!” Roger shouted. “That sly dog. Did he send you in a professional capacity?”

“He just said that you might be able to help,” Evie replied, “I don’t think it was professionally.”

Roger laughed heartily, lightening the mood. “I’m not putting you on the spot, young lady, just wondering if he has come to his senses yet and accepted my theories.”

“I wouldn’t know anything about that,” Evie said. “But we were just leaving the lab now. Is it too late to come visit?”

“Never!” Roger said. “I’m open all hours. Feel free to drop by any time.”

Roger provided his address to Silas and Evie. As Evie continued the phone call, Silas put the address into his phone GPS.

The GPS processed for a minute and the route popped up and zoomed in. “Less than three miles away,” Silas whispered to Evie, showing the GPS route. “Shows about fifteen minutes.”

“We just drove in from Ohio to see Professor Andrews today,” Evie said.

“Oh my. You must be tired,” Roger almost shouted into the phone. “I’ll put on some B-B-Q. What do you fancy? Ribs? Steak? Burgers?”

“Oh, we aren’t about to put you to any trouble,” Evie said, backpedaling.

“No trouble at all!” Roger said. “It would be my pleasure.”

Evie shot Silas a look and mouthed “should we?” to him. Silas shrugged back in a “why not” kind of way.

“Okay, we should be there shortly, but don’t go to any trouble. We’re fine just talking with you,” Evie said, leaving it up to Roger.

“Excellent,” Roger said. “Ribs it is.” And he disconnected the call.

Silas exited the parking lot and started following the GPS route. Fifteen minutes later the car pulled up at the destination. The pair sat in the car, unsure if they wanted to go into the stranger’s house.

“If there is any sign of trouble, we’ll just leave,” Silas said. “I’ll create a diversion if needed, and you can run for it.”

“My hero!” Evie joked, seeing the humor in the plan, and they both started laughing.

Silas gave the location a thorough scan. It seemed like a perfectly respectable neighborhood. All of the lawns were trimmed, the houses of different shades sat in neat order, and trees stood tall and green. Only two other cars occupied the street. Otherwise the cars were stowed neatly in the driveways and garages.

“Last chance to back out,” Silas said, not turning the car off, waiting to see if Evie had any doubts.

“One second,” Evie tapped out a message on her phone and hit send. “I texted the address and phone number and shared my location with my dad. Just in case.”

“That’s smart,” Silas said. “So we’re going in?”

“We have to,” Evie said. “At least if we want to find out what is going on.”

Silas shut off the engine. “Okay,” he said, and then smiled, “all this is on you then.”

“Funny,” she replied, with only half his smile.

Before the pair reached the door, it swung open wide and a white haired man stepped out to greet them. Shorter than Silas by a good half foot, the man’s pants fit a size or two smaller than his current waistline, and his bottom shirt buttons seemed to want to spring free at a moment’s notice. But the smile on his face seemed genuine and wholesome.

“Welcome! Welcome!” Roger shouted, seemingly intent on inviting the entire neighborhood in with his proclamation. “Come on in!”

Silas and Evie stepped in, Silas watching and ready to push Evie out the door at the first sign of trouble.

“These are my assistants,” Roger said, and three college age young people appeared, all smiling.

Silas’ nerves immediately settled down seeing the assistants in the house.

“Nice to meet you all,” Evie said. She, too, felt much more at ease.

“Rose says hi, too,” Evie added to Roger.

“Oh. Thanks, dear,” Roger said, a little fondness showing in his face. “She was always my favorite.”

“We’re out on the patio,” Roger said, pointing to a large door, behind which was a smoking grill.

“We don’t mean to put you to any trouble,” Silas said.

“Nonsense, my boy!” Roger said. “Food and conversation is my favorite activity. Not necessarily in any particular order!” He patted his rotund shape.

As they walked toward the patio, Silas scoped out the entire visible house, looking for any dangers.

“Stop it!” Evie said, noticing his wary eyeing of the house. “I think we’re fine.”

“Okay,” Silas said, but he vowed to stay vigilant.

At the grill, one assistant tending to the ribs with occasional flips and generous slatherings of sauces. Roger looked at Evie and Silas with great curiosity. “You two seem like an odd couple. What brings you here? How is Andrews?”

“It is quite a long story,” Evie said, looking at Silas, who nodded emphatically to Evie.

“Professor Andrews seems fine,” Evie started answering Roger’s questions, not necessarily in the same order.

“Still chasing Were-rabbits?” Roger asked with a wide grin.

“Were-rabbits?” Silas asked, not sure how he or Evie would know the answer to that question.

“Yes. Were-rabbits!” Roger exclaimed, laughing. “He sees tracks and prints and fur, but doesn’t ever see any rabbits or Were-rabbits.”

“I guess,” Silas said, not sure what the analogy was about.

“His ‘listening’ project,” Roger said. “Still taking stories but not knowing what they mean.”

“I see,” Silas said, making more sense of the question.

“That’s what we saw today,” Evie said. “We visited the reclaimed memories lab.”

“And you asked the biggest question!” Roger said, smiling brightly at Silas and Evie.

“Question?” Evie asked, exchanging glances with Silas and shrugging.

“The ‘How?’ question,” Roger said. “And Andrews sent you to me.” He sat back and crossed his arms. “Andrews wants all the answers, but refuses to ask the right questions.”

“Which is the question of ‘how?’” Evie asked.

“Exactly!” Roger said. “You learn fast. Faster than Andrews, Joy, and Frank.”

“Actually,” Silas said, “we didn’t get your name until we mentioned having a dream about a cylindrical artifact.”

“Cylindrical artifact?” Roger asked, his jaw dropping and eyes widening. Evie and Silas both made out the wheels turning in his head.

“Yes,” Evie nodded. “We had a dream with the artifact in it.”

“A dream!? With a cylinder?” Roger composed himself and shared a glance with his assistants.

“We don’t understand the dream part either,” Silas said.

“I don’t have any answers about dreams,” Roger said, “but you have made me very curious to hear your story.”

“How do you fit with Professor Andrews?” Silas asked.

“My focus at the university dealt with theoretical physics,” Roger answered. “Or at least that’s what I used to do there.”

“And you quit?” Evie asked.

“Yes and no,” Roger laughed, his bright face not showing anger or regret, just what Silas decided was happiness. “I no longer teach or research physics at the university, but I have not given up research. So in that sense I haven’t quit.”

“What do you do now?” Silas asked. “Is this your lab?”

“It is,” Roger said. “I’ve set up some lab space downstairs and in the garage, but I don’t need much equipment to do my research now.”

“Food’s done!” came the shout from the grill tender, and shortly the plate of food appeared on the table. The meat dripped with juices and sauce.

“Looks amazing,” Evie said, feeling the hunger from not having eaten since lunch.

“Yes it does,” Silas echoed, amazed at how hungry he suddenly found himself.

“Dig in, there is a lot of time for work talk,” Roger said, motioning to the spread on the table in front of them.

The group started eating, and Silas and Evie learned a lot about the research group. Maggie was the oldest, at 29, working on a PhD with Roger, although she realized that the university might not recognize her work. The other two, David, and grill tender, George, both 24, were starting as master’s students trying to create a coherent text of their theory.

“I followed Roger, right after he left the university,” Maggie told Silas and Evie. “I was working on my masters at the time, and was able to complete

that with a mix of work here and at the university. But the PhD is based entirely here.”

“David and I joined just a year ago,” George said. “We graduated after Roger left, so that was the first year of our program.”

“You work here?” Silas asked all three assistants.

“Yep,” Maggie answered, giving Silas and Evie a comfortable smile.

“The garage is a makeshift lecture hall for large groups, and the basement houses the computers and offices for us, along with a smaller lecture area for group discussions,” Roger added, pointing randomly in directions Silas imagined were the garage and basement entrances.

“If you don’t mind me asking,” Evie said, looking at Roger. “Why did you leave?”

Roger finished the rib in his hand, and made a point to lick clean each finger, one at a time. The process seemed to be excruciatingly slow, as Silas and Evie waited for Roger to begin answering the question. Roger wiped his hands and face for effect, keeping Silas and Evie in suspense for even longer.

“Let me tell you,” Roger began, and leaned back in the chair, allowing the meal to settle. “I was at the university, teaching theoretical physics, how things move, connect, behave, and I was studying the grand motions of the universe—how to launch things and land on things, including different propulsion methods, until *that day*,” he paused to do some counting. “Three years and four months ago, when I walked into Andrews lab. Probably the worst thing I ever did.”

“What happened?” Evie asked. She leaned forward in her chair, wanting the answer to reach her that extra 1/100th of a second faster.

“I saw the same thing you did,” Roger said, disappointing Evie, as she deflated audibly. “I saw the inexplicable. A child! Knowing things that are impossible to know. My mind could not fathom how that child could talk with such confidence of people and events half a continent away and a century ago. One of Andrews’ lab rats showed me a newspaper article. Fact for fact, that little child identified the story, as if he had just lived it yesterday.

“I could not fathom how it is possible, yet there it was, on the page in front of me, matching the child’s words,” Roger continued. “The scientific rigor, of course, is not there—it’s a child’s playroom, you see—but that didn’t change what I saw.”

“I was pretty blown away by the lab,” Silas said.

“Exactly!” Roger nodded. “My mind was dashing, side to side, trying to figure out how this little child, he was not yet four years old, could know things from a century ago.”

“Hoaxes are not impossible,” Maggie said.

“Professor Andrews explained to us how hoaxes could happen,” Evie added with a nod.

Roger nodded. “Yes, but it should seem so easy to expose a hoax, yet this particular child seemed adamant about every fact, never once wavering or changing the story in the slightest. In fact, with each pressing question, he got even more adamant in his answers, offering supporting facts one after another—almost in a desperate attempt to make us believe him.”

“I was in the lab for the questioning, and what really hit me, what destroyed me, was his face. I have never seen a face like that on a three year old. Andrews was in stride—the child fell into a particularly talkative mood—and his questioning kept getting more and more direct and challenging. I felt like jumping up and shouting ‘this is not police headquarters, Andrews!’ but restrained myself.

“I’m glad I kept my restraint, but that moment shattered my understand of everything. Every question Andrews asked was answered with a confidence I myself could not express in what I had for breakfast a week ago! Yet here was this child, a mere child!, answering questions over and over, adding facts faster than the little lab rats could write them down, and his face . . .” Roger trailed off again, losing his happy energy, going to a dark place.

“The face of a man trapped in another body, is the only way I can describe it,” Roger finally said. “Imagine you are trying to explain to an unbelieving judge that you are innocent, after being sentenced for a crime you did not commit. That face of sheer abandonment. How!? How does a child know how to make a face that shows the abandonment of an eighty year old man?” By now Roger was shouting. He slammed his palm onto the wooden table, causing all the silverware to rattle.

“Oh, forgive me,” Roger said, returning to the moment with all the noise. “I am not trying to scare anyone.”

Maggie and David and George laughed it off and Evie smiled, but Silas noted the expression on Roger’s face, and how it was not very inviting.

“I just get so caught up in that look, I can’t help it,” Roger said.

“And what happened after that?” Evie asked, enthralled in the story.

“I went back to my lab, looked around, found the board of my latest endeavor, erased it all, and just wrote the word ‘HOW?’ Then I walked out,” Roger said. “The university said that was my ‘breakdown’ and took my lab. They set me up in a ‘watching ward’ in case something was to happen.”

“Did that upset you?” Silas asked, feeling tension creep back into his shoulders.

“Quite the opposite, actually,” Roger admitted, a small smile growing on his face. “I had three days of no distractions and lots of time to think. I was able to refuse any medications and prove to them that I had no symptoms of a psychotic break, so I was free to wander about and do as I please. Using those three days, I was able to ponder the universe and beyond, and come up with my theory.”

“Theory?” Evie asked.

“The *Theory of Everything*,” Roger said with a sly smile, leaning in to Evie’s personal space, almost right up to her face.

“Everything?” Evie dared to breathe the words.

“Yes, everything!” Roger finally leaned back. “Everything that matters anyway. The macro-cosmos if you want to call it that.”

Evie had never heard of the macro-cosmos, and by the look on Silas’ face, he hadn’t either.

Roger noticed their confusion. “Everything in this macro-cosmos is dependent on change.”

“You mean time?” Silas asked.

“My boy! I would have said the exact same thing three years and four months ago. But not now,” Roger said. “Time doesn’t exist. Time *can’t* exist.”

“What do you mean, time can’t exist?” Evie asked. Looking around, she saw that Maggie, David and George seemed to be following along perfectly as they finished the meal.

“Time fails many of the tests to be an independent entity,” Roger started. “Therefore it can’t exist.”

“But we all get older over time,” Silas said, offering an easy counter-example.

“True,” Roger began. “Very true. But that is not time. That is *change*. Change is different than time.”

“How are they different?” Evie asked.

"I'll give an example most people can relate to. Most people have traveled at some point. By car or by plane."

"I flew yesterday," Evie answered. "And Silas and I drove today."

"And you sat next to a person or two on the flight?" Roger asked.

"Yes, two people."

"Did any of you three sleep? Or try to sleep?" Roger asked.

"I did, for a couple hours," Evie said. It hadn't been the best sleep, but it had helped her feel rested.

"Good. Now imagine someone staying awake the entire flight," Roger said. "The person asleep, such as you, experienced a much faster flight, didn't you?"

"I guess," Evie said. "It seemed faster since I was asleep."

"All three of you experienced the same time difference, but to you, it felt two hours quicker, because you slept for part of it," Roger said. "The clock difference was the same, but the 'felt' time was different. That's one reason time can't exist."

"That kinda makes sense," Evie said.

"No it doesn't," Silas said. "That's just sleeping. That happens every night."

"True," Roger said. "We are still researching exactly what happens during sleep, so your point is valid. I just used the flight to give an example. But let me challenge you, then." Roger looked at Silas, as if to read his mind. "How do these children of Andrews' know the past?"

"I don't know," Silas said. "But I am not a scientist, so my not understanding isn't a huge shock to anyone." Silas lightened the mood with a slight smile.

"I am not challenging your intellect. I am challenging your beliefs," Roger said, matching the smile. "I know you are smart, because there is no other possible way you could be at this table," Roger said, his smile growing. "Why do you believe Time exists?"

Time still seemed so obvious to Silas. "Because things happen," he said.

"What happens?" Roger pressed.

"The Sun rises and sets," Evie answered.

"Good," Roger said. "Is that change? Or time?"

"Both?" Evie said, but it came out like a question.

"If you had to pick just one?" Roger pressed.

“I guess if there was only one, it would have to be change,” Silas said. “If it was just time, then the position wouldn’t move?”

“Quite correct,” Roger said. “That’s how I would see it as well. In fact, the ancients created the time of day by the change of the position of the Sun into a day.”

“Ancients?” Evie and Silas both said at the same time, exchanging looks. Chills ran down Evie’s back.

“Yes. Older civilizations, Egyptians and Greeks and a few others created strong clocks and calendar systems. In fact, the Egyptian base 60 system is what we use today.” Roger looked off at the lowering sun. “Speaking of change, it’s getting dark. We can take the discussion inside, or down to the basement. Or continue on another day.” Roger sat back and patted his full belly.

Silas rose and stretched after the meal. “Stay? Or come back?” he asked Evie.

Evie looked at the group and saw the eager faces before her. But the totality of the day’s events hit her. “I’m so sorry, but I’m wiped out. I’ve been traveling since last night, and aside from the sleep on the plane and a few hours in the car, I’ve been up for a long time.”

“Oh, that’s quite alright,” Roger said. “No apology needed. Having been exposed to all of this new information isn’t easy either, which tired your minds out as much as your bodies. And having fundamental beliefs challenged can drain all of your energies. Come by tomorrow?”

Tomorrow sounded perfect. “Count on it,” she said.

Chapter 8

“What do you think?” Evie asked Silas as they settled in the car.

“About the food?”

“About the time theory!”

“Honestly, that went way over my head,” he said. “The only thing that I understood was the ‘ancients’ and that freaks me out.”

“That definitely surprised me too. Even Roger saw us jump up at that.”

Silas set the phone GPS to the hotel and pulled out onto the road. “Did you understand everything?”

“Some of it. It makes sense in a way. Like change always happens, and time is kinda like feeling how it happens, maybe?”

“Yeah, I don’t know how I feel about that. But that kid knowing all that stuff confuses the hell out of me, and it would be nice to know what’s going on there. Especially after watching Timmy being grilled by Andrews. Like how does that work?”

“Professor Andrews’ answer seems best to me—something supernatural,” she said. “Or religious. Because I don’t see how science could explain it.”

Evie paused for a moment, then shrugged. “Unless it is all a very highly orchestrated hoax.”

“Everything we’ve seen today baffles science I think,” Silas said, pulling into the hotel.

They sat for a while in the hotel parking lot, digesting the food and information. “I sure can’t explain anything I’ve seen today,” she said. “But there are many things that can’t be explained by science that aren’t supernatural, such as Dark Matter.”

“If you say so. This is where I am not very smart.”

“There is a difference between educated and smart,” she said, smiling to put him at ease. “I haven’t seen anything that leads me to believe you aren’t smart.”

Silas returned Evie’s smile. “I’ll get the bags and we can get settled in for the night,” he said as they got out of the car.

The hotel clerk looked up the reservation and checked them in. Silas looked at Evie for a second when the clerk asked for a credit card, and then offered his. They collected the keys and walked up toward the rooms.

“Goodnight, Silas,” Evie said arriving at her room first.

“Goodnight, Evie,” Silas said. “It was a very fun and interesting first day.”

The next morning Evie found Silas in the lobby breakfast buffet at a table. “How is the breakfast?”

“Make your own waffle bar. How much better can you get?” he answered, showing a plate of waffles he wasted no time attacking.

She laughed at him. “I’ll just have some of the oatmeal and juice.”

“Suit yourself,” he said, between bites of waffles.

She selected her breakfast and returned to the table, finding the plate of waffles almost finished. She sat silently for a moment then began to eat her meal.

“Did you do any more thinking last night?” he asked.

“A bit. But to be honest, I don’t think I got better at understanding anything.”

“Me neither,” he said, working diligently on the waffles. “Still goes over my head. Change. Time. Kids living in the past. It’s all weird.”

“Maybe it will make more sense today,” she said, though that seemed doubtful. “Or tomorrow.”

“When do you want to head back over? Anything else you want to see today?”

“I don’t really have an agenda, other than to talk a bit more with Roger.”

Silas pushed the empty plate away. “No reason to return to the university?”

“Not that I can think of. If we need to learn more after talking with Roger, we might have to go back, but so far I don’t see any reason.”

He leaned back in his chair and watched her eat. “Fair enough. When do you want to drive back to catch your flight?”

“That is still a big unknown to me. There is just so much that might need to be learned?”

“Your return flight is tomorrow night. We’ll have to leave tomorrow by noon to make it.”

“I might change it,” she said.

“Why?” Silas asked. He tried to hide his excitement at the thought of being able to see her for longer.

“Because we might not be ready by then?”

“Are you sure? Isn’t there a penalty for changing the flight?”

“Yeah, but we haven’t even discovered what the dreams mean. I am more concerned about discovering the meaning than the penalty. We only just found Timmy and Robert, and those are freaky enough, and now Roger is interested in the ancients and the cylinder, and then we might manage to get to the meaning of dreams part. It’s all too much to imagine doing in a single day without doing our heads in.”

“Doing our heads in?” he asked, giving her a confused look.

She laughed at the look on his face. “Oh. That’s what Red says when something is confusing.”

He glanced over at the waffle bar but decided not to eat more. A big day lay ahead of them.

Evie and Silas arrived at Roger’s home lab a little after ten AM. Just like the afternoon before, he eagerly greeted them before they reached the steps to the door.

“Welcome one and all! Did you eat yet?” he asked, gesturing for them to enter.

“Yes. We ate quite well, actually,” Evie said, smiling to Silas.

“Good to hear. Are you ready for the twenty cent tour?”

“Sure,” Silas said, feeling much more comfortable than yesterday in the stranger’s home.

“Here is the relaxation center,” Roger said, pointing to the den with the TV and fireplace, “and here is the restaurant.” He pointed at the door to the patio and the small kitchen inside the home, finishing with his familiar laugh.

“Down there is the restroom and my bedroom,” he said, pointing down a small hallway, “and here is the entry to the lab.” The trio descended a small stairway off the kitchen/patio that led down to a large open floor plan basement. “In the back are three tiny offices for my assistants, and this,” he pointed to the main area, “is the computer room and research lab area.”

Silas noticed several whiteboards on the back walls, filled with large pictures and diagrams, instead of equations as he would have expected from a scientist.

“Nice,” Evie said, nodding her head at all of the facilities.

Maggie was the first to exit her tiny office and approach the group. “Morning all.”

“Morning, Maggie,” Evie replied.

“Hi,” Silas said.

“Maggie, would you like to explain your research and thesis?” Roger asked.

“Sure,” Maggie said, with an excited smile. “My research is to design an experiment that tests for change but not time.”

“How is that possible?” Silas asked, cocking his head toward her and the whiteboards behind her. The whole time/change thing was still pretty muddled in his mind.

“I’m still working that out,” Maggie said, with a shrug. “But I think I’m getting closer every day.”

“Maggie is examining the time problem in more detail,” Roger said, beaming at his student as he sat in a chair in the middle of the whiteboards. Maggie motioned for Silas and Evie to sit also and moved to the desk in front of them.

Maggie took a deep breath and focused on Silas and Evie. “In physics, there are seven standard units. Most people can name three or four of them easily. Can you two think of any?”

“Length?” Evie said.

“Excellent.” Maggie wrote it on a whiteboard.

“Time?” Silas said, figuring that must be one of them.

“Good,” Maggie said, adding it to the list, with a knowing smile. “Time is definitely one of the seven, so your answer is absolutely correct.”

“Mass?” Evie said, pulling on the memory of her old science classes.

“Good again,” Maggie replied, adding the third unit to the whiteboard. “Those are the first three most people get. Newton’s Law stating Force equals Mass times Acceleration is pretty drilled into most of us, and has units of kilogram meter per second squared.” She wrote the equation and the unit abbreviations on the board.

“How about volume?” Silas said, not entirely sure of his answer but knowing that volume was a very common science unit.

“Nope,” Maggie said, twisting the dry-erase marker in between her fingers with a small smile. “Volume is a derived unit of length—length cubed, to be exact.”

“Crap,” Silas said, and the others laughed.

“To spare any further embarrassment, the others are . . .” and she started writing, “Temperature, Electric current, Intensity, and Quantity.” She finished writing and smiled. “Many people recognize temperature, but few people understand that current, intensity, or quantity are fundamental units. All the units except Time share some fundamental similarities. For example, think about how you might explain to an alien race what these units represent. How would you go about to do that?” Maggie posed to Evie and Silas, smiling as she waited for them to respond.

“Um . . .” Silas started after a few seconds of thought.

Maggie reached inside the desk and produced a ruler. “For length, a good instrument would include a ruler or meter stick, with increments to show the different length segments. For quantity, I would include things that I can count and show a progression from smaller to larger quantities, such as representations of the counting from one to one hundred.”

“I get it,” Evie said.

“I’m getting there,” Silas added.

Maggie went on. “The others get more complicated—not because of the nature of the units, but because of their representations. Electric current and intensity—usually described as light intensity or brightness—would need specialized equipment to store a particular value, but it can be done. For

example, looking at a star on an intensity chart could indicate a scale from one to ten.”

“What is intensity?” Evie asked. “I kind of recall it be something relating to power.”

“Good memory, Evie,” Maggie said. “Intensity has units of watts per meter squared. And it is the representation of the power distributed across an area.”

Evie nodded at the description as she tried to process the answer.

Maggie returned the board and made a check next to temperature. “Temperature would also depend on the surroundings and where the measurement is made, but is easy enough to measure with some sort of thermometer.”

“What is temperature?” Silas asked, looking for a more scientific definition.

“Temperature,” she answered, “is the measure of the average random molecular kinetic energy of a substance.”

“I thought it was just how warm it was outside,” Silas said, causing a laugh among the four participants. “But your description sounds way more complicated.”

Maggie shook her head. “Sorry, that’s the scientist in me. Basically it’s how much energy molecules have in a substance. Air molecules, for example, are bouncing around right now with a particular energy, and if the temperature goes up, those molecules will have more energy and bounce faster.”

“Ah, I get it,” Silas replied, and it was like a light switch turned on in his brain.

“Trust me,” Maggie said. “This isn’t the first time I’ve had to explain all this. You two are actually catching on way faster than most.”

Silas doubted that was true, but he appreciated her saying it.

“And don’t forget,” David said, walking out of his office, “that ‘average random kinetic energy’ is a term used to describe the statistical probability distribution of the velocities—which relates to kinetic energy—of a substance. George and I are working on a way to describe this for the textbook that would make it understandable, but we always get a bit too scientific. We’re trying to take lessons from Maggie.”

On cue, George walked out of the office behind him.

“And I’ve told you two not to start with ‘average random,’” Maggie said. “You need to explain it.”

David laughed. It was obvious they’d had this discussion before. “Right. Average . . . When molecules bounce around, they act something like pool balls,” David said, “When hitting another ball, the cue ball sometimes slows way down, or stops, or keeps going at a good speed, and the other ball also starts moving. Every air molecule collision can produce those type of results—but when ‘averaged’ the velocities even out to a constant number.”

“And random,” George added, “is just the natural air, without any external driving forces—like a fan or other means capable of imparting kinetic energy.”

“So it’s the average of just what is around us,” Silas said.

“Exactly,” David said.

George put up his hand. “But not just air,” he said. “Water, wood, the concrete in the floor, all of these have average random molecular kinetic energies that give them a temperature.”

“You just said temperature is kinetic energy,” Evie said, a random thought from science jumping into her head. “And power I remember being energy per second.”

Silas looked at her, wondering how she knew so much . . . and could remember it so well.

“Correct,” Maggie said.

“But kinetic energy isn’t a fundamental unit,” Evie said, trying to put together into words her strands of thoughts.

“True,” David agreed. “Energy is a derived unit, usually in joules, which is a Newton-meter, and that breaks up into a kilogram meter squared per second squared.” David added the unit definition to the whiteboard. $E = \text{kg} \cdot \text{m}^2 / \text{s}^2$.

“If energy isn’t a fundamental unit,” Evie continued, finally figuring out how best to express her question, “how are intensity and temperature able to be fundamental units when they are energies? If volume isn’t a fundamental unit because it is a derived unit, then energy based units shouldn’t be fundamental units.”

“What a fantastic question!” Roger exclaimed, glowing with enthusiasm. “I don’t think I’ve ever had a student—much less a non-majored student—ask such a good question.”

Evie felt her face redden at the praise. All she could do was nod quickly to Roger and wait for the answer.

“The cop out answer,” Roger began, jumping in to aid his assistants, “is that, while they are energies, they are different enough ‘quantities’ of energies that the numbers would make calculations extremely cumbersome. For example, the kinetic energy of room temperature air is a number starting with zero and probably having twenty zeros after the decimal point before the first non-zero digit. Such as 0.00000000000000000000303.” Roger wrote the number out on the whiteboard. “It is much easier to just talk about temperatures as a whole. And temperature also takes into account the different masses of each molecule, so there aren’t individual calculations for all of the individual gases that make up the air we are sitting in.”

“That is a very interesting answer,” Evie said.

“And intensity shares the same problem,” Maggie said, picking up on Roger’s description. “The numbers are either big or small depending on the relative position of the observer. An observer close to the Sun, for example, would have a very large intensity number if computed in terms of power. But I don’t have any numbers to back that up at the moment.”

“But what you think is that different forms and calculations of energy can have ‘easier’ units such as temperature and intensity,” Evie said.

“That’s the theory,” Roger said. “But science isn’t as fool-proof as people are led to believe. A good example is the definition of length—a meter. One meter is defined as the length light travels in a fraction of a second. But we also measure light in meters per second, so a meter could be any length based on the fraction of time used. If using one millisecond, then light moves at one thousand meters per second, and each meter is one thousandth of a second long.”

Evie scrunched up her face and looked at Roger. “Isn’t that circular reasoning?” she asked.

Roger smiled and nodded at Evie. “My thoughts exactly. In order for things to work properly, each unit should be independently generated, not rely on itself.”

“To be fair,” Maggie said, “the new definition picks the fraction of a second to match the previous standard meter length. Nobody is trying to trick people by changing definitions.”

“That’s true,” David said, “the definition of a meter is how far light travels over that fraction of a second, which doesn’t depend on length at all.”

“Good luck putting a ‘meter light timer’ into a spacecraft,” George said, causing the group to laugh. “I don’t think I would understand what a timer that clicks off in 299,792,458ths of a second could be for.”

“What about Time? Why don’t you think that is a unit?” Silas asked. He wasn’t following along like Evie was, but if what they were saying were the case for two of the physics units, then would it be the same for all of them?

“Nice question, Silas,” Roger said, then he looked to Maggie to explain.

Maggie was ready. “Time is different,” she said. “Because how would it be shown? Can one second be stored in a spacecraft to be sent somewhere? No. Time is ‘used up’ the moment it happens. Can you put the twenty-second millionth second of this year in a box and send it?”

“But I can put something lasting one second in the box,” Silas challenged, gaining a little confidence.

“Yes, you can,” Maggie said. “But is that Change? Or is it Time?”

Silas really thought about it. It could go either way. “Maybe time?” Silas said, not sure anymore.

“Maybe,” Maggie said. “And that’s the essence of my experiment. I’m trying to come up with a way to differentiate between Change and Time. There are some qualities of Time that seem to make it not a unit. One quality that may disqualify it, is that Time has no zero. You can’t have ‘no’ Time. I can have no mass in a situation, no current, no intensity, no length, and so on, but Time moves on, no matter what?”

“No temperature? Everything has a temperature,” Silas added.

“Good point,” Maggie said. “But I can also control temperature in ways. I can control all the other units in different ways for an experiment, but Time just goes on and on. Time also only moves in one direction, whereas I can measure length in any direction, and current can alternate or flow in either direction.”

“One other quality that makes Time different is the concept of ‘observation,” George said. “One of our theories of Change vs Time is that Change needs an observer, while ‘Time’—or at least ‘science’ definition of Time is that it has been progressing from the beginning, the Big Bang, without needing to be observed.”

“Like with your flight,” David said, jumping in, “or when you were sleeping last night into this morning. You didn’t know how much Time passed because you weren’t able to observe it. The only measure of how much Time had elapsed was the clock, or the Sun’s position.”

The more they talked, the more excited the two assistants got. Maggie cut in. “If I cut a board, can you tell how long each half is without observation?”

“And does turning on a light brighten a room if there is no observer?” David added. “These are examples where observation of things is necessary, but ‘science’ makes Time out to always be known without an observer.” He made air quotes around ‘science’ for effect.

Watching the three of them bounce back and forth with ideas was dizzying. Evie could hardly keep up.

“This doesn’t mean that Time isn’t important,” Maggie said. “Time as a means of keeping track of change is very important in every field of study. But for the purposes of this understanding, Time is a made up unit that is based off of Change. Thinking about the aliens again—there are a number of ways to show Change, but no way to show Time. Could you successfully tell someone where the beginning of Time is, or where in the entirety of Time we are living this very second?”

“Not to mention that Time itself is a symbolic human creation,” David said.

“Symbolic?” Silas asked.

David nodded. “We humans, not including any potential aliens among us, create and use symbols for all of our thoughts. For example, language is a totally symbolic creation—both in vocalization and in written form. Each symbol, such as the alphabet, is a building block for constructing something bigger, ending up in representative thought. So are numbers for that matter. Mathematics is just a broader logical system composed of those symbols. Take Roman Numerals versus the Arabic numbering system. Both have concepts of addition and subtraction using different symbols. And calculations with an abacus yield results by using quantization along with symbolism. Much like language, Mathematics establishes a system with a set of rules, and when obeying the rules, no matter what symbols are used, the answers will still be logical and consistent.”

“Language rules?” Silas asked. He tried to think of rules that language followed. “You’re saying like grammar and stuff?”

“Exactly,” David exclaimed. “In language, the rules aren’t meant to be broken, but can be. All you have to do is speak English to know that. But math, on the other hand, is very unforgiving if you try to bend the rules. Yet in any replacement symbolic system, whether binary, or hexadecimal, or a number system using stars, moons, and horseshoes, if the rules are consistent, any set of symbols will produce consistent results.”

“So is Time symbolic like numbers and letters?” Silas asked.

“Kind of,” David said. “A ‘year’ is defined as the time it takes for Earth to revolve around the Sun. The ancients used a specific counting system for keeping tracking of Time—sixty seconds in a minute, sixty minutes in an hour, and twenty-four hours in a day. Each of those divisions is completely symbolic.”

“And Change?” Silas asked, encouraged by his recent deduction.

“Change requires an observer,” George said. “Right at this moment, you are experiencing a change. And then another one, And another one. All of these changes put together create this symbolic representation we call Time, but Time falls apart when the change is not observed, unless the ‘science’ standard is adopted, which states the ‘Time always exists and moves forward’ and behaves exactly like now for all of the past and will for all of the future.”

“How can Time fall apart?” Silas asked, “I remember yesterday. And the day before.” Those were the days he talked with Evie. He would never forget those.

“Your observation makes ‘yesterday’ exist,” Maggie said. “But suppose you were in a coma, did ‘yesterday’ exist?”

“For everybody else it totally would.”

“And they are observers,” Maggie said, giving Silas a friendly smile.

The overload of physics information was starting to make Evie’s head hurt. And they still hadn’t gotten to the thing she’d been dying to know. She didn’t want the overly-excited assistants to lose energy before it was explained. “All this is great. But what does it have to do with the Theory of Everything?”

Chapter 9

“You want the big reveal already?” Roger asked with a laugh. Then he gave a nod to Maggie.

“The theory is called The Fundamental Theory of Change,” Maggie said. “There is no Time, and everything we experience is based on Observations of Change.”

“Aren’t you just changing the words from ‘Time’ to ‘Change’?” Silas asked after several seconds of digesting Maggie’s statement.

“Good question,” Maggie said. “The difference is based on the quality that *Change needs an Observer* for Change to exist. Time, as science ‘knows’ or ‘defines’ it, exists from beginning to end, with or without observation. For my research, I need to figure out how to prove this easily. I have some good analogies, but no concrete research methods yet.”

“Are you close?” Evie asked.

Maggie shrugged. “It’s hard to prove things. For example, suppose someone says there are eight billion people on the planet. How would you *know*? Have *you* counted them all? The majority of people will just accept

without proof that there is some accurate method to add up everybody, to get that number. Yet we accept that Time has and always will exist—without proof?”

“But we have proof,” Silas said. “We have documents from the past, and stuff like that.”

“And when were they written? How do you know? Did you observe when they were written?”

George raised his hand for a second and then chimed in. “One example that you probably relate to well, and that is in the textbook, is a hotel room. Check in time is at three pm, right?”

“Yes,” Evie said.

“And when you stepped into that room, it was organized?” George asked.

Evie nodded.

“So, by your observation, the room has always existed in that exact state,” George said.

“Hardly,” Silas said. “The bed was probably unmade that morning.”

“Exactly!” George said. “Just because you see something at some point doesn’t mean you can infer its state prior to that observation. But that’s exactly what science is trying to do. Science says ‘Time is moving at this rate, for this reason, and has always done that,’ and that’s a gross generalization.”

“Or how about a computer and its clock,” David said. “If a computer is shut down and then started up, how does the computer know what happened before it started? It has records, but nothing observable or measurable proves anything about what the computer truly did before it was booted up. All those records could even be copied from another computer onto a fresh drive, and so on.”

“I still don’t get what the issue is,” Silas said, and Evie nodded.

“The issue . . .” Maggie started, and then tried thinking of a way to express her thoughts. “. . . is that we are setting out to define the concept of Change. When we are awake, Change and Time are exactly the same. One second of Change equates to One second of Time. When you fall asleep, you cannot observe Change, so there is no Change, but ‘Time marches on’ or it should, so they say.”

“But I can observe change,” Evie said. “If something is different when I wake up, didn’t I observe change?”

“Good question,” Maggie said. “But when did the change happen? If you didn’t observe the Change, you only know it changed, not when, or how long, or at what time, that Change happened. Unobserved Change just creates a *when* situation.”

“Ah,” Evie said.

David jumped in again. “Here is another question. Suppose you watch your favorite television show. Friends for example. It ran for 10 years. If you took a snapshot of the cast at the very first episode and a snapshot of the cast at the very last episode, would they look the same?”

“They do *not* look the same,” Evie said, sitting up in her chair with a hint of attitude. “I know that for a fact!”

The group laughed at her response.

David continued, pressing the point home. “Point to the moment in Time when they changed.”

“I can’t, because the changes were so gradual.”

“Right! It’s another example of Time vs. Change,” David said. “By looking at large jumps in Change, Time can be inferred. But if we look at small chunks, Change is sometimes unnoticeable, which leads to an unknown Time.”

“So for Friends, over those ten years, Change and Time continued to move. There was a big change in the cast over the years, but in small increments, it wasn’t noticeable. The question then becomes, how does Time figure in?”

“Which is?” Evie asked.

“Suppose you sat down and binge watched all 10 seasons,” Maggie said. “And none of the actors changed in age. What would be your conclusion?”

“They definitely weren’t made over 10 years,” Evie said.

“Exactly,” Maggie said. “And imagine if a single season had the actors age ten years. What would you conclude then?”

“That the season took ten years to film,” Silas answered, getting the idea now.

“Yes,” Maggie said. “The idea that Change and Time go together is fundamental to the human understanding of the world.”

“And,” David jumped in, “our idea is that Time symbolizes Change, and Time, by itself, does not exist.”

“I honestly still don’t get that,” Silas said. He’d tried to understand. He really had.

“Maybe this will help,” George said, handing a copy of a book to Silas and Evie. “This is the text of the Fundamental Theory of Change. It might walk you through the ideas a bit slower than having everything dumped on you at once.”

“Thanks.” Evie briefly paged through the small book.

Roger jumped up and ran to the desk, seemingly moving faster than his shape would allow. “This has been wonderful, but I need to get some answers too. We should walk through the multiverse theory now.”

Just the idea of something called the multiverse made Silas’ head pound. “What’s the multiverse?” he asked. He wasn’t sure if he could handle much more.

“It’s the idea that there are parallel universes all around us, some with similar general outcomes but possibly different smaller events, and some with major differences,” David said.

“Like in the Spiderverse,” Silas said, finally latching onto a reference. If he could equate it to something he knew that might help. “Or wasn’t there a show on about that? Sliders?” He’d caught a few episodes on television.

“Yes, Sliders!” David said. “It had a group of people traveling through the multiverse. They would jump from one universe to another, maintaining a continuous ‘Time’ reference.” David finished by making air quotes around ‘Time.’

“Yeah, exactly,” Silas said. He finally felt like he was making some connection with the graduate students.

“What do you mean by ‘Time’ reference?” Evie asked, repeating the air quotes of David.

“Right,” David said. “They jump from universe to universe, but it’s always the same year. So one universe is very much the same as another with no time travel. They don’t slide into 1850, for example. If a world uses 1850 technology it is because that universe hasn’t advanced beyond that yet. Or if they slide into a dinosaur world, it’s because the dinosaur extinction never happened, but it is still their current year reference.”

“But that’s just science fiction,” Silas said. “Not reality.”

“Are you sure?” Roger said. He approached a desk with a long cylinder sitting on top. He watched Evie and Silas intently as he ran his hand over the cylinder. “You mentioned a cylinder in your dream. Something like this?”

Silas shook his head. “It was more like two cylinders put together and a third not connected anymore.”

Roger’s jaw dropped. “Then we must discuss the multiverse!”

“Okay . . .” Evie said.

“The multiverse . . .” Roger began, running his hand along the cylinder again, “Suppose, at this moment, you need to choose between two equally likely choices, like a coin toss. That single decision creates two equally likely universes—one with choice A, and one with choice B.”

“But I didn’t choose one of them,” Silas said.

“In the multiverse theory, a different *version* of you did, who now exists and will live in that parallel universe,” Roger said. “In this universe you are sitting here today, and in another, you are driving back home.”

“What if the choice isn’t likely to happen?” Silas asked, “Like if I had to run a stop sign, or break a law?”

“The probability that something happens factors into the ‘likelihood’ of that universe existing, but because there are infinite parallel universes, the multiverse theory states that any event does happen in at least one of them.”

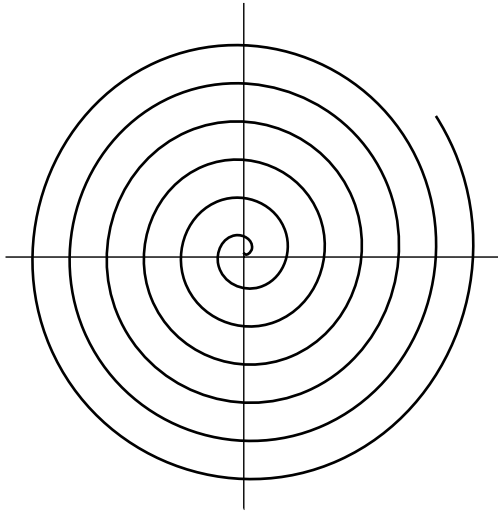
“Any event?” Evie asked.

Roger nodded. “The unimaginable number of universes is what guarantees that every event exists in at least one universe, and more likely within a set of many universes.”

“How?” Silas asked.

Roger picked up a piece of paper from the desk and held it up facing the group.

“Let’s start from the beginning. With this piece of paper and the spiral.”



Silas and Evie looked at the paper and nodded. “Seems simple enough,” Silas said, “but I’m sure it will get complicated quickly.”

“The spiral on this piece of paper represents a person’s lifetime,” Roger said. “In the center is the time of birth—or conception, if you prefer.” He pointed to the origin. “The curve is the path of the person’s life afterwards. In the Fundamental Theory of Change idea, the curve on the paper rotates at a set rate—and for simplicity, I have defined it as one revolution per year.”

Both Silas and Evie nodded, relieved at understanding the basic concept.

“If this was a standard racetrack,” Roger continued, “the first lap would finish very quickly. But, reversing the roles—where the track moves beneath the race car—the car actually seems to travel very slowly at first, and each subsequent ‘lap’ the car starts to move faster and faster, because the track gets longer.”

“Oh, that’s awesome,” Evie said. “Kind of like how wavelength is inversely related to frequency for a wave.”

“Exactly!” Roger said.

Silas was just going to have to trust them on that one.

“This is the start of the idea that observation actually influences the perception of time,” Roger continued. “Remember when you are a child, how long it took waiting for Christmas to arrive?”

The group laughed and nodded.

Roger continued. "It seemed to take forever, because the observation from the race car in those first years, goes very, very slowly due to the slow speed of the car. An adult forced to drive that slowly would most likely just get out and walk."

"And time flies when people get older!" Evie bounced in her seat. "That's what my dad always says!"

"Good!" Roger said, smiling at Evie's enthusiasm. "Time starts to seem like it zips by to the observer, because the race car is now traveling so fast. 'Where did the time go?' is a common expression after about age thirty."

"So, the speed of the paper is the same," Silas began, "but because the track is longer, the perceived Time is different?"

"Quite correct," Roger said. "The idea that Change is constant—the rotation of the paper—but that produces a different perceived effect on Time is the key idea."

"Can you ever prove that Change is constant?" Evie asked.

"It can be tested by observation and inference through a few thought experiments," Maggie answered. "But setting up a rigorous scientific experiment is a challenge. Mammals, for the most part, experience about two billion heartbeats in a lifetime. Suppose that a single heartbeat ticked off one second of perceived time. What would that look like for small animals?"

"Time would seem really fast for them," Evie said after a few seconds, finally understanding the train of thought.

"Yes," Maggie said. "If a small animal had ten heartbeats for every human heartbeat, then time would seem to be ten times faster for the animal."

"And it would move really fast?" Silas said. "At least to us, right?"

"Right!" Roger said. "And an elephant would perceive time moving much slower compared to a human. This is one way to think about perceived Time. I call these perceived differences the *Time Dilation* principle, my apologies to Einstein. Faster heartbeats experience time on a faster scale. This also fits into the child's perception of time taking forever, but falls apart at old age, because heartbeats seem to stabilize about age 18-25 and don't change much after that, even in ages 90 and above."

"Still, that is a good thought," Evie said.

George raised his hand and jumped in. "Another theory is the Percent of Time Theory for Perception. It's the thought that the percent of a life—or

percent of memory—determines how ‘fast’ time flows. Take the child again. One year for a five year old would be twenty percent of their life—and usually a lot more of their lifetime memories. That year would seem very stretched out, since it is such a significant percentage of the child’s life. To an eighty year old man, one year is only one point two five percent of his lifetime, and therefore would seem to pass much faster based on his collected memories.”

“Those are interesting theories,” Evie said. “They seem like very solid reasoning, at least.”

“It was a start, for sure,” Roger said. “But then the Fundamental Theory of Change fit everything much better, not just for a single person, but for everyone.” He waved the piece of paper for the single person. “After defining a single life span, I can start to stack papers—life spans—on top of each other.” Roger demonstrated by putting stacks and stacks of papers onto the holding mechanism on the table. “And with sufficient paper,” he grunted, hoisting the now heavy mechanism with the stack of papers onto a horizontal platform, and clicked it into place, “I can create the entire timeline of everyone ever born, or conceived.”

Silas and Evie looked at the cylindrical mechanism and holder and took in the stack of paper placed in the middle.

Roger flipped a switch, after taking a second to catch his breath. “Now the universe timeline is alive!” The cylinder with the stack of papers started to slowly turn.

“Is that a rotisserie?” Silas asked with a smile.

Roger laughed loudly at the question. “You’re darned right it is! It spins at a slow speed, but it’s a good visual aid. This is Change. And everyone is along for the ride.”

The group watched the cylindrical stack of paper rotate for a minute.

“Does that make sense to you?” Maggie asked.

“Bits and pieces, for the most part,” Evie said.

“I wouldn’t want to take a test on it, but it’s at least starting to take form in my mind,” Silas said.

“Good,” Maggie said. “Remember the power source is actually Change driving this, and each person on their piece of paper is moving along on their path.”

“What drives the Rotisserie of Change?” Silas asked, pointing to the small motor at the end of the horizontal mechanism.

“You are interested in the Prime Mover?” Roger asked, wiggling the power cord with another laugh.

Silas nodded. “If Change is what drives everything around us, what causes Change?”

“That’s a very good question, and honestly, I don’t have a complete answer. You could call it an external unknown force, or God, or some other invisible mechanism.” He looked squarely at Silas. “What drives Time?”

Silas opened his mouth like he was going to answer but didn’t say a word

Roger watched the paper spin for a few seconds. “If my theory just substitutes Change for Time, let me ask the same question back to you. So in your question, ‘what drives Change?’ I would counter with ‘what drives Time as we know it?’”

“Probably the motion of the sun and stars and planets,” Evie said. “That’s how we measured Time, right?”

“So the motion of stars and planets causes you to age?” Roger pressed, giving Evie a big smile.

“Oh . . .” Evie said, understanding the implication of Roger’s question. “If something visibly changing created Time, like the planets, or if Time even causes those changes, there needs to be something that moves every atom in a prescribed way toward aging.”

“That is a good summary,” Roger said. “I don’t know either. I can’t claim to understand what creates Time or Change. All I know is that there is a similar Prime Mover in either system that is outside of our comprehension. My best guess at what it would be whatever controls ‘Entropy’ but I couldn’t begin to answer what that is. Could be God, or Tao, or anything along those lines.”

“What is Entropy?” Silas asked.

“Entropy is one of the weirdest concepts in science—the measure of a system’s disorder. An ordered desk, for example, is a case of low entropy, while a disorganized one,” Roger pointed to his desk, with random stacks of books and papers, “has a high entropy.”

“Things naturally try to move toward high entropy states, messes, if you will,” Maggie said. “It takes energy to keep things ordered, like a desk or a living cell. It’s quite possible that what we call ‘Time’ is just the consumption of energy to keep things ordered.”

“Ordered? Like arranged?” Silas asked.

Maggie nodded. “Imagine a wall of rubber balls that all want to fall down. You would have to constantly be keeping them in place. For every one that you hold up, another one wants to fall off. That’s why it takes the consumption of energy to keep things ordered. The loss of energy due to entropy could be occurring at a constant rate, and if that is what drives Change then the universe rotates at the speed of Change for everyone.”

“Makes sense,” Silas said.

“Is the speed of Change important?” Evie asked.

“Yes,” Roger said. “If the Speed of Change were different for any one person, that person would age differently than everyone else. And each universe may have its own Speed of Change, but if the universes ever interact, any difference in speed would create obvious splits in Time.”

Maggie stood and walked toward Roger. “If Universe A rotated faster than Universe B, then any interactions from someone in Universe A to Universe B would occur earlier. For example, Evie in Universe A would pop into Universe B in the 1720s, and never meet her Universe B self.”

“That’s so confusing,” Silas said.

“It definitely can be,” Roger said, “which is why this lab is working to figure it out. Here is another thought to confuse you.” Roger nodded for Maggie to take over.

Maggie moved behind the cylinder. “Forget everything you know about Time. Try to imagine Time doesn’t exist.”

“Done!” Silas said, only half joking. It got the laughter response he expected.

“If you forget about Time, and just think about Change,” Maggie said, “then everybody on this rotating cylinder can be alive!” Maggie paused to see if the pair understood on some level. “And living their lives in their observation timelines.”

“I kinda see that,” Silas said, pointing to the lower half of the cylinder. “They could be living because they don’t overlap that half.” He pointed to the upper half of the cylinder.

“But it doesn’t matter where on the cylinder they are,” Maggie said.

“How can that be?” Evie asked.

“Look around this room,” Roger said, unable to contain his excitement. “Each of us in this room has our own piece of paper life cycle, correct?”

Nods from everyone told Roger everyone followed the idea.

“And that paper is rotating at the speed of Change, right? But . . .” He motioned for David to move alongside him as he produced two more pieces of paper with the spiral curve drawn on them. “David could be here.” Roger stabbed at a random point on the graph. “And I could be here!” He pointed to the center of the graph—to represent his birth.

“How?” Evie asked. “You are visibly much older than David.”

“Only in Time!” Roger said. “And since Time doesn’t drive Change, I could be anywhere on the curve, and experiencing my perceived Time wherever I am.”

“Just like a race, the position on the lap doesn’t necessarily show the correct ranking,” Silas said, sitting up in his chair. “One racer could be ten laps behind but ahead of everybody as they pass over the finish line, for example. That racer wouldn’t win, but would seem to be leading at that moment?”

“Oooh, great analogy!” Roger said. “But I’ll add one thing to your analogy. Instead of normal race cars, these cars have wings, and fly at a certain height based on the last lap they have completed. The racer ten laps behind would look back and not see anybody, because these other racers are actually above him.”

“And because they are flying they couldn’t interact?” Evie asked.

“Very good question!” Roger said. “Interaction is an interesting concept with the cylinder theory. Obviously people have to interact—we are interacting right now, but we are also racing along the track. In fact, on our paper graphs, by the science definition of Time, we should all be grouped together as a bunch of race cars at this exact moment in Time and space.”

“Like those variable frequency pendulum models?” Evie asked.

“Very much like those!” Roger said. “That is another fantastic analogy. All of the pendulums swing at their natural frequency, and occasionally they all swing together. The pendulums go back and forth, which isn’t quite the same as the rotation of Change, but it is a good visual of how different people gather together in a variable model. But, in the bigger picture, that moment may be in the past for some of us, or in the future for some of us.”

“How . . .” Silas asked. His racecar of understanding was starting to veer off the track.

“The answer is really in the Time versus Change idea,” Roger said. “Right now, in this moment of Time, we are all together, which is the normal

understanding of Time. Starting from the beginning—which hasn't been defined in any certain terms—until now, Time has been plodding along in a completely straight line. There is no deviation, and because we meet at this point, that means that all previous and future 'Time,' as we perceive it, can be referenced to this point for everyone.

"In the Fundamental Theory of Change, using the cylinder, means we are all moving along side by side at the racetrack of Change. But in reality, since Time is defined as perceived by the observer, then we could each be on a different lap, eventually meeting up to be side by side at this exact moment in time—exactly like when all of the different pendulums swing together. But with the Change theory, that moment could be a memory for some of us, or it could be actually happening for some others, and still for others it will happen in the future at some point."

Maggie pointed to Silas. "You could be one hundred years old at this exact moment in the cylinder on your life cycle page." She pointed to the cylinder. "And this is just a memory to you, whereas Roger could be three years old, and this moment will be in his future."

"But wouldn't that mean that things happening in someone's future are 'set in stone' and can't change?" Evie asked.

"I've had that very thought as well and have been trying to work out an explanation for it," Roger said with an excited smile. Turning to Maggie he asked, "Do you know if Jessica and Paul are around?"

"I haven't heard from them for a while, but I can call them," Maggie said.

"Please do," Roger said. "This is a good discussion for them to get involved in." He looked at the clock. "And this might be a good time to break for refreshments?"

Silas let out an audible sigh. "I am all for taking a break!" he said with enthusiasm, causing the group to laugh. "I feel like I'm trying to study for a final exam."

"There is no exam," Roger said. "But I do understand it is a lot to take in at once."

The group mingled for a while and then David, followed by George and Maggie, went up the stairs and took positions around the den and patio to relax and enjoy the weather.

"I still don't understand how kids can have memories from other people," Silas said, mostly to Evie, but within earshot of Roger.

“We’ll cover that with Jessica,” Roger said. “Because that is, after all, the point of the whole endeavor.”

Evie paused for a second and then asked Roger, “Do you have any contacts that have worked with dreams?”

Roger smiled back. “Dreams are a personal study of mine. In an amateur capacity of course. But . . .” the older man leaned in toward the pair, as if to tell a secret, “didn’t I tell you that the Fundamental Theory of Change covers *everything*?” He stood up straight and laughed to himself as he walked, in a waddling fashion, up the stairs. “I will get you a list of contacts that you might find useful.”

Silas and Evie shot each other a confused but impressed look, and Silas mouthed “*everything*” sarcastically to Evie, causing them both to laugh.

Chapter 10

The group mingled around the patio and den as Roger brought out some snacks and drinks. “Please eat,” Roger said. “Thinking uses a lot of energy.”

“Why are you doing the Theory of Change, instead of other physics?” Evie asked Maggie, grabbing a glass of Roger’s sweet tea.

“Theoretical physics has some very bright minds, for sure,” Maggie said. “I could definitely be a cog in the great wheel of physics. But I recognized the learning I could do under Roger, and when he broke—I mean left—he tried to send me to another advisor. But Roger’s work on Change over Time fascinated me. Not just because it’s counter-culture, but because it’s actually hard! I wanted that.”

“But couldn’t you miss out on your PhD?” Silas asked, looking briefly at Evie to see if he was saying something incorrectly.

“I could be refused a PhD, based on the untested nature of the work, but I’m very curious how this theory is received in the wider community too,” Maggie said. “I can always join another advisor team if I want a recognized

PhD, or just go work somewhere. I have options, but working on this right now is very exciting.”

“You said you needed an experiment for the PhD,” Evie said.

“Yes,” Maggie said. “I would have to essentially discover or do something new for the PhD.”

“And you don’t know what that is yet?” Silas asked.

“I sort of have an idea, but there are external considerations that might limit it,” Maggie said.

“External considerations?” Evie echoed. “Like a review board?”

“Pretty much,” Maggie answered. “I feel like this area is too new and the research so radical that any review board would reject any experiment as unethical.”

“What is your experiment?” Silas asked, genuinely curious. They’d heard a lot of theories so far today. Having some sort of tangible experiment might help root his mind in fact.

Maggie took a long sip of her iced tea then started. “The premise of the experiment is to set up conditions that will produce some different results for Time and Change. So like your flight from yesterday, you slept for a bit, and therefore didn’t perceive Time. During that nap, your body was not subject to Time, just Change, and that sleep could have extended your lifespan a little.”

Evie tried to grasp the idea. “So if people sleep a lot, they live longer?”

“That’s what I’m trying to find out,” Maggie said. “I have a group of mice—genetically experimental mice, basically clones—and I want to test if sleeping, much like your nap during the flight, changes the lifespan. We know sleep is important. Without sleep, most animals will go crazy and die relatively quickly. With one group getting normal amounts of sleep, and another group getting more sleep, using a sleeping drug, the question is will they actually live longer the more they are allowed to sleep?”

“Lack of sleep has really been linked to an early death?” Evie asked.

Maggie nodded. “I don’t think it has been ‘causally’ proved, but definitely linked to it. And I am trying to link the next step—that more sleep increases a lifespan. Not because of sleep being beneficial in some way, but because change and time would diverge a little bit.”

“Wow,” Silas echoed Evie’s response. “I’m glad I sleep so much.”

“You could be my test subject,” Maggie joked. “But in all seriousness, the review board might think it is cruel to the mice and reject the experiment.

Another version of the experiment is to attach pacemakers to the mice hearts, so each one experiences the exact number of heartbeats, and then see if the sleep changes how long their lifespan is. There are so many ways that Change pops out, rather than just working in Time.”

Silas and Evie heard Roger eagerly welcoming people at the front door, and immediately offering refreshments.

“Jessica and Paul,” Roger took care of the introductions, “this is Silas and Evie. But let’s not waste time on chit chat. We have work to do.” And then after grabbing some extra snacks, he led the entire group downstairs.

“What is your major?” Evie asked Jessica as they sat in chairs near each other.

“Oh, I’m not in college,” Jessica answered. “I witnessed to Roger about Jesus Christ a while ago—probably six years ago? I can’t remember exactly.” Jessica puzzled up her face, trying to remember. “But he and I got to talking about so many things, we’ve been good friends since.”

“Ah,” Evie said. “That’s nice.”

“It really is,” Jessica answered. “And he likes my ideas on some things.”

Roger moved to the desk at the front of the group and hefted the rotisserie more to the side of the table.

“Jessica, to bring you up to speed,” Roger started, “Evie and Silas are here trying to understand the ‘how’ question for Professor Andrews’ research.”

Jessica and Paul both nodded, obviously familiar with this scenario.

“As you can see the cylinder is in place,” Roger waved at the rotisserie, “and it seems both Evie and Silas have a basic grasp of the Change theory. They just need to hear more about things.”

“And the multiverse?” Jessica asked.

“A bit,” Roger said. “We can go more in depth before you jump in.”

Roger moved to the whiteboard beside the desk and looked at the group. “How to create the multiverse?” He wrote multiverse on the board. “For every decision there is a split in the multiverse, with another created universe. A decision could be a simple ‘act or not act’ type situation, or it could be a choice like flipping a coin.” Roger drew lines branching over and over across the board. Roger then looked intently at the group and steadied himself at the desk, taking a wide stance with his legs apart. “The number of universes is truly staggering!” He leaned in toward the group and spread his arms as wide as he could.

“Consider right now, there are about eight billion people in the world, and we’ll just assume that each person makes a decision between two choices—to act or not act—every second. To simplify the math, we can just say there are 30 million seconds in each year.”

Roger turned back to the board and wrote 8,000,000,000 on it and 30,000,000 underneath that then stepped back. He turned to face the others and started to move his arms around in an ever increasing wider circle. “Just simple multiplication tells us that is two hundred forty quadrillion but that isn’t the whole story. Each of those decision splits actually doesn’t just *multiply*, it creates an exponential situation! One decision produces two universes, and in those universes there are another two decisions each, which lead to four universes. So far it’s okay, but then the next decision leads to eight, and the next to sixteen, and so on! So the real number is eight billion times two choices, so sixteen billion raised to the 30,000,000th power! That is an inconceivable number!” He threw his arms out enthusiastically after writing the mathematical expression on the board. “Rounding down to ten billion to the thirty millionth power, and using exponential math produces a number of ten with three hundred million zeros behind it.”

“And that’s just for one year!” Maggie piped in.

“Yes,” Roger said. “And that isn’t counting all the things—living or inanimate that can move—every movement is a choice in a way. For example, every leaf that grows and falls off every tree in the world each year is a ‘decision’ which would change the eight billion into trillions and trillions of things that could have decisions or changes, and then on and on. And that is making a multiverse decision every second. There could be decisions happening much faster than that.”

Roger put his arms out wide. “It is a monstrously, *impossibly*, big number of parallel universes!”

“As another example,” David said, “We could calculate Silas’ decisions in one year. Suppose over the course of an average year, Silas makes about 10 million ‘heads or tails’ type decisions. This would be two raised to the power of ten million.” David added the expression on the whiteboard, alongside Roger’s.

“I don’t have a calculator on hand that could compute that number directly,” David said, laughing, “but doing some approximations and hand calculations and rounding to make it easier to understand, that number

would turn out to be a ten with three million zeros behind it. Putting that into perspective,” David continued, reaching under the desk, “if each page was filled with just the zeros—not talking about counting to the final number—it would take 1000 pages!” David dropped two wrapped reams of paper on the desk with a thud. “Just for the zeros of how many universes Silas created.”

“And we exist in each one?” Silas asked, trying to grasp the impossibly large number.

“On a simple level, you may assume so,” Roger said. “In some universes, your parents may have never met, for example, or been killed before you were conceived, and so on. So existing in all of the parallel universes isn’t a guarantee, but it can simplify the thought experiment to believe that the cylinder is the same in each universe for now.”

Roger moved behind the cylinder. “This is the simplest model of the universe,” he continued. “And just imagine lots and lots and lots of these for the parallel universes.” Roger looked at Evie and Silas. “And that is why your cylinder dream shocked me so much. You saw three cylinders. Were they overlapping in some way?”

“It was hard to tell,” Silas said. “In the dream, the artifact had some cylinders in it, but it wasn’t clear how they worked or fit together. There was a lot of corrosion on the two connected cylinders.”

Roger nodded, losing a little of his excitement. “I imagine being a dream would be hard to see all the details.”

“Is every cylinder turning at the same speed?” Evie asked.

“Yes. The easiest model is them all turning at the speed of Change.”

“And all the universes have something that makes them different or unique?” Silas asked.

Roger nodded. “Absolutely. If they were identical copies then it wouldn’t be a parallel universe. For example, today, right here, I am wearing gray socks, but in the next universe over, I could be wearing black, or white, or red socks. Something as simple as that. But the change doesn’t have to exist right now—the change could be a hundred years from now. So there are probably trillions of universes with all of us exactly as we are right now.”

“But there are other universes,” Evie said, “where things are horribly wrong. Like dinosaurs still exist, or the Revolutionaries didn’t win in 1776. And each universe in the multiverse is equally likely, I mean statistically speaking?” Evie asked, drawing on her background stats classes.

“Not equally likely at all,” Roger said, shaking his head. “There are definitely universes that are much more likely than others. If I only had one pair of white socks, and the rest were gray socks, then the probability that I would be wearing white socks in a single universe is much lower than for wearing gray socks, for example.”

“Oh, true,” Evie said. That did change the odds.

“One way to think of it,” Roger said, putting his hand at eye level with an outstretched arm, “Is to hold your hand out and spread your fingers like this.” Roger spread his fingers apart.

Evie and Silas both copied Roger’s example and put a hand up with fingers spread at eye level.

“Each finger can be thought of as a ‘multiverse set,’” Roger explained, pinching the middle finger of his raised hand. “Say the middle finger is the one we are all in right now, with all of the events that we would recognize as ‘normal’ history. There are trillions of trillions of cylinders that make up that multiverse set.

“Now the ring finger,” Roger continued, pinching the ring finger on his raised hand, “that could be a multiverse set like Evie said—the Revolutionaries didn’t win in 1776, and there are trillions of trillions of cylinders in that multiverse set. And each finger, and an infinite number of fingers, exist all across the multiverse.”

“Don’t forget the gaps,” Maggie said.

“Right, the gaps between the fingers,” Roger said, grabbing a web between two of his fingers. “They are the potential multiverse sets where things aren’t very likely—such as when Evie said dinosaurs still exist, and so on. Everything you can possibly imagine has a universe associated with it, but many of those are more likely to exist than others. This is what I call the probability density function of universes or multiverse sets.”

“And that’s only if observers exist in every universe in a multiverse set?” Evie asked.

“Exactly,” Roger answered. “One of the axioms of the Fundamental Theory of Change is that everybody has the *possibility* to exist in every universe. Some people may not exist in some universes, but they all have the possibility to exist.”

“Now,” Roger said, holding his hand out, but this time with the fingers closed, “This shows an example of the probability distribution of a single

finger's multiverse set. These are probability 'hills.' The most likely outcomes are higher than the others. The middle finger is taller, and this means that this is the most probable universe in the multiverse set—the most likely outcome in that entire set, but the others are somewhat close." Roger wiggled his little finger. "Like this pinkie is me wearing white socks."

"That sounds like a lot of universes," Silas said.

"It is!" Roger said. "Trillions of trillions of possibilities, just for a single day!"

"How does this apply to the memories of the kids?" Evie asked.

"Ah, right, back to Professor Andrews," Roger said. "Remember when I said to forget everything you knew about Time?"

Evie and Silas nodded.

"Now I am going to ask you to forget everything you think you know about the mind," Roger said.

"What is the mind?" Evie asked, giving Roger a sly smile.

"Fast learner," Roger replied with hearty laugh. "That's good. Now suppose there are trillions of trillions of trillions parallel universes, and each of us exists in every one of those. Why does this universe we are in right now feel like the only one? Evie or Silas?"

He waited for a response. But neither of them said a word.

"Because, there could be a singular consciousness for each person," Roger offered.

"What does that mean?" Silas asked.

"It means that each person can only feel the consciousness of one universe at a time, like this one right now."

"Sort of like multitasking?" Evie asked.

"Pretty much," Roger answered. "Even though a computer is technically 'multitasking' when running multiple programs, only a single one is being controlled by the user at any time. This is one of the great topics Jessica and I have discussed at length over time."

Roger waved for Jessica to take center stage.

She rose from her chair. "I like the analogy of playing computer games," Jessica said, walking over to the cylinder. "Suppose you're playing a Sims game, but instead of one game, you are playing one hundred different games. Even though the computer can open all of the games at the same time, you can really only play one at a time. The computer would need to focus on that

singular game, as do you. All the games show up on the task bar, but only the one being interacted with is actually changing and being controlled by you. You can switch between them, but only one can actually be directly controlled by you with the keyboard or mouse at any time.”

“So out of all the universes, this is the one that is being ‘played’ right now?” Silas asked.

“You can think of it that way,” Jessica said.

“But who’s playing it?” Evie asked.

“That’s another big question,” Jessica said. “I’ll give my answer, but other people would have their respective answers. It really boils down to a belief, or faith.”

“Faith?” Silas said.

Jessica nodded. “I’ve talked with Roger for years. Even before the Change theory took over. Then when he explained the multiverse set theory to me, it made a lot of sense, logically. But as a Christian, it didn’t really sit well, until we got to talking about what consciousness is. Trust me, we went back and forth. What is consciousness exactly? How is it controlled? The best answer I came to accept is that it is the connection to the Soul of a person. And the soul lives outside the multiverse—essentially watching the cylinders rotate. This is like the user existing outside of the computer, but the computer still creating and running millions of simulations.”

“How does the soul control the consciousness?” Silas asked.

“How indeed,” Jessica said. “How does a computer keyboard connect to the CPU? I imagine it’s like that—some sort of specifically created connection. Maybe there are brainwaves that serve as the connection between the soul and the body much like the keyboard cord and wires are. I don’t know the exact method—I don’t think anybody does—but I do think a connection exists.”

“And the soul can only talk to one ‘body’ at a time?” Evie asked.

“That is what I believe,” Jessica said. “Even though there are trillions and trillions of Yous out there, only one is ‘running’ at a time, giving you consciousness. The soul connects with a particular one and creates the awareness of living.”

“If the task switching occurred fast enough,” Evie began, “It would seem like each consciousness is the only one.”

“Very possibly,” Jessica said.

“How does this apply to memory?” Silas asked.

“Imagine you are still playing the computer Sims game. How much knowledge can you transfer into your character through the keyboard?” She paused but only for a couple seconds. “Not much. In actuality, you as a person know so much more than the Sim characters you are playing, but you are limited by the connection and the programming in the computer. You can’t just tell the Sim that you are going to make them walk around all day, or that you want them to build something. You have to click where you want the Sim to go, and keep clicking over and over.

“Suppose a Soul sees all the universes, and knows everything about every one of them, but is limited to whatever information passes to any particular consciousness. Here in this universe—or any universe—you would have limited information, mostly what is gathered by physical experiences and learning, rather than relying on the Soul to pass along information to us.

“The Soul could know all that is going to happen, but can’t give us anything more than what we learn,” Jessica said. “But maybe—on rare occasions—under perfectly ideal conditions, there is an opening to the consciousness, and stray information passes from the Soul. This could be one of the ‘eureka’ moments, or epiphanies, or just sparks of ideas, things like that. And sometimes, maybe this information connection is supposed to be for somebody else, not for you, but you end up receiving it. That could feel like someone else’s memory.”

“A glitch in the Matrix,” Evie said, nodding at the idea.

“Why kids?” Silas asked.

Jessica shrugged. “Maybe kids have better information receptors—especially when young. And they can connect in different ways.”

“Is that something like the 100th monkey theory? Or Zeitgeist ether?” Silas asked.

“What’s that?” Jessica asked.

“They are different ideas, but have a common thought in that there is a kind of ‘internet’ for people all around—the Zeitgeist—a collective bank, or cloud, of knowledge,” Silas said. “There is a cloud containing every single bit of information in the universe around us. That cloud can sometimes be tapped into for knowledge, either consciously or subconsciously. For example, those ‘eureka’ moments could be when a ‘lightning strike’ from the information cloud strikes somebody and gives them a spark of an idea, or transfers knowledge.”

“Very interesting,” Jessica said. “And some people are more likely to receive the lightning strikes than others?”

“I would say that is probably true,” Silas said with a shrug. “It does seem that some people keep coming up with good ideas, maybe like Tesla, or Einstein, or Edison.”

“And the 100th monkey theory?”

“I’m not sure if this is just made up or a real thing,” Silas said. “But as I heard it, there is a theory that when knowledge becomes ‘common enough’, it is suddenly learned by everybody, or available to everyone.

“The story says a researcher went to an isolated island with monkeys on it. The researcher taught one monkey to wash some food before eating it. The monkey learned this task and soon started teaching it to other monkeys on the island. More and more monkeys learned this task, and at some point—the 100th monkey tipping point— monkeys on other islands, islands with no connection to the isolated island, were performing that same task. The tipping point was reached and the knowledge was now available to every monkey, everywhere.”

“Fascinating,” Jessica said.

“I don’t know if it is true or not,” Silas said. “But it seems likely that some learned things are shared that way. Maybe there’s a bank of knowledge that is available to people that want it. Of course some people don’t have common sense—so maybe they don’t tap into that knowledge very often.”

“Where do the Souls live?” Evie asked Jessica.

“I can’t say for sure,” Jessica said. “But if I had to guess, I would say someplace outside of the multiverse, maybe like heaven. A place where they live forever, but can watch all of the universes at once.”

“With the Soul sitting outside of the multiverse,” Roger added, “all kinds of information would be available for the Soul to pick up and send to the consciousnesses of people.”

“Like ninety year old memories?” Silas asked.

“Quite right,” Roger said, his face seeming to soften as he remembered his own struggle for that ‘how?’ question.

“So there are rogue Souls outside the multiverse sending crazy memories to children?” Evie asked. “That doesn’t seem very nice.”

“Or master level trolling, if you ask me,” Silas added, agreeing with Evie.

“Not really,” Jessica added. “It would make sense—to me anyway, but without any way to prove—that each person only communicates with their own Soul.”

“That is what I would also expect,” Silas said, nodding his head in agreement with Jessica. “So we are back to the same questions? How and why?”

“What about sharing different lives then?” Evie asked. “Could a single soul be different people? At different times, of course.”

“I have no idea what the truth is,” Jessica said. “There is no way to know the truth in that question, but the thought seems to be contradictory to my beliefs.”

“Why is that?” Silas asked.

“Because the Bible talks about us being judged by our actions, at the day of reckoning,” Jessica said. “And who would be judged then? Would it be person A? Or person B? I think that would lead to a lot of confusion.”

“Well, if that’s the case,” Silas started, “How does that work with multiple lives? Is it the ‘last’ lifetime? Or the collective actions of all of the lives? Or the ‘best’ lifetime? I don’t think any answer to that would be consistent.”

“Those are really hard questions to answer,” Jessica said. “Because of the unknowing nature of the whole spiritual realm.”

“So when Professor Andrews said that we needed to look to the supernatural for answers,” Evie said, “he wasn’t too far off?”

“Not at all,” Roger answered. “There is no scientific way to prove or disprove anything other than what is physically here in the natural world. There are some very challenging questions yet to answer in the realm of quantum mechanics and theoretical physics, but I don’t think any of those discoveries will be able to explain any of what is going on here.”

“So it is religious?” Silas asked.

“Non-physical, or supernatural, or religious,” Roger answered, laughing. “But yes, you are pretty close.”

“Then there is no answer,” Silas said.

“No. There is an answer,” Jessica said slowly. “But each answer might reduce to a personal one, much like all of life’s questions.”

“How so?” Evie asked.

“If my answer is to believe that a Soul exists outside of the multiverse,” Jessica said, “and someone else believes it is more of a ‘collective’ or Zeitgeist,

rather than a soul, and someone else believes the consciousness is inside of us. Each of those answers is unknowable, and depends on faith.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Evie said, not really convincing herself.

Roger stood up and started talking, unable to control his excitement. “And the coolest thing is that the multiverse ties in with everything, and leads to a big finale where everything pops out. Jessica is here to give a feel for the spiritual side, and the Soul concept makes a lot of sense. But, what if the different universes left traces of one onto another? Or interacted in some way?”

Silas and Evie thought about that for a minute, and Evie spoke up first.

“Memories from one universe life could carry over into another one?” Evie asked.

“That is definitely an option,” Roger said. “Why don’t we do a ‘connect the dots’ multiverse style.”

“Step 1,” Roger began. “There is no such thing as Time, only Change. And Time is the result of the Observation of Change.”

“And Change requires an observer,” Maggie added.

“Exactly. Step 2: Without Time, and with Change needing an observer, everyone ever conceived is alive somewhere in their own life cycle in all of the universes.

“Step 3: There might be something ‘outside’ of the multiverse that can observe everything in all of the universes.

“Step 4: Universes of the multiverse sets, and possibly beings outside of the multiverse itself, have the ability to interact with each other and possibly with people.

“And that should do it,” Roger said. “If something occurs, I believe the multiverse theory covers it.”

Chapter 11

Evie sat tall in her chair. “What about ghosts?”

“Ghosts,” Roger answered, eagerly accepting Evie’s challenge with a smile. “I would first say that some people have never seen ghosts, and probably never will, while others see ghosts with some regularity. Ghosts could be the remnant of a past ‘lap’ of Change that someone connects to. Since only some people have seen ghosts, I would say that those people have a higher chance to connect to different memories or fragments of the cylinder, or even to other universes.”

“Or they could be all hoaxes,” Silas said.

“Absolutely. There is no way to prove ghosts exist yet—at least in any repeatable scientific way. The people who see ghosts may have ability to interact with different cylinders and get fragments of information to pass between them. I have attended many psychic conventions trying to figure this out, and it seems there is a slight connection like that. People who see ghosts may interact with different, and close, universes within a multiverse set—a finger, if you will.”

“And some could pass to other fingers?” Silas asked. “Completely different universes?”

“It is not outside the realm of possibility,” Roger answered.

“Did Nostradamus see the future of this universe?” Evie asked.

“I think Nostradamus saw things using mind altering drugs. But his writings were also quite cryptic, and ended up so generic it is hard to say what his true visions were. Although I can’t ignore the possibility that some people may be able to slide backwards and forwards along a single cylinder, I don’t see any way to use that information if the cylinder is ‘preset’ to run from beginning to end. But a psychic may have a different answer.”

“Do you know any we can talk to?” Silas asked.

“Of course! I’ll give you the name and address of one not too far away.”

“Is she a real psychic?” Silas asked, hoping to find out more about the dreams.

“As real as any psychic can be, I imagine. The whole psychic idea is hard to prove or disprove, as all of our emotional biases take over when dealing with claims of spirits from beyond.”

“What about mind altering drugs?” Silas asked. “Do those shift consciousness and universes?”

“Drugs that allow for entering ‘altered states’ could be gateways to being receptive to the fragments and maybe even traveling along the cylinder,” Roger said. “These drugs might enhance the connection to the soul, or between the community knowledge, and allow for more data to be sent. This would mean that possibly everybody has some connection to the other universes, such as the Soul connection, and the drugs just make it a bit easier for that connection to be made.”

“Aliens?” Evie asked with a slight smile, engaging in Roger’s game.

Roger matched Evie’s smile. “Probably the same as ghosts—only more mind formed. The mind is a very good interpreter of information that it recognizes, but also fills in a lot of gaps to ‘make sense’ of information that doesn’t quite fit any known situation. Some fragments of another multiverse—possibly a far away finger type—could connect to a person, and that information seems so foreign in nature that the only reasonable interpretation for the brain to make is to envision some alien being.”

“Does all this mean the reclaimed memories are from other universes?” Silas asked.

“It does seem that a lot of—if not most—children have times when they are more open to a multiverse connection to things,” Roger said. “Most children experience things we call nightmares, and those seem to disappear after a certain age, or at least reduce in occurrence. Even waking nightmares all seem to happen up to a certain age, and then diminish or disappear entirely. This seems to suggest a connection in children to other aspects of the multiverse that closes up as the child ages.”

“Or learns more things,” Silas suggested.

“Good!” Roger said. “The more we learn, the less the brain has to fill in, or the more comfortable we are with the world around us.”

“Fairy tales,” Evie said. “Or mythology. Is there any way the different mythological creatures could be real and connect to different universes?”

Roger thought for a moment. “I could imagine that at some level there is a way for physical things to transport from universe to universe, but that seems like it could break a lot of axioms of a multiverse.”

“Or,” Maggie started, directly challenging her mentor, “It could totally be conceivable that physical travel between universes is possible, within a narrowly defined context. Like you know how the Bible says that ‘sons of God’ dwelt on the Earth. The common phrase ‘sons of God’ in that context usually means something besides humans. That would lead to the possibility that a select set of beings are able to jump into a particular universe and interact along the timeline. This would allow for super jumpers—if you want to call them that—to inject themselves, supernaturally, into a universe for different purposes. Fairies, leprechauns, or gremlins.”

“And angels and demons,” Jessica added, perking up at the talk of religion. “Angels appear to many people in the Bible, and Jesus cast out many demons from people, so there must be a way to travel from the ‘cloud’ to any particular universe.”

“Absolutely,” Maggie said.

Roger tapped his head, making a mental note of the idea. “I have to ponder it for a while. My supposition is that timelines are fixed by the birth of the observer. But I get that beings that don’t have a physical birth into a universe may appear and disappear without upsetting the balance significantly. In fact, I remember meeting someone that studied mythological areas at some conference.” Roger moved to his computer and rummaged around the desk drawers. “I will add that information for you.”

“And reincarnation?” Silas asked after watching Roger search for a short time.

Paul spoke up. “I can give my opinion on this. Much like Jessica, I believe in the Soul that controls the body through some kind of connection, although I don’t know what it is. The Bible is clear with many verses on death and hell. For example, there is a verse: Hebrews 9:27, ‘*And it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment,*’” Paul quoted. “This could be speaking of two different outcomes, depending on how you read it. If the verse is read with emphasis on ‘*once to die*’ then there is no reincarnation and each person only gets one life.

“The other interpretation reads, ‘*once to die, but after this*’ with the emphasis on ‘*but after this.*’ This reading may state there is a judgment to come, but it comes after one particular death. Roger says that everybody that ever lived is still alive, in their own page or life. So, when a person dies, in order to accommodate Roger’s thesis, that soul would be respawned into the same or another universe. Jeremiah also says that ‘*before I formed thee in the belly, I knew thee*’ which seems to imply that there is permanence to something in heaven or at least outside the current universe.”

“Then what keeps people bouncing around the multiverse from reincarnation?” Silas asked. “Just getting experience?”

“The religions that believe in reincarnation typically deal with a ‘good life’ being rewarded with better position, and a ‘bad life’ being punished with a more base existence,” Paul said. “Although there may be one goal of all this—1 Timothy 2:4, says of Jesus, ‘*Who will have all men to be saved*’—so maybe the end goal is to end up in the life cylinder where everybody is saved.”

“That’s an interesting thought,” Evie said.

“Are you a Christian?” Jessica asked.

“Off and on,” Evie said, her face warming. “My family is very spiritual-minded, but not strictly religious. I haven’t studied the Bible in a long time, but I know most of the New Testament.”

“You probably mirror many Americans in that way,” Jessica replied.

“Tell me more about this cylinder where everybody is saved,” Silas said, “if nobody minds straying into religion.”

Roger shook his head. “True science should never be afraid of any discussions. In fact, science should be willing to entertain any ideas for

further study, and stand up to all challenges by presenting evidence, not stifling thought or debate.”

“Being saved,” Paul said, “is the state of realizing the incredible flaws of the human condition—called Sin—and realizing that this Sin is a fallen state. In the Old Testament, the Laws of Moses instructed a Sin Offering yearly at the Temple, to beg forgiveness of the sins—an atonement, for that year. But these Sin Offerings were never permanent. Only one sacrifice—Jesus Christ on the Cross—could bring about permanent forgiveness of all Sin in a person’s life. The realization of the sinful nature of man, and the need to accept the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and then the actual calling upon Jesus in repentance, is called being Saved.”

“And that is what God wants?” Silas asked.

“Yes it is,” Paul said. “God cannot look upon sin, but wants everybody to go to heaven. The only way for those two things to happen at the same time is if everyone accepts the Sacrifice of Christ on the Cross for Salvation.”

“This is getting deep,” Silas admitted. “Just believing is enough?”

“Believing is the key, but there is an important part of ‘believing’ that is often lost,” Paul said. “It isn’t enough to just say you believe, and then continue as before. You must have faith and trust in your belief, and act on it. A good example is if I was to build a chair out of scraps. I could look at it and say ‘I believe it will hold me’ and never sit on it—that would be brain believing. Many people brain believe a lot of things. In fact, most everything we talked about today, is based on brain belief. The key is that I need to actually sit in the chair and believe it will hold me.”

“A lot of Christians seem to be brain believers in the Sacrifice of Christ,” Jessica chimed in. “But still ‘add’ to the Sacrifice of Christ by trusting in good works, or their religion, or their genetics, etc. Very few people actually seem to fully believe with faith that Jesus is all that is needed.”

“Confessing sins isn’t needed?” Silas asked. “That’s one of the things I grew up with.”

“Biblical Salvation comes from the Sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, where Jesus took all of the sins of the world onto himself and paid for them,” Jessica said. “Confession is good for the soul, but isn’t part of what gets a person to heaven. Confessing that Jesus is Lord and has paid for all our Sin is the only confessing that works toward getting to heaven.”

“How does that relate to the cylinder?” Silas asked, motioning at the table.

“Ah, yes,” Paul said. “If we accept that the ultimate goal of wandering about the multiverse is to draw people to this One cylinder, then every person over the age of accountability must accept Jesus Christ as Savior before they die.”

“How likely is that?” Evie asked.

Paul looked at Jessica for a moment, then visibly saddened. “Probably not very likely.”

“Why not?” Silas asked.

“For one, the Bible is settled. ‘Psalm 119:89 says, *‘For ever, O Lord, thy word is settled in heaven.’* and that seems to say that the Bible won’t change. The Bible is very explicit in how many people will be saved. Matthew 7:13 to 14 says, *‘Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.’* Jesus even asks in Luke 18:8, *‘when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?’* And Revelation talks about how many people will die having rejected Salvation. All in all, not a very positive outlook.”

“But there are so many religions and versions of the Bible,” Evie said.

“The myriad of versions can be explained as a way for Satan to create a huge lie for the world,” Jessica said. “Religion is how people interpret events and beliefs, which don’t necessarily coincide with how God has things set up.”

“Which Bible is the right one then?” Silas asked. He knew there was one on the bookcase in his apartment, but he had no idea which version it was.

“I believe that the King James Bible is the true version,” Paul said. “That is the Bible I use. I believe that the King James Bible is the Literal and True Inspired Word of God, written through Godly men, and that my God is powerful enough to not just write the Bible, but also preserve it, without error, throughout all time.”

“But what if the Bible is different in each universe?” Silas asked. “So the Bible can be different but still be true and preserved in every multiverse?”

Paul pondered the question. “It might make sense that different circumstances could lead to the need for different Bibles in each universe. And God would be able to keep track of them. Even then there should only be one version in each universe, not the hundreds that are around now.”

“And all the people that think a newer version is needed because of needing to be ‘updated?’” Evie asked.

“They don’t seem to know the history of the Bible, or don’t trust God enough to preserve it,” Paul answered.

“And these people think that somehow we now have better knowledge that the original translators—who actually spoke the languages—didn’t have,” Jessica said, shaking her head. “That just doesn’t make sense.”

“But then what about all the various religions?” Evie asked. “Like—what is the word . . .” She paused for a minute, trying to remember. “Things are already determined?”

“Ah,” Paul answered. “Predetermination and Predestination. Calvinism is one religion that believes in a version of that. It is the belief that God has chosen everyone, in advance, who will be Saved or not.”

“How can that be?” Evie asked. “If God wants everyone to be Saved?”

“Calvinism seems to focus on one word,” Paul answered. “Romans 8:29 says *‘For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son’*, and from that, the religion of being called or not was established. There are several verses that talk about God predestinating a group of people.”

“And you don’t believe that?” Silas asked.

“No,” Jessica said. “I believe that everyone can be saved, not just a select group, or select religion. Also, predestination implies that the person has no say in being Saved or not. And there is no evidence given for who are the called and who isn’t. That doesn’t sound like a very loving God to me.”

“But God is more than loving, right?” Silas asked. “God is Just? So there is judgment for some people?”

“True,” Paul said. “God is Just, and Merciful, and True, and so many other things that we can’t really comprehend. And it really comes down to how much faith a person has and what they trust in.”

“So, many religions could be completely true, as long as the people believe?” Silas asked.

“I would be willing to accept some version of that idea,” Paul answered with a nod. “Although I would probably qualify that by saying there are many people in different religions that have true faith, whereas the religion itself doesn’t necessarily contain much truth.”

“Religion and science seem to have a lot in common,” Evie said.

“Parts of religions actually could explain many aspects of the multiverse that science can’t. And as I said before, much of Time as used by ‘science’ is like a religion in itself,” Roger said.

“The concept of the Souls watching and interacting outside of the multiverse is quite intriguing,” Evie said. “I have memories of learning about angels and a ‘cloud of witnesses’ in Sunday School.”

“Hebrews 12:1, *Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses*,” Paul said. “Hebrews 12:1 follows from chapter 11, which describes all of the people of faith in the Bible, such as Abraham, starting all the way back with Abel, son of Adam and Eve, up to David. They are all witnesses to us now.”

“If they are witnesses, then they can’t be alive?” Silas asked looking from Paul to Roger.

“That’s a good question,” Roger said. “If the theory that a person exists only in the physical form is correct—like you, Silas, sitting right here, right now—then yes, they couldn’t be witnesses to us and still be alive somewhere else in the multiverse.

“But if the theory of Jessica’s is true, and the Souls of everyone exist outside of the multiverse then we could all be witnesses of everything, yet still live from one cylinder to the next, not really knowing that we are being watched by ourselves and others.”

“That could really be confusing,” Silas said softly.

Roger took a small breath, as if to respond, but then waited a second for things to settle more. “I know this is very confusing the first time it is presented. This could be just information overload at the moment, and a lot of this information needs to be dissected and assimilated to make it make sense. Take some time, and think about it all, and if you do have questions, let me know.”

“I’m still a bit shocked by the whole ‘Time’ thing, actually,” Silas admitted.

“I am, too,” Evie added. “I just am so familiar with seeing the clock tick, and now I learn that time doesn’t exist?”

The group laughed together. “It is hard to grasp at first,” Roger said. “I will admit it took me a long time to actually verbalize my theory, much less put it to paper in a way that can be explained. This is probably why nobody else accepts the Fundamental Theory of Change.”

“I started to work through it by creating a habit. I substituted ‘Change’ for ‘Time,’ since right now that fits perfectly,” Maggie said. “And then I started using the statement ‘Change needs an observer’ to make past and future fit.”

Roger scribbled several bits of information onto a piece of paper at his desk. He walked over and handed Evie the paper. “Here are several contacts that may be of interest, including the address of the psychic I mentioned,” he said, “She should give some answers on how she interacts outside of the physical world.”

“Thanks,” Evie said, taking the paper and reading it quickly. “Is she close?”

“Oh yes,” Roger said. “Shouldn’t take you long to get there.”

Silas looked at his watch. “I know time doesn’t exist, but is she open during business hours?” Silas asked, seeing that the time was approaching four PM.

Roger laughed at Silas’ comment. “She has very flexible hours,” Roger said. “I’m sure you’d be able to talk to her today. Call her and ask.”

“What do you think?” Silas asked Evie.

“It would be interesting,” Evie said. “And, no offense Roger, but my brain is pretty full with all this information.”

Roger laughed again. “No offense at all. I’ve had years to digest and refine my thoughts on this, and you have had it thrown at you in only two days. And if you’re hungry after to talk to her, I’ll be firing up the barbecue in an hour or so. It’s been ages since I last ate.” Roger rubbed his belly for effect.

“Thanks,” Evie smiled. “We’ll call and let you know our plans.”

Silas slowly shook his head. “Even though this is hurting my mind, I’m blown away that these ideas exist.”

David nodded, “We all felt that way at first.”

Chapter 12

Silas brought up the navigation app on his phone again and entered the address as Evie read it. “Looks like a twelve minute drive.” He set the phone on the dashboard holder and started the car.

“I’ll give her a call too.” Evie dialed the phone number. The phone rang several times, but there was no answer.

“No answer,” she said. “Do we go anyway?”

“Driving there won’t put us any farther from the hotel,” Silas said, more familiar with the area now. “We can drive there and if she’s not home, we’ll head to the hotel.”

“I’m down for that. As much fun as Roger is, I think my brain is full.”

“My brain was full six hours ago.”

Evie laughed. “That was at breakfast this morning!”

“Exactly!” He pulled away from the curb and started following the GPS directions. Twelve minutes later he stopped the car at a dark gray two story business.

“It looks empty,” Evie said, looking out the passenger window at the building. “It actually looks like this part of town is almost deserted.” She scanned the street and buildings.

“Maybe the residents are older and stay in more,” he said with a shrug.

“It’s just past four PM. That is still daytime for just about everybody.”

Silas scanned the street as well, seeing the emptiness all around. “We should at least knock.”

They got out of the car and walked to the front door. The door showed signs of age, such as peeling paint in the detail of the door, and a dented and scuffed bottom. Silas ran a hand over the door, getting a feel for the wood, and condition, before delivering a loud knock.

“What the . . .” Evie jumped, hearing the knock actually echo around the neighborhood. “Why knock so loud?”

“I want to make sure if anyone is here, they hear it,” he said, his face warming. The emptiness of the place was overwhelming. He wished for somebody—anybody—to appear on the street.

“This place is unsettling,” she said.

“Roger seemed to feel everything is safe. But Roger definitely runs with a different crowd.”

“There is safe, and—” She started to reply, but the door opened.

“Yes?” A woman’s voice asked through a small opening. Seeing Evie and Silas, she opened the door a bit more.

“Hello,” Silas said. “We are here to see—”

“Her!” The woman cut off Silas and pointed to Evie. “She speaks!”

“Oh,” Evie said, taken aback, a cold chill running down her spine. “Hi. I’m Evie,” she managed to vocalize—sounding quite confident, and surprising herself. “And this is Silas. We were sent to see the psychic Mademoiselle Ranier.”

“Sent by whom?”

“By Roger,” Evie answered, somewhat comforted by having an answer, but also on edge because of the uncertainty in how the recommendation would be received. “The professor.”

The door slammed shut, and the pair could hear the faint sound of feet shuffling away.

“Maybe this is the wrong place,” Silas said, taking a step back.

“I’m ready to go. This place honestly gives me the creeps.”

“I’m with you on that.” The pair turned and managed to cross the length of the sidewalk and get to the car before the front door opened wide.

“I’m Mademoiselle Ranier,” the new woman at the door said, with a strong foreign accent. She looked around fifty, and almost six feet tall, close to Silas’ height, but much thicker, covered in brightly colored swatches on a throw, and wearing a black dress underneath. A multicolored belt adorned with fiery blue opals at constant intervals held the dress close to her waist, trying desperately to make it look slimming, but failing. Her jet black hair showed no signs of graying and fell down to her mid back, and a red and blue scarf sat on her head, holding some of the hair back. A small chain ring wrapped around the top of the blue scarf on her head, studded with gems, finished her outfit.

Evie and Silas took in the woman and tried to gauge the danger of approaching her.

“Hi,” Evie said with a small wave, not moving closer.

“Please do come in,” the woman said. “If Roger sent you, then I’m sure you have some questions.”

Evie looked to Silas, and Silas tried to size up the situation. The woman looked to be a very imposing figure and possibly had others inside. But Roger’s recommendation was one of a friendly relationship. Silas looked at Evie and shrugged. “If you want,” he whispered to Evie.

“I don’t really,” Evie said, taking a step closer to Silas. “But we probably should, just to learn what Roger thinks we can.”

Silas nodded and took Evie’s hand, and the pair walked toward the door.

“Welcome!” Mademoiselle Ranier said, stepping back and opening the door fully for the couple.

“Thank you?” Evie replied, almost as a question, trying to be as polite as possible.

“My name is Brenda,” Mademoiselle Ranier said, dropping into a very Bostonian accent. “I just use the Mademoiselle Ranier bit to keep the mystery.” Silas could tell she enjoyed seeing their reactions.

“Oh, hi,” Evie said, feeling a bit more at ease.

“Hello,” Silas said through tight lips, trying his hardest to be friendly.

Brenda led them down a small hall to a room on the left side. Entering, the couple found a dimly lit kitchen with a small square table and small stove

and sink. Brenda twisted a dial on the wall and the lights brightened, showing a few plants hanging in the corners and a small teapot on the stove.

“Can I get you anything to drink?” Brenda asked. “I have a stock of some of the best teas you could ever drink.”

“I could go for tea,” Evie said, trying to be polite. Silas nodded in agreement.

“What kind would you like?” Brenda asked, opening a small door to reveal a variety of small tins.

“Surprise us?” Silas replied, trying to hold a smile.

“Surprise! I like that!” Brenda said. She looked around for a few seconds, then reached in and removed four tins. She tapped a small teapot quickly with her hand, testing the temperature, and turned the gas burner a bit higher to bring the water to a boil.

“Oh, where are my manners?” Brenda said. “Please, have a seat.” She pointed to the two chairs on the back side of the table.

“Thank you,” Evie said, pulling out a chair and sitting down. Silas did the same, scooting his chair close to Evie.

Brenda pulled out her chair and sat down—actually more of a dropping into the chair than a sitting—and let out a small grunt as the small chair took her weight. She glanced at the couple sitting across from her, and took a minute, a full minute, to size them up.

Not sure what the protocol was for being visually examined in such a situation, Evie and Silas sat still for the entire minute, Evie slowly moved her left hand into Silas’s right hand.

“Hell-llo!” Brenda said as the teapot started to whistle, breaking her deep gaze. She put both hands on the table and propelled herself upwards with another small grunt, the chair sliding backwards, either from her legs or dress, stopping with a small squeal. She slid out and around the chair, walking the three steps to the stove.

Cups clanged together as she rummaged around a high shelf and produced three cups, setting them on the counter. Opening the differently decorated tins, she carefully proportioned different amounts from each into the cups. Pouring some of the boiling water into each cup, she slowly stirred the teas, bringing the mixture of tea into the water leaf by leaf.

Satisfied that the tea met her expectations, she turned around and placed a cup at each place at the table, leaning forward—almost dangerously—to reach Silas and Evie.

“Let the tea sit for a few minutes,” Brenda instructed, as she sat down heavily again. “The flavor needs to release and mix.”

“I see,” Evie said, pulling the cup that Brenda placed in front of her a bit closer with her free right hand. Evie could see the small leaves swirl. She counted at least four distinct colors of leaves, and took a sniff of the blend.

“Now,” Brenda blurted out with a huge grin, “What does Roger say I can tell you?”

The outburst and show of emotion surprised the couple again, and Evie’s left hand squeezed Silas’ hand quickly and with intensity, shocking him and making him jump.

“I guess we’re here to talk about psychics,” Evie said slowly, not sure of how that answer would resonate with Brenda. She gave Silas’ hand a quick squeeze then let go, wrapping both hands around, but not touching, the hot cup to calm herself.

“I see,” Brenda said, her face growing peaceful, and then breaking into a smile. “Did he tell you I am a fraud?”

“Oh, no!” Evie blurted out, hoping she hadn’t offended their host. “Not at all!”

Brenda broke into a loud laugh. “I’m just kidding.” Her mood changed to deadly serious, with an almost scary scowl as she leaned in toward them quickly “I am NOT a fraud!”

Evie’s hand immediately jumped back into Silas’. Silas echoed the sentiment by squeezing her hand back tightly, but then relaxed and released as Brenda broke into another laugh.

“Roger is a good guy,” Brenda said, the laugh lingering in her voice as she sat back. “He and I have had many long conversations over the years.”

“Roger just told us that you could give us insight into some things,” Evie said. Brenda was a bit erratic and it put Evie on edge.

“That I can!” Brenda said, leaning to reach a small strainer behind her, the size of a spoon, and also a small cup from just beside the sink. She ran the strainer through the tea and collected the tea leaves, gently banging the strainer into the cup, clearing it. She handed the strainer and cup to Evie, who

mirrored her actions. Satisfied with the state of her tea, Evie passed them to Silas, and he also performed the straining process.

“Not going to read the leaves?” Silas joked.

“Nah, I’m not that kind of psychic,” Brenda said with a smile. “And this tea is better without sugar, if that was what you were thinking,” Brenda added, winking at Silas.

Silas’ eyes went wide as he nodded his head.

“Are you a psychic?” Evie asked, genuinely curious, and hoping for a straight answer.

“I can sense things,” Brenda said, taking a sip of her tea. “I don’t know if I would call that psychic or not.”

“Sense what kind of things?” Evie asked, trying to figure out what information Roger felt was important to them.

“People and events mostly,” Brenda said. “And that is why tea leaves do no good for me.” She winked at Evie.

“How did you meet Roger?” Silas asked, trying to get to the start of the story.

“Straight shooter Silas!” Brenda declared. “I like that.”

“We don’t want to take up too much of your time,” Silas replied, squirming a bit. “No more than you can afford. I’m sure you have other things to attend to.”

“Don’t worry about that.” Brenda took a slow sip of her tea. “I have lots of time. As you can see, the streets are pretty empty.”

Silas and Evie both sipped the tea, actually finding the eclectic flavor quite enjoyable.

“The story of Roger . . .” Brenda began, taking another slow sip of tea. “Roger was working at the university and was friends with Andrews, Joy, and Frank. They were all trying to get funding to look into different types of memory. Roger was probably a year away from his break—or breakdown—however he describes it. The group wanted to study how memories form and manifest, and also how other factors can influence experiences. I was already Mademoiselle Ranier, performing readings on people, and such. They wanted to do a test on my brain while doing a reading.”

“They wanted to test a psychic?” Evie said. “In the imaging machine?”

“Sort of,” Brenda answered with a sad face, which slowly grew into a smile. “Roger felt that memories and lies and the like, exhibited different

responses in the brain. He was convinced that psychics were fake, just creative liars, and I agreed to do the study.”

Brenda stopped and took a sip of tea, her gaze boring into the faces of the pair, looking for signs of judgment.

“I made it clear that I wouldn’t do the study unless I was actually receiving a message. They all agreed,” Brenda said, softening her look. “I would sit in the waiting area several times each week, waiting for a good message, and one day, I felt a connection. I told Roger, and we set up the machine. Even with the noise of the machine, I was able to focus on the connection and get the message.”

Brenda took a gulp of her tea then continued. “After that, I waited for the results. When Roger walked in with them, he sat right there.” Brenda pointed to the chair Evie was sitting in.

“And the results?” Evie asked, interested in knowing the details.

“Roger said they had never seen anything like it,” Brenda said, moving her hands across the surface of the table. “He showed me many pictures of different test results—pictures of people telling the truth, recalling memories, liars, even people recounting sexual experiences, and all of the brightened regions from the machine. Then he pulled my scan out and put it right on the table in the middle of the others. He said my results didn’t make sense—couldn’t make sense.”

“He captured a real psychic event?” Silas asked, feeling a tingle race across his forearms.

“I don’t know what he captured,” Brenda said. “Just that during the test, I was able to receive a message.”

“What was the message, if I may ask?” Evie said.

“It was a message that Roger was out of place,” Brenda said, giving a soft look to Evie. “I don’t get messages like ‘Silas will be wearing yellow tomorrow’ and stuff like that, but more of a feeling of things being on a different path in the past, or how to set things in place to make things right. And I can’t conjure anything up at will. I just get a feeling whenever they happen.”

“And you felt he was on the wrong path,” Silas said.

Brenda nodded.

Evie took another sip of her tea. “This is very good tea.”

“One of the perks of Mademoiselle Ranier.” Brenda waved at the tea tins on the shelves behind her. “The locals, and others, send me exotic plants and herbs, and spices and such, thinking I am an old gypsy alchemist.”

“Aren’t you?” Silas joked.

“Only in the drinking of the tea sense,” Brenda laughed. “I don’t use herbs or potions or tea leaves to do psychic readings.”

“What do you actually do?” Silas asked.

Brenda twisted up her lips ironically. “I do perform a bit of the fake readings, mentalist type stuff—I will never admit to that outside of this room. But only to those that understand the entertainment value of the whole ambiance. I never perform fake readings for people looking for real help. In those cases, I am honest with them and tell them that I will try to channel something. But I never promise any results.”

“Do you get results?” Evie asked.

“You’re here, aren’t you?” Brenda said, causing Evie’s face to warm. “I don’t make promises, but my results keep customers coming through my door.”

“Sorry,” Evie said, feeling suddenly embarrassed.

“Don’t worry,” Brenda said, smiling warmly at Evie. “Everybody has doubts, but also wants to believe I am for real. Now let me ask you a question. Why are you here?” She alternated her intense gaze between Silas and Evie.

“Roger said you might help us find answers,” Evie answered nervously.

“Answers to what?” Brenda pressed. “Why are you here?”

“A couple weeks ago,” Silas started nervously, figuring it would be helpful to be honest, “I woke up from a dream with a face imprinted in my brain. I couldn’t get the image out of my mind, so I made a drawing and tried to find who it was,” Silas spoke quickly.

“It was her?” Brenda asked, pointing at Evie with a finger. A small bracelet of stones dangled from her wrist.

“Yes,” Evie answered, her voice shaking a little. “At least I looked like the drawing Silas made.”

“Not hard to guess,” Brenda said with a small smirk.

A small figure passed by the door.

“Angel!” Brenda called. “Be a dear and fetch young Esmeralda.”

“Okay,” The voice said, and shortly afterward the front door opened and closed.

“And you feel there is something supernatural about that dream?” Brenda queried the pair.

“I don’t know how to explain it otherwise,” Silas replied. “It was just so vivid and life-like, not like a regular dream.”

“And you?” Brenda asked Evie, her gaze again feeling like it was reading Evie’s soul.

“My dream didn’t focus on faces,” Evie said, and paused for a moment before feeling the need to add more. “But I had a dream about conversations and voices.”

“Anything else?” Brenda asked, looking at both Silas and Evie.

“There was an artifact in the first dream—cylinders actually,” Silas said.

“Cylinders. Roger’s expertise,” Brenda said, leaning forward. “First dream?”

“Yeah,” Silas said. “There was a second dream.”

Brenda looked to Evie. “Did you have a second dream?”

“Yes,” Evie said. “That’s why we traveled here. To Virginia.”

“We came to visit Professor Andrews’ lab,” Silas said. “It was in the dream. I heard the name of a little kid in a dream—Timmy—and that it was in Virginia. That’s how we ended up here.”

“I see,” Brenda said softly, seeming to go into a deep thought. “Did you meet Timmy?”

“We did,” Evie said. “Pretty much exactly as we had seen in the dreams.”

“Interesting,” Brenda said. “But you didn’t have any visions while you were awake? No messages?”

The pair paused for a minute and looked at each other, then shook their heads. “No, nothing while awake. Just in dreams.”

“Are you thinking you are psychic then?” Brenda demanded, causing Silas and Evie to jump slightly in their chairs.

“Not at all!” Silas said. “I don’t know how to characterize it, but I would never call it psychic.”

“I don’t think you’re psychic either,” Brenda said, relaxing and giving Evie a smile. “Both from the story and from the feelings around you. You don’t seem to be able to connect outside of the natural realm.”

“But what about the dreams then?” Silas asked, tensing up at Brenda’s mixed messages. “What are they?”

“I believe that the dreams are probably real,” Brenda said. “The bigger question is obviously ‘why.’ Why are you getting these dreams? Why you two? People all over the world have dreams where they see or experience things that come to pass, but those dreams are neither psychic nor supernatural events, just random things that turned out to occur. I’ve seen it many times—someone comes in and says they had a psychic episode. I convince them to wait it out as I try to construct who they are, and most of the time it turns out to be random.”

“Dreams randomly tell the future?” Silas asked. This was new information he hadn’t considered.

“Oh, definitely,” Brenda answered, stretching her core left and right in the chair. “I don’t study dreams, and have no inkling to, but dreams seem to be mostly a way for the brain to recharge, and at some point that recharging hits on something that seems at first glance to be a psychic episode.”

“Such as?” Evie asked.

“Suppose you, a young girl, are studying in college. At some point, you dream you oversleep and miss a class,” Brenda said. “Odds are, at some point in your future that will probably happen. Or you, as a young fertile woman, dream of a husband and children. Those are very common dreams for men and women—it is practically part of our DNA. Many dreams have enough ambiguity to appear prophetic. In fact, most dreams contain people who are generic, without specific features.”

“Except for my dream?” Silas interjected, returning to the dream of Evie’s face.

“We are getting to that,” Brenda said, putting up a finger to silence him with a smile. “Most dreams, not all dreams. In fact, there are a few dreamers who consistently see very vivid details, such as facial features and other distinguishing features. But that still doesn’t mean it is a psychic event.” She stood up and took the teacup from Silas. Evie drank the last gulp of the tea and handed the cup to Brenda. Brenda placed all three cups into the sink, and emptied the tea leaves from the fourth cup.

Then she turned to face them, “Question. Are you a couple?”

Both Silas and Evie turned bright red. And neither was sure who should answer first.

Silas took a deep breath. “We only just met online a week ago, and in person yesterday. We haven’t even talked about dating. Why?”

“Just wondering” Brenda replied with a relaxing smile. She sat back down, with a small grunt again, and adjusted her hair covering.

Evie started to feel like Brenda was getting ready to perform a psychic reading on the couple. As the silence was about to get uncomfortable, the trio heard the front door open and rapid footsteps echo in the hall.

“Hi, Mademoiselle Ranier Brenda!” a small voice called out before the accompanying figure appeared in the doorway.

“Hello, young Esmeralda!” Brenda answered, not bothering to get up.

The footsteps echoed down the hallway for two more seconds before a figure appeared in the doorway of the kitchen.

“Who are you?” Esmeralda said to Evie and Silas, surprised by the strangers seated at the table. She stepped in and stood at Evie’s right shoulder. The young girl with long dark hair that framed a light complexion smiled brightly, showing several gaps where adult teeth were presently growing in.

“I’m Evie,” Evie said, smiling back at the young girl.

The young girl’s face scrunched up, as if she were trying to figure out some complex mathematical problem. After a few seconds the bright smile returned and she jumped quickly to position herself behind Silas’ right shoulder.

“And who are you?” Esmeralda asked, resting her chin casually on his shoulder.

“I’m Silas,” Silas answered, feeling the pointy chin dig into his shoulder. “Good to meet you, Esmeralda.”

“You too!” Esmeralda said, not moving from her position on his shoulder.

“Esmeralda,” Brenda said, “These two have had dreams.”

“Ooohh,” Esmeralda uttered in the same way a pre-teen would respond to watching a kiss. “Good dreams?”

“Just a face to start with,” Silas answered, “looking for an artifact.” He filled the young girl in on the dreams.

Esmeralda stepped back, removing her chin from Silas’ shoulder. After a short pause, Esmeralda put one hand on Evie’s shoulder and one on Silas’ shoulder. She stayed in that pose for several long moments, or at least it felt that way to Silas.

“It’s okay,” Esmeralda said, after the long silence. She dropped her hands from their shoulders and took a step back behind them.

“Okay?” Evie asked.

“Yes,” Esmeralda answered, casually. “There isn’t any danger.”

“What would be dangerous?” Silas asked the young girl, not sure what the information meant.

“Perhaps it would be good to know about Esmeralda,” Brenda said, interrupting.

“That might help,” Silas said. He was definitely wondering who this young girl was.

“Esmeralda, or Maddie, is another psychic,” Brenda said, motioning for Esmeralda to leave Silas and Evie alone and move to the stool in the corner of the kitchen.

“Like you?” Evie asked.

“Different but similar,” Brenda said. “Maddie can connect with events. And connect at will.”

“Most of the time!” Maddie corrected the older woman.

“Yes,” Brenda amended. “Most of the time. I noticed this when I first met Maddie.”

“Brenda and I met at a psychic convention,” Maddie said, happily engaging in the conversation.

“Yes, we did,” Brenda said, laughing at the interruption. “A convention that brought together mostly fakes, but some true seekers. Lots of peddling of wares and such.”

“Such a scam,” Maddie added, shaking her head even as her face showed amusement.

“And what happened there?” Brenda pressed Maddie, leading the young girl into the story.

Maddie grew quiet, suddenly not feeling excited to talk.

“She saw a man fall down,” Brenda answered in Maddie’s stead. “You were what? Four or five?”

“I was five,” Maddie answered soberly, a look of sadness covering her small face.

“The man happened to fall a few feet from me, and I didn’t really take note of much else, until this girl’s voice hit my ears. ‘That isn’t supposed to happen!’ she said,” Brenda continued, switching her gaze from Silas and Evie to Maddie.

“The fall wasn’t supposed to happen?” Evie asked.

“Yes,” Maddie answered quietly, from the corner.

“Why?” Evie asked.

“I’m sure you’ve heard of Déjà Vu?” Brenda asked Evie and Silas.

“I’ve heard of it,” Evie answered. “I don’t think I could give a clear definition of it though, because I don’t think I’ve ever experienced it.”

“Me neither,” Silas said.

“Déjà Vu is the feeling that the events in the present have happened before,” Brenda said. “Sort of like a repeat. Many who experience it describe the feelings from light to very intense, and from brief to lasting several seconds.”

“I have that!” Maddie jumped in.

“You have Déjà Vu?” Evie smiled at the very curious young girl.

“In a way,” Maddie said, slowly returning to her exuberant self. “I get the feeling that things either happen the right way, or sometimes the wrong way.”

“Like the man falling?” Evie asked.

“Yeah. He wasn’t supposed to fall. He was with his grandkids, and was supposed to have a happy day. He fell and hurt his leg. He limped the rest of the day.”

“How would you know that?” Silas asked, not sure how the young girl could know what the man’s day should hold.

“I’m Déjà Vu,” Maddie replied with a big grin.

“Then you met him again?” Brenda questioned Maddie.

Maddie’s face took on a look between fear and discomfort.

“Go ahead,” Brenda said. “It isn’t that bad, dearie.”

“I saw the man like two days later,” Maddie began, looking down. “He wasn’t limping, so that was good.”

“Seems good,” Evie said.

“Then I checked him,” Maddie said, lips tightening with eyes closed. “He was fine in a lot of ‘universes’ I guess, but then I saw *it!* Normally the people I look at don’t know I am there, but this one, he was totally black, no eyes even! And he turned and looked right at me!”

“Maddie was only five, remember,” Brenda said.

“I got scared and started to cry,” Maddie admitted, almost tearing up again.

“Maddie’s mom says she was so scared that she wet herself,” Brenda explained.

“Like three drops!” Maddie protested, her face a bright red along with her eyes.

“It’s okay, dearie,” Brenda reassured her.

“The dark shape was the old man?” Evie asked Maddie.

“I don’t know.” Maddie sat up straight and wiped a small tear. “I didn’t hang around to know more. All I know is that the shape turned to look directly at me, with no eyes.”

“And that was *Déjà Vu*?” Silas asked.

“Most probably,” Brenda said. “A collective of present events in multiple universes.”

“What was the black figure?” Evie asked.

“We don’t know for sure,” Brenda answered. “That was a very unsettling event.”

“The only time I’ve ever seen it,” Maddie added.

“Did you talk with Roger about this?” Silas asked.

“Roger has explained his theory of the multiverse to you?” Brenda asked.

“Yes, but I admit I’m still very confused by it,” Silas said. “How everyone can be alive in all those cylinders.”

“He explained the probability ‘hills’ as he likes to call them?” Brenda asked.

“Yes,” Silas and Evie said in unison.

“Maddie is an exceptionally gifted child, and has the ability to ‘see’ the current hill, as it were—or at least that is the best explanation Roger and I could come up with. Probably more like ‘feel’ the present,” Brenda said. “Sort of like constantly living in *Déjà Vu*, and being able to compare the present to a feeling of what is supposed to be the present. All of the possible ‘presents’ are close enough that Maddie can sense what is supposed to happen by how often each feeling of being ‘right’ happens.”

As Brenda spoke of Maddie’s ability, Maddie’s mood brightened, almost back to how she was when she first walked into the kitchen.

“Roger knows of Maddie?” Evie asked, very curious at the seemingly well connected group in the area.

“Oh, yes,” Brenda answered with a big laugh. “Roger knows a lot of people in the fringe cultures. Roger attends almost every psychic convention that I do.”

“Me too!” Maddie added with a big grin, the small gaps in her teeth making Silas smile.

“Roger was very interested in hearing about this dark figure of Maddie’s,” Brenda said. “And we tried to figure out what it meant.”

“Any answers?” Silas asked. Not that he thought there would be any. So far, in the last two days, there hadn’t been “answers” about anything. Only more questions, and impossible to understand theories.

“We aren’t dealing with a realm that has *any* answers,” Brenda said. “The best we can do is come up with plausible situations that make sense. And Roger seems to have come up with a reasonable theory.”

“I see dead people,” Maddie joked in a practiced creepy voice, shocking Silas and Evie.

“That’s not the full theory,” Brenda said, laughing at the girl’s antics. “But it does come close. Roger thinks that the dark figure was from a universe where the man had died.”

“Based on what?” Silas asked.

“Since Maddie started out with Déjà Vu of the man not getting hurt,” Brenda started, “It would seem that getting hurt prevented the man from some activity later—an activity where he would be hurt worse.”

“That seems like a stretch,” Evie said.

“Everything relating to these powers is a stretch,” Brenda said, spreading her arms wide. “There is no way to figure out what or how these powers work, so every explanation is a wild theory. You have seen the children in Andrews’ lab, and any theory trying to explain that behavior would also be a stretch.”

Evie tried to piece together the bits of information. “So if the man had died in the universe Maddie connected to, that would be a quite far away universe, wouldn’t it? I mean, it would be a significant distance from the one where he is now alive.”

“Most likely,” Brenda said. “And we will probably never know how many universes out Maddie can see.”

“Or if things can float between universes,” Maddie added. “When I see a different universe, I only just watch stuff. This time, the black figure actually turned to look at me. He knew I was there. That was the scariest part.”

“If he had no eyes, how did you know he looked at you?” Silas asked.

“I could tell.” Maddie’s voice held no doubt. “Even without eyes, I felt him stare directly at me.”

Chills rippled through Evie's body. She knew without a doubt that the young girl was telling the truth. But what did it all mean?

"The man was dead in that universe?" Silas asked.

"That's the best explanation," Brenda answered. "Could have been recent enough that there wasn't a 'reset' yet, or carrying away to heaven, or whatever, just an empty track on the playing record."

"Is that what you see?" Evie asked Brenda. "Ghosts and dead people?"

"No. Not exactly," Brenda answered. "I can connect to a 'life spiral'—as Roger would call it—with some people, and get images of certain times of their lives—their past. I think every psychic's ability is different, with no two being the same."

"That's why I love to go to the conventions!" Maddie said, giving Evie a big smile.

Chapter 13

Silas shifted his gaze between Brenda and Maddie. “It seems like conventions are something that would be more for fakes.”

“True,” Brenda said. “Most of the attendees have no psychic abilities. But I go to see what the ‘state of the art’ has moved to. While fakers can get away with a lot at the conventions, there is some serious—albeit definitely off base—science that does try to explain things.”

“And there are some real psychics!” Maddie added.

“Of course,” Brenda said. “If anyone actually had psychic powers and wasn’t sure where to find others, that would be the place to go. Imagine you are an outcast, and all you know is that this ability is in you. Nobody you ever talk to can relate, and they all think—and call—you a liar. A convention is where you would go to belong. When abilities manifest themselves, there is usually a very strong feeling of abandonment. Those with psychic abilities often feel confused and out of place.”

“I bet it gets lonely sometimes,” Evie said.

“Very much so,” Brenda said, “everyone desires to belong, in some way, to something, whatever that is.”

“Do psychics openly advertise their abilities?” Silas asked, “That seems like something that people would want to avoid.”

“Except the fakers!” Maddie said, smiling at Silas.

Brenda nodded to Maddie. “Exactly. Except the fakers.”

“So if these conventions have a bunch of fakes, how do those with real psychic abilities find each other then?” Silas asked.

“Usually by saying ‘hi,’” Brenda said. “Seriously, I think there is an invisible connection between all these psychic abilities. Except for Maddie. I picked up on her strange outburst.”

“But then we said ‘hi!’” Maddie said, smiling at her addition.

“That we did,” Brenda said. “And then we discussed Maddie’s ability.”

“Déjà Vu?” Evie asked as the story circled around.

“Right,” Brenda said. “Maddie can tell if the present is as it should be.”

“And sometimes things end up being way off,” Maddie said with a shake of her head.

“Can you see the future?” Silas asked. If she could know how things were supposed to be, then maybe she knew what would happen.

“No silly!” Maddie said, laughing at Silas’ question.

“Roger and I came to the conclusion that Maddie can sense the present and immediate past, across many different, universes,” Brenda explained. “If any of these varied universes—the dark figure seems to indicate she can reach pretty far—ends up being radically different, Maddie can sense it. Or if the current situation seems to be dramatically different, Maddie can feel that too.”

“Why did you say we’re safe?” Silas asked Maddie.

Maddie shook her widely at Silas. “I didn’t say you were safe. I said there wasn’t any danger.”

“What is the difference?” Evie asked, not sure what to make of the distinction.

“If you were in danger, I could probably feel that,” Maddie said casually, as if she had answered this question many times before. “But I can’t say for sure that you are safe. There are always things that I can’t see.”

“Maddie, are these two supposed to be together?” Brenda asked, changing the subject, with a sly smile. “You know, like a couple?”

Maddie grinned and swung her legs rapidly in front of herself. “Yes! It totally feels like it.”

“There you go,” Brenda said, laughing at Maddie. “Guess it is settled.”

Evie knew she was probably bright red. Her only consolation was that Silas’ face was completely red also.

“What is your gift?” Silas asked Brenda, trying to change the awkward subject. “If Maddie can sense *Déjà Vu*, what do you get?”

Brenda took a deep breath and shook her head. “Roger and I have gone over this, in incredible detail some times, and determined that I have the ability to connect to a close multiverse set.”

“Close multiverse set?” Evie repeated. “Like not as far as Maddie can see?”

“Right!” Brenda said. “If Maddie can see the entire ‘hill’, or several close hills, of this probability present—meaning probably millions and millions of different universes, but only at this moment in time—I can connect with maybe twenty universes, not just the present, but also the past in some cases.”

“What about when you sensed about Roger being in the wrong place?” Silas asked. “Wasn’t that a future message?”

Brenda shook her head again. “With Roger’s message, it wasn’t a feeling that his future self was unhappy or anything like that. It was more of a feeling that all of the Rogers I could sense had something they longed for. Something missing in the current path. But nothing about his future.”

“No future?” Evie asked, repeating Silas’ question.

“Nope!” Maddie shook her head, and swung her legs. “Future is *ha-ard!*”

Brenda nodded to Maddie. “The future is very hard. I can’t get any connections past a few seconds ago. I imagine if someone could connect with the future, they would probably be consumed by greed and end up destroying themselves.”

“Or just go crazy trying to get there,” Maddie said.

“Have you tried?” Evie asked the young girl.

“Every psychic has tried!” Brenda said. “It is like the holy grail in a way.”

“I tried—a lot!” Maddie answered, then put her hands on her cheeks and pulled her face down to show her frustration. “There was always something blocking me.”

“I see,” Silas said. “Nobody ever sees the future then?”

“Not that I know of,” Brenda said.

“There’s old man Postoffice!” Maddie stated in a know-it-all way.

“He doesn’t see the future,” Brenda said, rolling her eyes at Maddie.

“But he *knew* the future,” Maddie said, seemingly reminding the older woman of the information.

“Maybe,” Brenda said, scoffing at the young girl. “Or it could be just coincidence.”

“Old man Postoffice?” Silas asked, pretty sure he and Evie were missing some inside joke.

“Oh, yes,” Brenda said, remembering Silas and Evie were there. “That is what we called him. His actual name is Postice.”

“And he saw the future?” Evie asked.

“He *knew* the future!” Maddie corrected.

“He might have *known* the future,” Brenda said. “It is hard to really say if he saw the future, or knew the future, or if he was just lucky.”

“You should go ask him,” Maddie said, matter-of-factly, providing the simple answer to their query.

“We could?” Silas asked, not sure how open all of these different people would be to talking to strangers.

“If you want,” Brenda said with no emotion, giving a small shake of her head to Maddie.

“How did you find him?” Evie asked, wanting to know more.

“Maddie and I met him—maybe three or four years ago—at a convention. He set about to find *us*, actually. I have no idea if he is still alive,” Brenda said.

“He’s alive,” Maddie assured them, giving a huge gappy grin as her legs swung in front of her.

“Why was he at the convention?” Silas asked.

“He seemed to be looking for actual psychics,” Brenda replied, after spending a few moments trying to recall details. “He was asking about dreams too,” Brenda said.

Dreams? Was that a coincidence? Or were they meant to talk to this old man Postoffice?

“And the future,” Maddie added. “He wanted to know if I ever saw the future.”

“How did he figure out you have psychic abilities?” Evie asked.

“Just by asking,” Brenda said. “I remember he went about it quite smartly, asking people very specific questions. He managed to eliminate almost all of

the fakers immediately. And then he started casual conversations with the remaining attendees, getting enough information to put together who had abilities and who didn't.

"And you?" Silas asked Brenda. "Did he find you?"

"Yes," Brenda said, slowly shaking her head. "I still don't know how he did it."

"I just told him I was for real," Maddie said with a big smile. "He's a little mean, but he's funny too."

"Funny?" Evie asked, confused at the old man being mean and funny.

"He kept asking funny questions," Maddie said. "And he got madder and madder when I answered them."

"It isn't nice to toy with people like that, dear," Brenda said, then turned to Evie and Silas. "He lives near Boston, at least from what I remember. His name is pretty unique, so you should be able to ask around and find someone who knows him."

Evie pulled the paper out of her pocket and nodded. "I thought the name sounded familiar. Roger has his name on the list of people that might help with dreams and artifacts."

"Postice doesn't like people," Maddie said happily, like that was a good thing. "And he's like a *milll-lllion* years old."

"He's really probably in his 80s," Brenda said. "But he doesn't like people, that's for sure. I suppose being rich makes people suspicious of everybody."

"He's *ree-ally* rich!" Maddie bounced on the stool. Brenda fixed her with a glare.

"Postice," Silas started, reading from his phone after a searching the name. "An early investor in medical technology, reportedly starting when he was only fourteen with his first ten dollars."

"Sounds like him," Brenda said.

"See, that's what he knew," Maddie stated bluntly, with a cocky attitude. "He *knew* what was going to happen. And he used it to get rich," Maddie finished with a 'told you so' look to Brenda.

Silas shared his phone with Evie, and together they skimmed the paragraphs of the life of Postice.

"Such a sad life," Evie said, reading the elderly man's profile. "His family suffered such tragedy."

“Yes,” Brenda said, a growing confidence in her voice. “And that is one reason for the disbelief. I would think anyone that could see the future would have a bit of power to prevent events such as those.”

“There’s a big difference,” Maddie said bluntly, more to herself than to the others.

“What difference?” Evie asked.

“A big difference between *seeing* the future and *knowing* the future, and knowing *all* the future and knowing only *one* thing,” Maddie explained.

“I see,” Evie said, but not really understanding the difference.

“Do you think it is worth talking to him?” Silas asked Brenda.

“Stay away if he is grouchy,” Maddie muttered loud enough so that she knew the others heard.

“You could at least ask,” Brenda said. “Your path seems to be a bit curvier and round-about than most. I don’t know what you are ultimately looking for.”

“I don’t know either,” Silas answered. “Starting from a face in a dream to learning so much information.”

“I think we’re still trying to figure out our path, and why,” Evie said. “Right now we have theories and stories, but still no reason for traveling all over the country with some random stranger.” She pointed to Silas, causing Brenda and Maddie to laugh.

“Our journey has been strange from the onset,” Silas said. “Maybe old man Postoffice will just be the next strange thing on our path to figuring out these dreams.”

“Maybe,” Brenda said. “And I probably can’t give you much more information on your dreams, or your quest. I brought Maddie in to try to see if she knew anything more, and it appears we are both out of ideas.”

“I’m getting hungry, too,” Maddie said.

“You can get on home now, Maddie,” Brenda told the young girl. “I think we’ve kept you long enough. Get Angel to walk you home.”

“I’m a big girl!” Maddie protested, folding her arms across her chest.

“Get Angel to walk you home,” Brenda said once more with no question in her voice. “It’s getting late.”

“Yes, Mademoiselle Ranier,” She jumped off the stool with a cocky snap of her head in Brenda’s direction, enough to make her dark hair swing widely behind her.

“Nice to meet you, Esmeralda,” Evie said, shaking the young girl’s hand.

“Likewise, Evie,” Esmeralda said, with a slight bow. “And you too, Silas.”

Before the remaining adults could start conversing, a loud shout echoed down the hall. “*Angel!!*” Maddie shouted without reservation. “I need you to take me *hoo-ooome!*”

Brenda shook her head with a small smile, and Evie and Silas laughed at the spirited young girl.

“We’ve probably kept you long enough as well,” Silas said after the house grew quiet. “We don’t want to intrude any longer.”

“It isn’t a bother,” Brenda said. “Your case is one that I will probably have to dwell on for a while. If anything connects, I’ll let you know.”

“We would greatly appreciate that,” Silas said, jotting down both of their numbers on a piece of paper. “Please call anytime.”

“I will,” Brenda said. “Remember that time doesn’t exist for me.”

They laughed. But as Evie laughed, she started to wonder if time existed for any of them.

Chapter 14

Silas and Evie settled in the car. “Back to Roger for food?” The neighborhood still showed no sign of activity anywhere. Evie and Silas felt the eeriness of it.

“Or we could get food, just the two of us,” Evie said, her face lighting up. “There was a ton of stuff to process today.” She looked deeply at Silas.

Silas grinned. “Just the two of us it is.” He pulled the car out onto the empty street and drove away. “Any place in particular?” He asked as they drove through the business district toward the hotel.

“No,” Evie said.

Silas smiled as his idea took shape. “I got it.”

The pair drove in silence for the short span of time until a parking lot appeared with a ‘Family Grocers’ sign on the building behind it. Silas looked over to Evie, and saw a small smile and a glint in her eyes.

They walked through the entryway, the doors sliding open as they got within range of the sensor. Silas grabbed a cart, and pointed it towards the stocked aisles in the store.

"I'm off to the meat section—you head to breads and condiments if you want," Evie said, scanning the hanging signs for the contents of each aisle.

"Yes ma'am."

After walking through a few aisles, Evie met Silas carrying some meat and cheese in her arms. The pair combined their items and headed to the checkout.

"We can save a bit of money here too," she said looking at the cost of the grocery purchases compared to eating out at a restaurant. "I can't really afford big spender stuff."

"I don't want to do that much more spending either." He placed all of the items on the belt for the cashier.

"Split it?" she asked.

"Split it!"

"This is the most relaxed I've felt all day," she said, happy for the familiarity of food shopping contrasting with the lecture-type setting earlier. "I hate learning new stuff too fast, especially when I don't understand it."

Silas opened the trunk and adding the bags. "I'm with you. I felt like I was under a microscope all day at Roger's place. I know he is a great guy, but damn, that really blew my mind. And the Bible stuff . . . I'm not at all up to speed on that, and Paul just kept spouting verse after verse. I couldn't keep track. And to be honest, I would like to understand what a multiverse is first."

The pair laughed together.

"Apparently we aren't in danger," he said, echoing Maddie's cryptic statement from earlier.

She gave a small laugh. "That's not a warm fuzzy feeling. I would like to know that I am safe."

"I'll keep you safe," Silas said, looking at Evie, and while said in a light-hearted manner, she could tell he was being sincere too.

"I know you will." And she knew it was true. There was something about Silas. About her connection with him. More than just the dream they shared. It was like they were meant to be together.

"And you dad scares the pants off of me!"

"He really should."

"Your room or mine?" he asked, waving the bags of groceries toward the two hotel rooms.

“Mine.” She pulled her key out and slid it into the electronic lock. “Your hands are full.”

“As you wish.”

Evie smiled, catching the reference to one of her favorite movies.

Silas unpacked the groceries onto the small table in the room, spreading the items out for sandwiches. “Hearty grain bread, mayo, mustard, tomatoes, pickles—both sweet and regular—cheese, of course, and the tasty meat sticks you procured.”

“Sliced lean turkey! Not tasty meat sticks!”

He looked at the buffet on the table. “This looks like a feast.”

“That it does,” she said. They’d have leftovers for tomorrow.

Evie jumped on the bed and grabbed the remote. “And because I don’t really want to think about anything anymore, I just want to watch something on TV!”

“Agreed.” Silas watched her as she clicked through the various TV channels.

“I don’t want to think about anything, just get totally distracted.” She stopped at a channel featuring a couple constructing a new home. “This is it.” She didn’t wait for any input from Silas. She put the remote down and slid off the bed to make her sandwich.

“That’s fine. As long as you can stand my commentary on what they are doing wrong!”

“Fair enough. Commentary away.”

Evie carried her sandwich to one side of the bed and jumped on, shaking the bed as Silas tried to sit down.

“Hey! I could have dropped my Croissant!”

The couple watched the home show, making new sandwiches and talking and eating together, Evie in the bed, and Silas making due sitting on one edge of the bed, using a chair as a makeshift table.

“That was so good,” he said after finishing his second sandwich. He collected all of the extra groceries and stowed them in the small fridge.

“Yes it was. One of the most enjoyable meals of the trip so far. My brain didn’t have to think about anything!”

“So true. I like Roger, and enjoy his discussions—as much as I understand them. And his food is top rate. But there is something about just being . . . this!, that is more enjoyable.” He waved his arms around the room.

“Yep. Oh, here comes another show!” She bounced on the bed to get comfortable.

Silas looked at the situation and wondered what to do.

“You look troubled,” she said, somewhat seriously, but also knowing exactly his dilemma.

“Yep. I’ll stick with the chair for now.” He moved the chair to the corner to allow for watching the show on the TV, and took a seat.

“Suit yourself. The bed is fair game—one foot on the floor, you know.” She patted the empty side of the bed for Silas.

He smiled back, and stuck with sitting in the chair.

The show passed in mostly silence, with some commentary and humorous comments from both them. The next show changed to a different genre, and she clicked the TV off.

Silas thought for a few moments, then sat on the bed next to Evie. “Should we try to track down Postice?”

She thought for a moment before replying. “I was thinking the same thing. He might not have any more information than Brenda did.”

“Let’s ask Roger?” Boston was a long way away, and he didn’t want to go there for nothing. He dialed Roger’s number and put his phone on speaker, placing it on the bed between them.

“Hello Silas,” Roger said. “How are you and Evie doing tonight?”

“We are fine. We had the meeting with Mademoiselle Ranier.”

“Good! Good!” Roger said. “How is Brenda?”

“She is just fine,” Evie said. “We had a good talk with her and also Maddie.”

“Ah, young Maddie. What was the consensus?”

“There wasn’t really much they could tell us about the dream or the artifact,” Silas said. “They admit the dream is unique, but haven’t a clue for the source of it, or how to describe it.”

“Ah, that’s disappointing—for me at least. I was hoping there would be some sort of connection between the Change Theory and your dream.”

“We were hoping that too,” Silas said. “The only lead Brenda and Maddie settled on was to talk to some guy named Mr. Postice.”

The phone was silent for a while. “Ah, Postice. I included him on the list because he seemed to be interested in dreams.”

“Is he worth talking to?” Evie asked.

“I haven’t talked to him for a while. I was presenting the Change Theory to a convention group and met him, probably—two years ago? Before I was able to fully define and defend the entire thing, and it doesn’t seem like he’s been back at any area conventions lately. At least not an official one.”

“I see,” Silas said. “Doesn’t seem like a good lead then?”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Roger said. “Any information might provide the spark of an idea. I just don’t have the same connection with him as I do with the others. I don’t think my reputation would get you very far.”

“Should we call him?” Silas asked.

Roger paused. “I’ll call him first. I’ve been meaning to talk to him for a while anyway.” And the line went dead.

“I really didn’t want to talk to Postice at all,” Evie said. “He just feels like an angry old man to me.”

“Well, we truly don’t know him,” Silas said, “and it would be too quick to judge him harshly.”

“I know. I don’t want to judge him. But I just get that feeling from the stories of Brenda and Maddie. It feels odd to just expect him to meet with us out of the blue. Who are we?”

“True. I don’t like forcing meetings on people just because of this crazy dream. But everyone that we’ve talked to so far actually understands this crazy quest.”

“And actually has gone out of their way to help us. That is pretty amazing.” She leaned over the edge of the bed to the nightstand and opened the top drawer. “I knew it! They still put Bibles in here.”

Silas laughed at her excitement. “We *are* in the Bible belt. Did you not expect one?”

“I have no idea. I haven’t been in a hotel for so long.” Evie flipped open the cover. “What was the verse? Hebrews something.” She turned to the proper book and started skimming through Hebrews. “Here it is,” she announced a few minutes later, “Hebrews 9:27, I had to start from the beginning because I didn’t remember.”

“Which one was that?” He looked over her shoulder.

“The one that talks about dying, and then being judged. Remember when Jessica and Paul were talking about reincarnation. And they said how the verse could mean two different things.”

Silas shook his head. “Maybe if you read it again?” All the verses sounded the same in his memory.

“*‘And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment:’*” Evie read. “The verse before says *‘For then must he often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.’* Followed by 9:27: *‘And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment:’* which is followed by *‘So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation.’*”

“I’m lost,” he said, not making any sense of any of the three verses she read.

“Me too, honestly. I remember hearing that Hebrews is one of the more challenging books of the Bible to understand.”

“No argument from me.”

“I guess what I was hoping to find was a bit more clarity on the reincarnation question,” she said. “But put together, these verses actually seem to have many different topics crammed in, and in such a way that nothing is very clear.”

“Walk me through your thinking.”

She sat up straight against the wall. “Jessica said reincarnation is not justified in the Bible, mainly by the verses that talk about dying and go to hell, or this one—dying once and then being judged. And I can agree with all of that. I want to believe the Bible is true, so that seems to be the starting point. But Timmy blows my mind.”

“Exactly. He had the memories of an old man, true and actual memories that only the old man would know. I can’t believe Timmy is a hoax.”

“I agree,” she said. “I don’t think it would be easy, or maybe even possible, to set up a hoax such as Timmy, especially given that there are other little kids that have memories like he does. That’s what really makes me suspect that second lives might be real.”

“Maybe not second lives,” Silas said. “But at least connections to different lives. How would you explain the reincarnation thing? That’s how far behind I am in all this.”

“If the Bible part is put aside for now, the multiverse is a collection of spawn points. And each ‘life,’ if you want to call it that, spawns in a new universe. You are still you, but just in a different game.”

“Okay. And the universes are in contact with each other?”

“Maybe. I’m not sure on the whole ‘probability’ part, or hills or whatever yet, but it sounds like there are universes that attract each other. Like all the universes where we win World War II are together.”

“And all the ones where Hitler wins are together, but apart from now?”

“Exactly. Like those could be way over there,” She waved her arms in the direction of the mountains on the horizon. “And all the ones close to now are all in this hotel.”

“And the universes where the dinosaurs win World War II?”

“Those could be on the bottom of the ocean. Almost impossible to get to, but they probably exist, according to Roger’s theory.”

“That kinda helps,” he said. “Thanks.”

She felt her face warm. “My pleasure. It’s actually kind of fun to talk about this with you.”

“Well—” Silas started, but was interrupted by his phone ringing. He swiped across the screen. “Hello?”

“Silas. Roger here. I just got done chatting with old man Postice. He doesn’t seem to have a problem with you calling him.”

“That’s great, Roger. Thanks for making that contact.”

Silas ended the call and looked at Evie.

“Should we call now?” she asked him, sensing his question.

“I don’t see why not. Maybe our questions can be answered quickly.” He felt his hands shaking slightly as he dialed the number, then looked nervously at Evie as the phone rang.

“Hello?” a gruff voice answered.

Silas looked to Evie and motioned for her to talk first.

“Hello, Mr. Postice?” she said into the phone.

“Who is this?” the gruff voice replied. “Why are you calling?”

“Hi, Mr. Postice, My name is Evie, and I am calling to ask . . .” She trailed off, giving a lost look to Silas, not sure what to say.

“Hi, Mr. Postice, My name is Silas, and Professor Roger called you about us,” he picked up the awkward conversation.

“Oh, yes. We just talked about you,” his voice didn’t sound inviting.

“Yes,” Evie said. She shrugged to Silas, not knowing what to ask next.

“Fine. Come up,” Postice said.

“Come up?” Silas asked.

“You are in Virginia, correct? That seems to be what Borlun said.”

“That’s right.”

“Then come up. Boston. Pine Lake. See you tomorrow.” The voice sounded demanding and still cold.

“Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow. Can you hear me? Seems like the connection is poor. Call me when you get to Massachusetts.”

“Okay . . .” Silas replied hesitantly, not sure of what else to say.

“Tomorrow,” Postice said again loudly and slowly, making sure his words came through on the seemingly shaky connection “Massachusetts.”

“We’ll see you then,” Evie said. And the call ended abruptly.

“What was that?” Silas asked, half shocked, half joking.

“An old man telling us he wants company?” She gave him an uncomfortable laugh with a half smile.

“I hope so. He doesn’t sound friendly at all. I don’t know what we would be able to learn from people with that kind of bedside manner.” Silas wondered what the old man must have seemed like in a convention.

Evie grabbed her phone and pulled up the GPS. “Ten hour drive,” she said, showing the map route. “We should start early.”

“Easy for you to say. I don’t like this East Coast traffic.”

Evie shrugged. “Me either. But with active GPS routing, it should take us around all of the heavy traffic.”

“You hope. I haven’t really had good luck with getting traffic updates en route.”

“I thought guys liked a driving challenge?” she joked, poking him in the arm.

“Challenge is one thing,” he said, then broke in a small grin. “People are another. I probably won’t like the traffic one bit.”

She got off the bed with the phone and swinging her arms down and then toward the door, seemingly to usher Silas back to his own room. “Well then we should get a lot of sleep to rest up for the trip.” She pointed both arms toward the door again with a big smile.

“We should,” he said, giving her a quick look, but not moving from the chair for a few moments.

Evie's phone rang, causing them both to jump in surprise. "Oh, hi, Chris!" She covered the phone microphone. "This is going to be a long call," she whispered to Silas. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight," he said quietly, standing up and walking out the door.

As he heard the door close behind him, he heard her say "Chris!"

Chapter 15

His loud phone alarm alerted Silas that it was time to get up. It had taken him a while to fall asleep due to all the information he'd tried to cram in his brain that day.

'you up?' he texted Evie, after getting ready and packing his bags.

"yes," she replied right away.

'ready to head out?'

"just about."

'I'll meet you outside your room.'

"Have everything?" he asked as they set their bags down in the hallway a couple minutes later. He'd taken care of the food while she finished packing.

Evie took stock of the few bags and the empty room. "Yep. All set."

"Good. Me too. I packed all of the food into some bags with some ice. That should last until lunch."

They grabbed their bags and headed toward the elevator.

"We can call Roger and let him know our plans on the road," she said. "It probably isn't very nice to wake him up this early."

“I would believe that he doesn’t ever sleep.” Silas said, as they stood at the front desk and dropped off the keys. “How could he with all that information running around his brain at all times?”

The pair checked out and he made a mental note of the total bill compared to his budget. Everything seemed to still be in the workable range, which gave a somewhat comforting feeling. He didn’t want any surprises along the way. He looked at Evie and wondered if she could afford the financial hit from the flight reschedule.

After filling the car, he entered the Pine Lake destination into his phone. They had a long journey ahead of them, much of it with heavy traffic.

The morning travels progressed as planned, and all of the major traffic snarls were avoided by following the green roads provided by updates.

Just before ten AM, Silas’ phone rang.

“Hello?” Evie answered.

“You must be Evie! This is Silas’ friend, Noel.”

“Hi Noel!” Silas said. “What’s up?”

“I spent a lot of time thinking about what we talked about last night, dude. Have you asked your favorite question yet?”

“Talked about?” Evie asked, looking at Silas. “Favorite question?”

Silas felt his face grow hot as he looked at Evie’s smirk. He shook his head. “Busted. My favorite question is ‘don’t you wish everyone talked like in the movies?’”

Evie covered her mouth with her hand and let out a muffled laugh. “You know that is all fake, right? Movies, and books too, are edited and rewritten many times just to make sure the words sound perfect. That isn’t real life at all.”

Silas smiled at Evie’s answer. “That’s all true.”

“Everything is made to sound so sanitized and with quick comebacks that it becomes almost unbelievable on one level, while at the same time every movie concocts totally outrageous scenarios that could be prevented with a simple thirty second conversation.” Evie said, shaking her head at the Silas and the phone.

“Sounds like a keeper answer!” Noel said, with a hearty laugh in the background.

Silas looked intently at the road, avoiding Evie's gaze, which he imagined still smirked at him. "What did you think about last night?"

"All this multiverse stuff," Noel said. "It really got my walnut cooking. It's a very deep dive into all aspects of philosophy. I don't think I slept at all last night."

"I know you have ideas to share," Silas said, smiling at Evie.

"So many it's hard to find a good starting point!" Noel said, a small laugh echoing over the car noise. "The multiverse isn't a new idea by any means. It's been tied to the idea of time travel for centuries, although not directly linked in all of the stories. Most stories start with the premise that everything is all one timeline. But—and everybody has a big but—it also seems very likely that time travel within the same 'universe' would be impossible, based on several theories."

"Such as?" Evie asked.

"The Bible passages dealing with time and predestination to start with. Predestination and changing the past seem contradictory in every sense. And then the bacteria and virus loading for both the traveler and the local populations. And finally, the fact that horrible evils seem to still be a very large part of our history. All of these seem to conclude that time travel hasn't happened so far."

"But that doesn't mean that it's impossible," Evie said.

"Very true," Noel said. "But do you think that if someone had that power, there wouldn't be a little bit less evil in the world by now?"

"That is one theory," Silas said, "and another theory is that time travel did happen, and corrected an even worse evil."

"Absolutely. That's why it's brain busting to think too deeply about things. Thoughts are such a double edged sword."

"Thoughts?" Evie asked, tilting her head toward Silas.

"Yeah, thoughts," Noel said. "Thoughts essentially create good and evil. Without thoughts there would be just living. It's deep, I know, but imagine having no inventions or technology at all, and no thought to improve technology or anything. Just living day by day. And whatever happens just happens—no rhyme or reason for any actions by anyone. Just satisfying the immediate needs. Just like —almost like nature.

"Nature isn't good or evil by definition. Like ants just go back and forth every day collecting food for now and the future. No evil intent there. The

ants react to different situations, but those reactions are just for survival. Nothing with evil intent.”

“What about wasps?” Silas asked. “They’re a little meaner than ants.”

“Dude, you know it,” Noel said. “Wasps are assholes for sure, but I don’t think they’d be called evil. Most of nature doesn’t have the ‘intent’ needed to be called good and evil.”

“Good *and* evil?” Evie asked.

“Yeah. Good and evil are two sides of the same coin. Can’t have one without the other. Both need to exist if one exists.”

“I can do good without needing evil to exist,” Evie said.

“Could you?” Noel said. “Paul writes in the Bible that he wouldn’t know sin without the Law being present. If good existed without evil, wouldn’t that just be ‘normal’ then?”

“An interesting point,” Silas said. “It takes two opposites to identify either of them.”

“Right. Just like weighing with a scale, bud,” Noel said. “You need two sides. And ‘intent’ is the driving force toward good and evil. That little push to do something outside of just surviving. And intent needs thought to plan the *cause and effect* relationship.”

What he was trying to say was starting to make sense in Evie’s mind.

“Without the cause and effect of thought, most actions reduce to survival rather than being described as good and evil.”

“Animals do some crazy things we could consider evil,” Silas said.

“And sure, there probably are some exceptions. Of course the more intelligent the animal, the more likely an action could be considered evil.”

“Like killer whales playing with their food?” Evie said.

“Is that evil?” Noel said. “The playing could be just a way to make it easier to eat and digest the food, much like cooking does for humans.”

“I never thought of that. It just seems cruel when predators kill their prey.” Evie had never liked to watch those nature documentaries about stuff like that.

“They have no tools or technology. They’re just acting for survival the best way they know how,” Noel said. “And human thought is what created the empathy for the prey animals in the first place. Without thought and technology, how would humans still be feeding themselves?”

Evie and Silas spent a few seconds thinking about that statement. After the few seconds of silence, Noel went on.

“Humans tend to be weak compared to other animals, and not suited for survival hunting one on one, or even in packs. Also having to compete for gathering would also be very difficult without tools and thought. The biggest strength humans have is the brain—allowing for tools and technology, and speech, cooperation and recording history, which eventually creates thought.”

“And thus good and evil?” Silas asked.

“That’s a good question, dude, if not THE question,” Noel said. “What makes us? Who are we? These are the philosophical questions for all ages. The first person looking up at the stars, with that spark of thought, probably wondered if we were part of something beyond ourselves.”

“The multiverse? And anything outside of it?” Evie asked.

Noel paused then said, “It seems there is enough evidence to suggest—but not prove—that something external to our conscious brain and body exists. And with the multiverse theory, it would make sense.”

“What kind of evidence?” Silas asked.

“Demonic possession is a good start. Many may be hoaxes, but some show signs of superhuman abilities—such as strength, speech, movement, and so on. Bible stories of strength and superhuman abilities add to the list, if you accept those.”

“People possessed by demons in the Bible?” Silas asked.

“There are a few stories,” Evie said, “I don’t remember what they were though.”

“Mary Magdalene is one,” Noel said, “And a man possessed by seven devils. And then there was the man on the island that broke the chains they tried to tie him up with. He had a legion of demons in him, and Jesus cast them into the swine, which then ran over the cliff into the sea.”

“I didn’t know any of that,” Silas said.

“Most people don’t,” Noel said. “And then there’s prophecy. Prophecy could be considered as evidence. Biblical prophecies, but also non-spiritual visions over the ages. All of the true visions would be supernatural and point to something beyond the natural human consciousness as a source.”

“You’re on board with this time theory then?” Silas asked.

"I'm still digesting the time part," Noel said. "Time does seem to be a human construct and based on change. I don't know if I fully understand the 'everybody is alive' part though."

"Join the crowd," Silas laughed.

"The 'reclaimed memory' kids are another crazy thing. I don't know how to process that. I can totally get behind the idea that kids have stronger connections to the multiverse and anything outside of it. But that doesn't mean I understand it."

"That's the statement of the year!" Evie said, causing Noel and Silas to both laugh.

"From the perspective of the ninety year old," Noel continued, "how does that new connection form to the child if the old man is still alive? Where do the memories go if the person died? And how long is it before the person can reclaim their own memories? And why is it different people?"

"Very good questions, my friend," Silas said.

"Also, is there a delay between death and the next step to allow memories to linger and make a home in a young kid?" Noel asked. "How long is the delay? And what causes it?"

"And what about reincarnation or 'respawning' in another universe?" Silas added. "So many questions."

"That's the deep part. It leads to so many different possibilities. Like is this universe specifically crafted just for you?"

"Just for me?" Evie asked.

"Absolutely. Everything in this crazy world could be tailor made and constructed for Evie's learning and growth, for some unknown cosmic reason."

"You mean Silas is a construct?" Evie asked, poking him in the arm.

"Potentially," Noel said. "Everything from history, math, science, the weather, and every person, all of it has been constructed just for you—for some reason. To give you an experience of some sort. Knowledge."

"That's crazy," Evie said. "George Washington was created just for me?"

"And if this universe is specifically crafted as 'Evie's Universe', then it is quite possible that every person ever living in this universe is a Non-Playable Character, or even a different manifestation of Evie herself," Noel said.

"Me? Everybody is me?"

“Could be,” Noel answered. “There is no way to understand the cosmic realities. But if the simulation is just for you, then you would have the opportunity to ‘play’ every role throughout your universe to learn from it.”

“That’s even crazier.” Evie shook her head as the new ideas swirled around in it.

“Simulation theory can get very deep,” Noel said.

“Like *The Matrix* simulation?” Silas asked.

“More involved than that,” Noel said, “but it’s a good starting point. There aren’t babies powering the world, and we don’t have computer connections in us. But the idea that we live in a simulation makes sense when you think about the total number of universes making up the multiverse. If we live in one at a time, it will take an eternity to visit every one.”

“Eternity *is* a long time,” Evie said.

“That it is, dudette,” Noel said with a loud laugh. “A very long time. Though it’s quite possible that each of us will never visit some—or many, or most—of the universes. And if our form exists in that unvisited universe, then something like an NPC would need to fill in for us.”

“The multiverse is sounding more like a computer game every time I think about it,” Silas said, shaking his head. “Spawning points in every universe and NPCs all around us.”

“And we are NPCs in the universes we never visit,” Evie added. “Plus there are universes where we are never born.”

“True,” Noel said, “and taking all of those into account, there are still so many possible universes for us to live in that it’s mind breaking.”

“Would knowing about respawning into different universes change things?” Evie asked, her voice quiet and slow.

“In what way?” Noel asked. “Knowing things does totally change behaviors. Every experiment is corrupted by observation. Watching people causes behavior changes. From children being near parents, to adults turning on ‘church mode,’ to having to act a specific way at work . . . All of us are masters of change due to observation.”

“And criminals and rioters,” Silas said. “They definitely behave differently when they see cameras around.”

“Exactly. It’s impossible to count how many different personalities each of us can create for all of the different situations.”

“Besides observation, knowing about respawning—if true—if someone doesn’t like their current situation, they could just try to respawn into a new life,” Evie said.

“There are many people that think suicide is the way out of so many different troubles,” Noel said, “some of which are actually trivial in scope. Respawning wouldn’t seem a big factor.”

“I was just wondering if learning about the multiverse is worth it,” Evie said.

“My mentor loved to ask the bigger questions like that—why do people do things in general, and what is the end goal of knowledge. There was never a perfect or ‘right’ answer, but my answer is simply ‘live your best life.’ So that’s what I try to do.”

“What is your best life?” Evie asked.

“Just be kind to each person, and don’t stress the little shit!” Noel said. “Life is a gift, so make the most of every day.”

“The sandwich philosopher!” Silas said.

“Absolutely correct!” Laughter filled the car.

“What about the psychics?” Silas asked, wanting to know Noel’s thoughts about Brenda and Maddie. “What do you think about them?”

“Dude! I’m all in on psychics! There are totally connections to different universes that feed information. And the fact that you found two people to talk to you is amazing.”

“I gather you’d like to be with us next time?” Silas asked, though he doubted there would be a next time.

“Definitely! I’d ask questions all day!”

“Always the philosopher,” Silas said.

“Always. So my first question for the psychics would be how they learn it. Is it something mechanical like riding a bicycle, or something purely intellectual, like memorizing multiplication tables?”

“Why would that be important?” Evie asked.

“It creates the basis of a world view. For example, having a mechanical component defines the world as needing physical manipulations to produce effects. This is the ‘Harry Potter’ world view.”

“Harry Potter?” Silas asked.

“The use of a physical wand and chantings to produce effects. Without the wand or the proper utterance, an interaction cannot exist,” Noel said. “The

mythology of magicks, wizards and witches, and whatnots. Written spells, incantations, potions, and all that. Very physical magicks.”

“Well, Mademoiselle Ranier said she didn’t read tea leaves,” Silas said, laughing.

“Good info, dude! Another data point to add to everything.”

“And what about a purely intellectual mechanism?” Evie asked.

“In an intellectual system, all of the interactions would be through mental or psychic or spiritual connections. There is a connection beyond something that can be physically studied. It opens the possibility for many abilities in tons of people. And the Bible sort of backs up an intellectual mechanism. Jesus tells us to pray in secret, and not for show. But Elijah prayed on the top of Mount Carmel for fire to come down, and prayed as a show to the people, rather than for himself. The connections don’t need to be physical for many things.”

“Interesting,” Evie said. “You mention the Bible a lot. Are you religious?”

“Not particularly. Though it might be better if I was. The Bible has some pretty powerful credibility, more than many other works, anyway. Which could turn out to be unfortunate for me.”

“Why unfortunate?” Evie asked.

“If the Bible is true, and I don’t have the right religion or belief, I would be looking at a pretty terrible eternity. But even aside from religion and moral teachings, I find many stories of interest in the Bible.”

“Such as?” Evie asked, growing more curious, recognizing her own struggle.

“The book of Job,” Noel said. “It’s an early story in the Bible. It deals with beings—angels or demons—that travel to and from heaven and Earth. This could be good evidence for the cloud theory again.”

“Better than the witnesses?” Evie asked.

“Possibly. In Job, a devil or demon talks to God, and gets permission to ‘disrupt’ Job’s life.”

“Hence the ‘Patience of Job,’” Silas said. It was one of the few stories he remembered from the Bible.

“Yes,” Noel said. “To summarize the story, that devil gets permission to take everything Job has, family, livestock, health, and so on, and Job doesn’t understand why it’s happening.”

“That’s not Patience,” Evie said.

“True,” Noel said, with a small laugh. “The Patience comes in when his friends—and even his wife—turn on him and tell him he has sinned, and needs to come clean with God. Of course, Job can’t remember sinning, and defends himself to his friends and wife over the course of more than thirty chapters. But Job also doesn’t just ‘curse God and die’ and after those thirty chapters of accusations of sin, God then finally talks with Job to put things into perspective. He had Patience. He recovered. And he got double of everything taken from him.”

“But only ten more kids, not twenty,” Silas said, remembering that part of the story.

“Right,” Noel said. “God promises Job that he would end up with double everything that was taken from him. Job had lost his ten children—seven sons and three daughters. But he only had ten more.”

“And why does that matter?” Evie asked.

“Many people use it as a condemnation of the Bible,” Noel said. “Because ten is not double ten in any maths that we use. But the true answer may be that the first ten kids went to heaven, and when Job arrived in heaven he found them waiting. And then the second set of ten kids arrived—presumably after Job—giving him a total of twenty kids in Eternity.”

“You could interpret it that way,” Evie said.

“The relevant portion for the discussion about time and the multiverse is the fact that—let me look it up quick . . . I know it’s in the first chapter . . .” The phone went silent as he searched for the reference. “Is that the ‘sons of God’ came to present themselves before the Lord. That implies something off the Earth, and then Satan—it is Satan himself in the story, I forgot that fact—travels to Earth and has his dealings with Job. More evidence for a cloud existing outside of the multiverse.”

“But that doesn’t mean there are multiple universes,” Evie said.

“True,” Noel said. “There could be just this one universe—slash lifetime—and still be a cloud outside of time.”

“You mentioned time in the Bible,” Silas said. “Do you remember what they are?”

“Sort of,” Noel said. “The one I remember best is something like ‘*a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years is like a day*’ to God.”

“That’s New Testament somewhere,” Evie started typing on her phone. “I don’t know where.”

“I don’t either,” Noel admitted with a laugh. “I just remember the phrase. But that gives some evidence that time may not exist outside of our view—again supporting a cloud theory.”

“Here it is,” Evie said. “Second Peter 3, verse 8: *But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.*”

“Ah, so it seems there might be a disclaimer then,” Noel said.

“What disclaimer?” Evie asked. “The ‘*with the Lord*’ part?”

“That seems like it to me. It could be referring to after death, where time doesn’t matter in heaven.”

“Does that line up with the theory that there is no time outside of the cylinder?” Silas asked.

“I’d say so. If the cylinder is ‘Change’ and not ‘Time’, then any being outside of the cylinder, like in the cloud, would not experience time the same way we would.”

“And the witnesses watching could view a thousand years of history, in a ‘day’ as we know it,” Evie said. “And take a thousand years to watch one ‘day’ on Earth.”

Noel let out a low whistle. It was brain-bending to say the least. And something that all three of them knew they’d be thinking about possibly forever . . . if such a thing as forever even existed.

Chapter 16

As the noon hour approached, the couple watched as the traffic condition report on the GPS app turned from green, then to yellow, and then many of the roads turned to the red color—warning that traffic speeds were significantly reduced due to bottlenecks or accidents.

“We could stop for lunch,” Evie suggested, seeing the nervousness grow in Silas’ face.

“Actually,” Silas said, his shoulders dropping to release a lot of tension, “That is a fantastic idea. Thanks.”

“No problem,” she said, smiling on the inside. “Where would you like to stop?”

“You know those signs we’ve been seeing for the last hour? Best historical museum in the area?”

“Oh, yes,” Evie said, with a laugh. “Tourist trap for sure.”

Silas looked over at Evie. “Absolutely! But, this might be the only time I get to pass this way.”

“You think we should?”

“Why not? Besides, we need to stop for gas and stretching and lunch. And traffic should be cleared up a little after that.”

“Very true.” She typed into her phone and brought up a webpage. “Seems to be not as bad as some tourist traps. The website says cost is \$15.”

“That’s doable. Lunch and tourist trap it is.”

They veered off the interstate at the marked exit, slowing along the off-ramp, and the couple followed the map and the signs to the museum. They seemed to be one of the few cars actually parked there.

He looked around for any signs. “I wonder if they’re open.”

She pointed to a sign on the door. “It says ‘OPEN.’”

“Then let’s do this,” he said, grabbing the food. “Looks like there is some shade over there.” He pointed to a small stand of trees with cut grass underneath.

“Nice picnic area,” she said.

They ate the remnants of the sandwiches.

She leaned back against the tree and took in their surroundings. “This is quite nice. Even if we don’t tour the museum, this is a nice little picnic.”

“Shootness!”

“What?” She asked, laughing as Silas looked around. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t have any drinks. We finished the water already.”

The couple looked around and he jumped up “There is a pop machine.”

Silas ran over and checked the prices. “Two dollars?” he said to himself, thinking tourist trap. He pulled two bills from his wallet and fed them to the machine. He selected the drink and ran back.

“Two dollars for a soda!” he told her, handing her the drink.

“I don’t mind sharing.” She recognized his desire to not waste money.

“Time for a tour?” he asked after the food settled.

“Fine by me,” she said getting up and heading to the museum front entrance, followed by Silas.

The door opened noisily, not from just the bell announcing the opening, but also from the creaking of the neglected hinges.

“Welcome!” the man behind the counter said. “Looking for a tour of the museum?”

“Yes,” Silas said.

“Excellent!” the man waved them over to the counter. “Thirty dollars please.” He took care to visibly count Silas and Evie by pointing with his finger, as if double checking for himself more than anything.

Silas handed over the bills, and the man quickly shoved them in his pocket.

“I’m Ceril, proprietor of the museum.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Evie, and this is Silas.”

“Silas? That’s a very good, and appropriate, name in the museum. Well, Evie and Silas, follow me.”

The museum lived up to the hype of being a tourist trap, although there were many nooks and crannies that Ceril showed the couple most regular visitors wouldn’t spend much time on.

“I have a small room out back,” Ceril said at the end of the interior tour. “If you would like an extended tour.”

“Of what?” Silas asked, not sure how safe that would be, with just the three of them in the building now.

“Oh,” Ceril said, his smile growing bigger exposing a couple missing teeth, “A personal project of mine. I’ve been working on constructing a large scale map of the entire Civil War.”

“Sounds pretty cool,” Evie said, “I don’t know much about the whole history of it.”

“Would you like to see it?” Ceril asked, an anticipatory smile growing into a wide grin.

“How much?” Silas asked, a bit wary—both of the situation and the cost.

“For you two? No charge!” Ceril said. “I’m just happy I get to show it to someone.”

The trio walked out the side door of the museum, Silas taking a moment to watch the traffic patterns, and gauge distances, and then rounded the corner to the back to a ‘small’ shed.

“This isn’t very small,” Silas commented, seeing the size of the building, which looked very much like a full size barn.

“It is a very good size for the display,” Ceril said, maintaining the big grin on his face while opening the squeaky door.

Silas and Evie were completely unprepared for what they saw.

A small platform stretched almost the entire distance from one side of the barn to the other, and on the platform was an outline of the East Coast

of the USA. In small detail were dioramas of the different battles, important towns, and arrows and timelines for the entire war. Blue and Gray clumps of tiny soldiers provided relative numbers for each side at each battle.

"This is amazing," Silas said, walking corner to corner on one side of the display.

"Really amazing," Evie echoed.

"Thanks," Ceril said, his voice full of pride.

"This must have taken years," Evie said, walking to the far side of the platform to get a better view.

"Many years, you are correct," Ceril said, "But it was worth it."

"You should advertise this," Evie said, genuinely impressed with the craftsmanship and details presented.

"I will when I feel it's ready. I have a few more things to finish up."

Silas and Evie walked around the raised platform, looking at the detail, and Ceril handed them a small folded paper. "Here is the timeline of the battles."

Matching the numbering system from the brochure to the platform, the trio walked through the battles from the beginning to the end.

"Sherman's March to the Sea," Ceril said, lifting a small blue piece of plastic from the map of Georgia, to show Silas and Evie, and then replacing it on the tabletop. "Almost to scale."

"Wow," Silas muttered. "It never occurred to me that it was that wide."

"More than fifty miles wide in places," Ceril informed them, pointing to the plastic overlay. "Enough to destroy all supplies along the way and severely impact the ability of the Georgians to wage war."

Silas and Evie marveled at the immersive feeling provided by this platform, and by the care and knowledge of the caretaker. It was almost surreal, and Silas found no words at the sheer awesomeness of it.

"This is really unbelievable," Silas finally managed to say.

After much longer than expected, the couple finished the walk-through and headed toward the door.

"That has to be the best museum experience I have ever had," Silas said, He was interested in the Civil War but had never been able to appreciate it in such a way before.

"Me too," Evie said. She reached out to shake Ceril's hand. "Thank you so much for the tour."

“My pleasure,” Ceril said, shaking hands with Evie and then Silas. “You have been the best guests in a long while to my humble museum.”

“Don’t give up on it,” Evie said, “I think many people would love to see your display.”

“Thanks,” Ceril said, digging into his pocket. He pulled out 8 quarters and offered them to Silas. “I saw you buy a drink at lunch. Buy another or just take the money for the first one.”

“Oh, I couldn’t.”

“Please take it. You made my day by showing such appreciation for the museum.”

Evie shot Silas a glance that told him to honor the man and take the money. “Thank you very much,” Silas said.

“We should get going,” Evie said, checking her phone.

“Going far?” Ceril asked. “I mean . . . I don’t mean to pry.”

“It isn’t prying,” Silas said. “We’re headed up Boston-way, and I was actually wondering about the roads and traffic.”

Ceril checked the time. “I think the major cities will be easy to avoid.” He pulled out a notepad and drew a map. “If you take this path you should avoid most of the evening rush-hour traffic along the way.”

Silas took the hand-drawn map. “Thanks again for all the help.”

Ceril smiled brightly and escorted them to the parking lot, and then walked back through the front door of the museum.

Silas heard the hinges creak again and smiled. He walked over to the vending machine and used the 8 quarters to buy another drink, satisfied that the man’s gift would be returned with the purchase.

“You ready?” he asked Evie as they approached the car.

“Yep. All set for the drive,” she replied.

“That was the perfect afternoon,” he said, settling in the seat and looking at Evie.

“Yes it was. Good food and good people.”

The evening sun started to dip low as Evie and Silas entered Massachusetts.

“Time to call Postice?” Evie asked. She’d tried to put out of her mind that she’d have to talk to the cranky old man.

“There’s no getting out of it,” Silas said. They’d come this far.

Evie nodded and dialed the number.

“Hello?” the gruff voice responded after the second ring.

“Mr. Postice, hi. This is Evie.”

“Are you in trouble?”

“Oh, no. Mr. Postice,” she answered, a bit confused as to the nature of the question. “We have just passed into Massachusetts and are calling to inform you.”

“Just now? You should have been here hours ago!”

“We stopped for lunch and a museum tour.”

“Not necessary! I expected you hours ago.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Mr. Postice,” she said. “I wasn’t aware that you had an expected arrival time.”

“I figured ten hours for the trip,” Postice said, ignoring the apology. “And that was generous by giving time for a few stops.”

“I hope it isn’t too late,” Silas said, trying to take the pressure off Evie.

“You are already late! Head to Pine Lake. Marlborough. Call me when you get there.”

“We will,” Evie said. “Sorry again.” She wasn’t sure when the call ended, but it was over by the time she looked at her phone screen. “Yikes,” she said, a bit flustered.

“Yeah,” Silas said. “Old people. Rich people. So demanding.”

Evie plugged the information into the GPS, and the most direct route took over.

The pair rode in silence, still a bit shocked at the reaction by Postice.

“Marlborough,” Evie announced, as the GPS also declared their destination has been reached. And she dialed the number again.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Mr. Postice,” Evie said, trying to sound natural. “We just reached Marlborough.”

“Good! Follow my directions.”

Postice started giving directions to Evie, who relayed them to Silas.

“Now follow this road for the next ten minutes, and look for the green house on the left,” Postice said, after dictating their moves for the last four minutes.

“Got it,” Evie said.

“Good,” Postice said. Then nothing. Evie looked at the phone and saw the call had ended.

“Wow. Such personality.”

“No argument there,” Silas said.

The green house appeared after the predicted ten minutes. “There it is.” Evie pointed to a house on the left.

“Doesn’t look too mansion-y,” Silas said. “Just a regular house.”

“I agree. Looks more upper class than rich of any kind.”

“Look for a driveway, or something,” Silas said, as the house grew closer and the shadows grew longer with the closing of daylight.

“There,” Evie said, pointing toward a small paved entryway.

He turned onto the narrow paved driveway in the middle of a small stand of trees, and then the driveway opened up into a larger circle, as well as a direct path to a garage. He found a spot off to the side and turned off the car. No welcoming committee greeted them, like there had been at Roger’s.

“Guess we should get out,” he said after a few seconds, then unbuckled his seatbelt.

She followed suit and the pair got out of the car to stretch. They looked around, but still nobody appeared. Evie brought up her phone to call Postice again when the front door of the house opened, and a withered looking man stood glaring at them from the stoop.

“Don’t just stand there,” Postice said. “Come up! Come up!”

Silas grabbed Evie’s hand and escorted her up the small cement stairway to the front door to where Postice stood.

He guessed Postice was probably a tad over six feet tall when younger, but now stood, maybe five-eight with a pronounced slouch. He wore a dark brown fedora which covered an unruly mat of gray hair, along with a similarly colored tweed jacket, and had a large cane with a rounded handle and well-worn footpad.

Postice used the cane to direct the couple to the small veranda just off the steps, and shuffled slowly after them.

“Sit!” Postice said, as they set foot on the veranda. He waved his cane toward two chairs on the far side. The cane rose just off the floor and managed a forty-five degree angle toward each chair. The couple obliged, sinking into the two deck chairs, surprisingly comfortable, with thick foam seat cushions. Postice shuffled after them, and took a seat in a plush rocking chair near the rail. He rocked for a few moments, then stopped and leaned forward.

“You are Evie?” Postice asked, half pointing at Evie with the cane. “And you are Silas?” the cane followed.

“Yes,” Evie said, feeling her stomach tense up.

“Good.” Postice seemed to make a mental note of some unique characteristics, even though their difference in appearance, and specifically in the genders, was readily apparent.

Postice looked at them for what seemed like a long while, at least to Evie, and then he finally seemed to soften. “Have you eaten?” Postice asked, still mustering the gruff voice from the phone.

“We had lunch,” Silas said.

“Good,” Postice replied, almost expecting that to be filling enough for the day. “Need to use the restroom?” Postice again queried with the gruff voice, almost as if the pleasantries offered were non-essential interruptions he wished to get over with.

“We stopped for gas just before calling you, and I’m good,” Silas said, looking to Evie.

“I’m good too. Thanks,” she replied, with a smile and nod.

“Good.” There was a tense silence as Postice again paused to take an assessment of the situation, trying to make sure not to miss anything.

“You know Roger?” Postice finally broke the silence.

“We talked to him for the last couple days,” Silas said.

“What do you think of him?” Postice asked. It almost sounded like a demand.

“In what way?” Evie asked.

“Any way! Impressions!”

“He is interesting,” Silas said. “But a lot of what he said went over my head to be honest.”

“And you?” Postice half pointed the cane at Evie.

“I like him,” Evie said, knowing her nervous trembles were visible. “He is very hospitable and interested in the people he talks to.”

“Hmmpfh,” Postice replied, digesting their answers. “What is your background?” Postice asked, raising the cane slightly to point toward Silas.

“I work in construction. Or at least I think I still do.”

“Meaning?”

“I had to take off work to come here. And I might not have the same job when I get back.”

“I see.” Postice seemed to accept the answer. “And you?” The cane moved toward Evie.

“I work in data analysis,” Evie said.

“Good at it?”

“I guess?” Evie said, hesitating for a couple seconds. “The computer does all the work, to be honest.”

Silas and Evie couldn’t be sure, but it looked like a small crack of a smile appeared on the old man’s face. The trio sat in silence for a very long minute as Postice seemed to digest and process their presence.

“I am a bit disappointed in your backgrounds,” Postice finally said, shaking his head. “I was hoping for a detailed analysis of Roger’s thesis.” The man stamped the cane on the ground to vent his frustration. “I don’t understand how people with your qualifications would end up discussing theories with Roger.”

“Sorry?” Evie said, not sure why she felt like that needed an apology.

“Not your fault, I guess,” Postice said, softening a bit. “Wentworth!” he shouted into the house.

“Yes, Sir?” A man appeared out the double doors, wearing a black butler uniform—or what Silas assumed the uniform of a butler should look like.

“Bring some refreshments for our guests. We’ll take them out here.”

“Very good, sir.” Wentworth disappeared behind the double doors.

“Oh, we don’t really need anything,” Silas said, hoping to not impose any more on the old man.

“Hogwash!” Postice waved his cane. “You traveled all day.”

There was a tense pause in the conversation, as Postice seemed to wait for Wentworth to return with the refreshments. Postice passed the time by looking over the veranda at the small wildlife area behind the house, now lit by some deliberately placed lights, ignoring the two guests, nervously sitting there.

“Refreshments, sir,” Wentworth announced, finally arriving—or so it seemed to the two young people feeling very out of their comfort zones and not sure how to endure all of the silence.

“Very good Wentworth,” Postice said. “Make arrangements for . . . two . . .?” Postice said, returning his look toward the couple.

Silas interpreted his question and gave a slight nod.

“Two rooms at the Plaza.”

“Very good sir,” Wentworth said, backing off the veranda and pulling the double doors closed behind him.

“Don’t go to any trouble on our account,” Evie said, trying to catch Wentworth before he left.

“Nonsense,” Postice said. “I invited you, and I will take care of you.”

“Thank you,” Silas said.

“No trouble,” Postice said, and waved the cane toward the tray of refreshments Wentworth placed on the table moments ago.

Not wanting to be rude, Silas and Evie both took small portions of the finger foods, and a small glass of what looked like lemonade. Postice waited for the couple to finish their refreshments, watching them occasionally, but mostly taking in the nature sights from his precisely placed chair.

“I sit here most evenings,” Postice said softly, not really expecting a reply. “It’s my peace.”

“It is nice,” Silas said, not sure if Postice expected a reply.

“You.” Postice narrowed his eyes at Evie. “How did you find out about Roger?”

Evie sat up in the chair, and exchanged a quick glance with Silas. “We got his name from Professor Andrews at the university.”

“Andrews?” Postice now seemed angry again, leaning forward with his weight on the cane. “What business have you with Andrews?”

“From a dream.” Silas said the first thing that occurred to him.

“A dream? Hogwash!” Postice shouted at Silas as the color drained from his face. “It can’t be!” He met Silas’ eyes with a look of anger and terror.

“It’s true, sir,” Evie said, almost fearful of the man’s response. “We both had a dream.”

Postice looked at Evie, placing both hands on the cane. It shook visibly in his hands. He leaned forward and rested his forehead against the back of his hands, as if to pray, and stayed in that position for a long time.

“Dreams bring nothing but sorrow,” he finally said softly, almost tearfully, not looking up.

The moment ended abruptly as Wentworth emerged from the double doors. “The arrangements have been made sir.”

“Thank you, Wentworth. The time?” Postice asked, looking up at the butler.

“Almost seven thirty, sir,” Wentworth replied and backed out again, closing the double doors.

A silence settled on the veranda, with Silas and Evie afraid to even reach for more refreshments. Postice sat still, looking at nothing, with visible thoughts churning manically through his mind, the cane still shaking in his hands.

“We can come back another time,” Silas finally said, sensing something was troubling the man.

“I must hear your story,” Postice said in a softened gruff voice, almost pleading with some trembling.

“We can come back tomorrow,” Evie said, picking up on the same feelings Silas had

“If you are tired, you may leave,” Postice said, leaning back to take in the view again, deliberately not looking towards Evie and Silas. “But I will hear your story!” With a weak stamp of the cane, he shifted his intense gaze to stare directly at Silas and Evie.

“It’s probably better if we rest up,” Silas said. “It has been a long day for us.”

Postice nodded to Silas and looked over at Evie. “Tomorrow!” he said. “Don’t sleep late.”

“We won’t,” Evie said. She wouldn’t dare.

“Good! I will have breakfast waiting.”

Silas stood and helped Evie up. He positioned himself between the old man and Evie, using his hand on the small of her back to guide her along a safe path away from Postice. Silas didn’t know what danger the old man could pose, but wanted to be sure nothing happened and that there was a clear path of egress for both of them.

The old man didn’t move as the young couple walked off the veranda and to the parked car, his gaze shifting between the now emptiness of the two chairs on the veranda and the nature view beyond.

Evie’s phone lit up with a notification. Wentworth had sent the reservation info and the directions to the hotel directly to her phone.

They rode in silence for a short while. “That was weird, right?” Evie asked, finally composing herself after the interaction.

“Totally!” Silas replied. “That was a crazy reaction to our dream.”

“Not even the dream. Just the mention of it being a dream. We never even told the dream.”

“Right. Something is troubling him.”

“Do you think he’s dangerous?” she asked.

“I don’t know. But maybe Roger will have some insight.”

“That’s a good idea.” Evie dialed the number, and Roger answered on the second ring.

“Hi, Roger. It’s Evie. We are doing fine, but I have a question. Silas and I were just meeting with Mr. Postice, and he asked how we knew you, and then Andrews. When Silas answered that it was from a dream, Postice freaked out. Do you know why he’d do that? Or if we should be worried?”

Roger thought for a moment. “I haven’t talked to Postice in a few years before last night, but there’s nothing that I’m aware of that would be dangerous about him, except that he is an eccentric old man.”

That was only mildly reassuring. “We’re supposed to meet him tomorrow for breakfast. Should we stay? Or should we just get away?”

“I’ve never heard anything from anyone about him being a danger,” Roger said. “I think you’re fine. And if you want to get the answers you seek to find, you may have to put yourself in situations that feel a bit . . . unusual. You know, out of your comfort zone.”

As far as Silas was concerned, everything since he’d seen Evie’s face in his dream had put him out of his comfort zone.

“Thanks, I guess,” Evie said. She knew Roger was right.

“You are very welcome,” Roger said. “And make sure to report back to me.”

“Oh,” Silas jumped in, “Postice was a bit ‘disappointed’—his words—because Evie and I don’t have backgrounds in science, apparently. Postice was hoping for a detailed update on your thesis.”

Roger laughed at the thought. “You can explain what you understand.”

“Honestly, I don’t think I understand much of it right now.”

“And I understand some,” Evie said, “but definitely not all of it.”

“Do your best. And if Postice wants more, that is good news for me. That sounds like job security!”

She hadn’t even set her phone down when it rang again.

“Oh, hi, Chris,” Evie said. “Everything seems to be going well so far. We are almost at the hotel. Yes! Two rooms! I’ll call you back when we get settled.” Evie hung up as the hotel marker appeared on the GPS.

Chapter 17

Silas opened the door to his room at the Plaza. “This is what it’s like to have money? I could get used to this.” He walked to the bed and fell backwards on it, sinking into the soft mattress and covers.

“I don’t think I’d want to,” Evie said, surveying his room. “Too much extravagance for me.”

“Will you be requiring room service?” the bellhop asked.

“Not in my budget,” Silas said.

“Oh, everything is covered,” the bellhop said, keeping the same passive expression on his face. “All room amenities are covered during your stay.”

“Understood,” Silas said. “Thanks, but nothing for me tonight.”

“I’ll take a look at the menu,” Evie said, as the bellhop carried her bag toward her room. “I could eat.”

“Very good, ma’am.”

“See you in the morning,” Evie told Silas.

“See you,” Silas said, suddenly feeling very tired from the long drive and day’s events. In the few moments between falling into the bed and hearing the door close, his eyes shut and he fell into a deep sleep.

Silas rolled out of the bed, after unsuccessfully trying to crawl out of it. He'd slept like a rock. He rummaged in his suitcase for a change of clothes. Noticing his last set of clean clothes, he made a mental note to do laundry at some point.

Silas showered and dressed, and shortly after eight-fifteen, Evie knocked on his door. "Almost ready?" she asked.

"Yep. All set. I need to do laundry at some point, though."

"Luckily, the hotel offers laundry services," she said.

"Like they do my laundry for me? I don't feel comfortable having the hotel do my laundry."

She shrugged. "Well, to get laundry service, just use the bag in the closet." She motioned toward the large closet in the room.

Silas pulled into Postice's driveway shortly after nine AM. The morning sun made it easier to see the estate. The veranda couldn't be seen when parked at the front of the house, but was briefly visible on the drive into the small patch of trees.

"I think I saw him," Evie said, pointing toward the veranda.

"Most likely an early riser."

"Probably. He doesn't seem the type to waste a minute of his life."

They parked and walked up the concrete steps.

Postice greeted them from the corner of the veranda. "Welcome. I took the liberty of placing breakfast out here."

"Thank you, and good morning," Silas said as they walked across to the veranda to greet the old man.

"Take a seat and eat." Postice waved the cane toward the chairs, but raising it up only a few inches, displaying much less energy than last evening. Silas hoped this meant that the old man wasn't as angry as before.

Evie grabbed some toast and jam and Silas took a small plate with a poached egg on it, along with a small spoon.

"Eat up," Postice said. "Don't be shy. Make yourselves at home."

Silas shot a look to Evie, and Postice intercepted it.

"You have to forgive me for yesterday," the old man began softly. "I was angry, and tired, and surprised, and I took it out on you. Madsad if you will."

"You did sort of scare us," Silas said, meeting Postice's stare.

“I had no intention of such things,” Postice said, his gruff face turning more neutral. “In fact, I was looking forward to your visit with great interest. The longer I waited the more disappointed I became. But it’s no excuse for how I acted.”

“We should have phoned you sooner,” Evie said.

“It’s my fault,” Silas said. “There was this history museum—”

“Oh!” Postice actually laughed. “The tourist trap?”

“It was way better than we expected. The display is truly remarkable.”

“Interesting. I might have to make it there myself someday.”

“If you are interested in history, especially Civil War, take the extended tour,” Silas said. Somehow the mundane topic helped them get more comfortable with the old man.

Postice let the couple eat their breakfast without rushing them, even though Silas could tell he had many questions that needed answers.

“I Moved here for this view,” Postice said softly, not to anyone in particular.

Evie noticed the cane wanting desperately to point, but Postice kept it still.

“Nothing beats an early morning coffee out here,” he said.

“It is beautiful,” Evie said. “Your flowers are very pretty.” She looked at the yard with the very colorful plants in a small garden planted in the middle.

“My wife . . .” Postice paused, seeming to want to change the subject immediately. “I must hear your story!”

“The dream?” Silas asked, somewhat hesitant to draw out the man’s anger again.

“Yes. The dream!”

“Well, it started with me,” Silas said. “I dreamt of a face. But it wasn’t just a dream, it felt different. The image of the face didn’t—and wouldn’t—fade like dreams normally do. It stayed as clear as day—and it feels clear even right now. It felt so weird, important, that I felt I had to do something. So I went to an art studio and made a computer image of the face. And then I decided to try to find who it was. Long story short, it was Evie.”

Evie smiled at the story, gauging the reaction of the old man.

“I see.” Postice took it all in without further comment, seemingly waiting for more.

“After Silas endured a flurry of online harassment, we started chatting,” Evie picked up the story after Silas’ pause. “We talked for a couple days just randomly, and one day it seemed we both had the same dream the previous night.”

“Another dream?” Postice said, his voice rising up an octave. The cane producing a loud rubbery boom in the calm morning quiet.

“Yes,” Evie answered, somewhat shaken by the outburst.

“This time, we both saw a building with children, and something about reclaimed memories,” Silas said, taking over the explaining of the dream. “After we did some research we figured out it was Dr. Andrews in Virginia.”

“Dr. Andrews . . .” Postice said, shaking his head, almost disappointed to hear the name. “And what was the dream?”

“It was a bunch of children being studied,” Evie said, sitting up straight now. “Running around, and a name—Timmy. A lot of conversations, but mostly all ending up with the name Timmy, and Robert also.”

“Leading you to Virginia?” Postice asked, making mental notes.

“Yes,” Silas said with an uneasy laugh. “We thought it was crazy! Crazy for Evie to fly from California to Ohio, and then for us to drive to Virginia, without any purpose other than to try to track down this dream.”

“And you met Andrews?” Postice continued his probing.

“We did,” Evie said. “And we met Timmy. He was experiencing the memories of a 90 year old man who died near the mid 1900s.”

“Was this the dream Timmy?”

“Yes,” Evie said. “Almost exactly like he was in the dream.”

“And during the tour we found the file of Robert,” Silas said, “and he was ‘separated’ from the program when he was eight because the memories faded and he couldn’t even remember that he’d had them.”

“Interesting.”

“Evie and I got a good tour of Dr. Andrews’ lab,” Silas said, “and what they were trying to do. But their work was to document the stories more than to ‘explain’ how it was working, or why. That’s when Dr. Andrews suggested that we talk to Roger.”

“Roger,” Postice repeated. The name sounded thick on his tongue.

“So we got his information, and went over to meet him.”

“And you learned of his thesis?” Postice asked, his gruff demeanor betrayed by the curiosity showing on his face.

“We were told most of the details, I think,” Silas said. “But it was a lot. I’m still confused thinking about everything.”

Postice paused for a moment, then raised the cane toward Silas “What’s missing?”

“What do you mean?” Silas asked, a bit nervous at the directness of the question.

“There is something missing! You don’t have all the information you need. Otherwise you wouldn’t be here.” Postice looked between Evie and Silas.

Images from the dream slowly filtered through Silas’ mind. Evie’s face. The lab. And . . . Silas’ eyes went wide. “The artifacts!”

“Yes, the artifacts! In the first dream, Silas and I are standing at some kind of archaeological dig, and artifacts are dug up. Cylinders, and they seem to match Roger’s cylinder idea. Three cylinders total, and some sort of holder for two of them.”

“And an etching of something.” Silas said. “I was so focused on Evie’s face and the lab that I totally forgot that part.” But how could he have forgotten? Now it seemed so important, the last missing piece of the dream.

“You both had the same dream about these artifacts?” Postice asked, shifting his stare between Silas and Evie.

“Yes,” they both said. “Very similar parts.”

“Dreams . . .” Postice trailed off, the old man growing silent and very still. “What else do you remember?”

Details began filling back in for Evie. “There were two distinct details in the dream. One was the mention of the ‘ancients,’ and the other was the three of something, the cylinders.”

“Three of something . . .” Postice repeated. Then the old man muttered and slammed his cane on the ground “Alfred!” he shouted loudly into the house.

A young man appeared through the double doors of the veranda. “Good morning, sir.”

“Alfred! Take the details from this young couple and do a search.” Postice rose slowly, using the cane to steady himself. “I am going to take a little stroll.”

“Very good sir. Do you need anything?”

“No thank you, Alfred,” Postice replied softly, somewhat surprising all of the younger people, “I will just do a little stroll.” He walked through the

double doors and across the interior room, the cane echoing softly with his departure.

Alfred exited the veranda and shortly returned to Evie and Silas after retrieved a small tablet. “You have some details that need to be searched?”

“I guess?” Silas said.

Alfred held the stylus over the tablet at the ready. “Fire away.”

“Well, Alfred, I think we’re looking for a historical dig site,” Silas said. “Like the kind you see on archaeology shows.”

“My name is actually Jeremy,” Alfred said with a small laugh. “And Wentworth is actually ‘Stan.’”

“What?” Evie said. “How can he get the names so wrong?”

Alfred continued his smile. “He doesn’t get the names wrong—he chooses to use these ‘wrong’ names. Apparently Wentworth was his first butler many years ago. And his personal assistants have all been called Alfred. It seems Mr. Postice enjoyed the ‘Batman’ TV show a little too much.”

“Don’t you mind being called Alfred?” Evie asked.

“Actually, it doesn’t bother me at all,” Alfred said. “I think it is his way of forming a connection with the past. Okay, historical dig site—got it.”

“And this one has a desert dirt mix,” Silas added the detail. “Sandy dirt.”

Alfred made a note on the tablet. “Sandy dirt.”

“And Ancients,” Evie chimed in. “Very clearly talking about ancients.”

“Ancients . . .” Alfred echoed, typing it in.

“An etching too. Some sort of lizard.” Silas remembered trying to clean the dirt from that detail.

“Lizard etching too.”

“That’s probably the main details,” Silas said. “Do you think that’s enough?”

“We’ll find out,” Alfred said, closing the cover of the tablet. He stood up and walked over to the far end of the veranda. “Mr. Postice is in the back garden. You may go meet him there if you wish. Or sit out here as long as you like.”

“Thanks.” Evie stood up and walked through the double doors. Silas followed quickly after, making sure to keep her close by—just in case.

They were met inside by Wentworth, and he directed them to the back staircase which led to the yard and garden. Taking in the surroundings, the house definitely wasn’t a mansion, but was rather large and quite exquisitely

decorated. It seemed to Silas that great care was taken in the selection and placement of every piece of art and furniture in the house.

“Very beautiful,” Evie said, remarking of the interior of the house.

“It is,” Silas said as they opened the door and entered the back garden.

They slowly wandered around, taking in the landscape, and she was drawn to the colorful flowers in the garden visible from the veranda. He followed as he saw her walk over, and the young couple stopped to admire the entire colorful arrangement. Evie leaned down and took a long sniff, amazed at the bouquet produced by all of the individual plants together.

“Take one!” Postice commanded from a nearby sitting area.

She turned around, surprised by the voice, and shrugged at him, not sure what he was suggesting.

“Pick a flower!” he yelled again, giving her permission with the waving of his cane.

Evie understood and bent down and broke off a deep purple flower that caught her eye. Placing it behind her ear, the young couple then walked over to the sitting area.

Postice raised his cane in the direction of Evie. “Remarkable,” he said.

“What is?” Evie asked, confused and looking around and behind her.

“You remind me almost exactly of my wife. It is just remarkable, the similarity.”

She was unsure how the comparison made her feel. “Thank you.”

“And Mrs. Postice?” Silas asked.

Postice’s mood immediately shifted and his face fell. “Passed,” he said quietly, sadness dripping his voice. “Long, long ago.”

His sorrow broke Evie’s heart. “I am so sorry.”

“Dreams!” he shouted angrily, shaking his cane as high up as his strength could manage, as if cursing the sky. “Damn Dreams! It’s all because of those damn dreams.” And then slowly softened and sat back, almost whimpering, or so it seemed to Silas and Evie.

Chapter 18

Postice took several large slow breaths staring at the ground. He seemed to suddenly remember his guests standing beside him. “Please sit,” he said, waving toward the chairs with his hand. Evie and Silas obeyed.

“I’ve heard your story. And I guess it is only fair that you hear mine.”

Evie looked at Silas. “We don’t mean to pry.”

“Nonsense. I’ve never told my story in all my years, but I feel you are the first to deserve the tale—kindred spirits and all.”

Evie felt a little overwhelmed. Almost undeserving to hear the story. But she leaned in, eager to hear.

Postice pointed a finger at Silas while holding the cane on the ground. “I had a dream much like your dream. An image I couldn’t shake. I can literally see it this very moment! That damned dream . . .” He looked over toward the small garden.

Silence filled the air. Even the insects seemed to want to hear the tale.

“I was fourteen. Fourteen! Can you believe it?” He looked at Silas and Evie. “A kid of fourteen can’t handle that!”

Evie reached over and placed her hand on his, trying to comfort him.

“She was my comfort,” Postice said, covering Evie’s hand for a moment, and then continuing his story.

“My dream was simple—an image of some type of device. I was always able to draw, so I made a detailed sketch of the image from the dream. I kept that image, and looked at it almost every day—not knowing what it meant. I then went about my days—this was after the war, lots of work to be done—so I did odd jobs all over the neighborhood. Cleaning, mowing, raking, collecting cans and bottles, all kinds of jobs, you see. One day, I was turning in scraps at a plant, and some guy in a fancy suit was there. I’d never seen a guy like that before, in a clean suit, we were all blue collar workers then, and I listened in for a bit. I was always a curious kid, and still am, both curious and a kid, wanting to learn everything.” Postice produced a sly smile at his joke.

“He was talking about needing a device made and wondering if the plant could handle it. I crowded in closer, and listened. The plant manager wasn’t sure, and he wasn’t sure of the cost to make it. The man said he didn’t have much money, but thought this device would help many people.

“Being just a kid, I asked how much money it would take. I didn’t understand business at all, and they all had a good laugh. ‘Twenty thousand is an off-the-cuff number,’ the plant manager told me. I was carrying the drawing of the device so I pulled it out and was going to ask about it. ‘How much to build something like this?’ I asked.

“But as soon as I opened the page and the man saw it, he froze. ‘That’s my device!’ he shouted. And he demanded to know where I stole the drawing from. I told him I dreamed about it, and felt it was important, so I drew it from memory. He didn’t believe me at first, since I was only 14 years old, but I adamantly swore that I drew it from my dream. He finally believed me, and then I offered to help pay for the device.”

“That was my first investment,” Postice said, wiping his face. “Fourteen years old, a ten dollar investment to that man. For the next two years, I worked every day, and every cent I earned went to that device.”

“I remember the day too.” Postice’s face beamed as he continued the story. “Not quite as clearly as the device—mind you—but do remember the day. The first device prototype was on the desk. The man thanked me, not just for my pittance of an investment compared to the others, but for my determination and faith in him. I had probably four hundred dollars invested

at that point, so definitely not much—but it worked. We all watched it. The first pacemaker. And medicine changed forever.”

“That’s amazing,” Evie said. Even after what she and Silas had been through, it was still do hard to believe. “All from a dream.”

“My dream,” Postice muttered, shaking his head looking down. “Be careful of those damn dreams!” He fixed his eyes on Evie and Silas. “Every dream demands a sacrifice!”

“Sacrifice?” Evie asked, her eyes wide as she swallowed hard.

“Yes, a sacrifice. Dreams are never free!”

“Your dream had a sacrifice?” Silas asked, the words still not fully registering in his mind.

“It did. I sacrificed my youth for this dream. This damn dream! I was made an honorary investor in the company because of what I did, but it cost me my entire youth. What is that worth? I started making money—more money than I ever imagined—from this first investment. It was happy times. I was carefree, and working on whatever I felt like. I married, and together we had two children. Very happy times.”

“Then the second dream!” Postice said. “Damn dreams!” He looked away, lost in thought for a few moments.

“Another invention dream. And I was caught—hook, line and sinker. I was a man obsessed, searching for the purpose and meaning of the dream. Day and night, I couldn’t stop trying to figure out the meaning of that second dream. But I found it. I discovered it, and poured more of my life into that pursuit. And, of course, it paid off beyond measure.

“After weeks and months of non-stop searching and then two years developing it, all that work paid off. And as a reward, I took the family to a party to celebrate the kickoff. And I celebrated too much. Way too much.” His voice was croaked softly.

“What happened?” Evie asked, patting his hand.

He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “Fate will always settle the balance. On the way home, I was driving, and was drunk or tired. I must’ve fallen asleep. The crash. My two boys . . .” The old man’s voice cracked with the despair of the story. “That was the sacrifice fate required for my second fortune.”

“Oh, you poor man,” Evie said, holding back tears. “I am so sorry.” Silas and Evie shared a look, recalling the tragic story from their web search of him, now hearing it from the source.

“But I made money, and learned and learned. I kept at it, and the money poured in. More advances in medicine, helping people—that’s how I justified everything. I consoled myself that I helped save so many people, that it was almost fair that I had to lose my two boys.

“Then the third dream came. That one was easier to search, as I had teams of people working for me now. I promised that I wouldn’t ever be obsessed or neglect my wife because of the dreams again. I found it—or my team did—and more investments and results, unimaginable results. It was perfect! But fate is not to be denied.”

The old man looked over at Evie and the garden, his age fully showing. “Who could have ever predicted? In the middle of the day, a police chase—how random is that? What are the odds? Two speeding cars, someone trying to get away, another someone trying to catch them, and my wife right in the middle.”

He took a moment to regain his composure. “That was less than two years after moving here.”

“That is so sad,” Evie said, looking toward the vivid colors in the garden. “You said your wife planted the garden?”

“No,” Postice corrected Evie, and turned, looking her in her eyes. “My wife *is* the garden? That is her burial plot.”

“Oh no!” Evie cried, taking the flower out of her hair.

“Don’t fret, Evie,” Postice said, gently putting the flower back into her hair. “She is always with me that way, and I have made peace with it. I have come to understand the demand of the dreams. And have never accepted another dream. I never will.”

“Then we shouldn’t either,” Silas said, understanding the scope of their possible future.

“You are free to choose,” Postice said. “You can ignore the dream, or you can choose to pursue it.”

“But your story,” Evie said. “I don’t like the idea of the dreams demanding a sacrifice!”

“I don’t either,” Silas said.

And then the reality of the situation hit Evie, her face draining of blood. “We’ve already accepted one dream! What does that mean? What sacrifice will we need to offer?” Evie seemed on the verge of tears.

“Do you know?” Silas asked Postice desperately, his hands starting to shake.

“Honestly, no. I don’t think the type of sacrifice is ever the same. For me, it seemed to be a trade—money for life.”

“Wait. We aren’t after money,” Evie reasoned. “So that means there is a different sacrifice?”

“There is no way to know. That’s why I was so interested in Roger’s work. At some point he has to stumble upon dreams. He may be able to see the possibilities. What can you tell me about his progress?”

Silas shifted in his seat. “You probably need Roger to explain it. I can probably only explain small bits.”

“Then start there.” Postice smiled with a friendly tone now.

Silas and Evie explained what they understood about Roger’s work. Postice hit the soft ground with the cane several times at key points, as if to take note of the information.

“Anything else?” he asked.

Both Silas and Evie laughed. “Isn’t that enough?”

“It’s definitely not enough,” Postice said, shaking his head.

Evie straightened up in her seat. “Well, Jessica has a theory of souls living outside of the multiverse. Roger also says that it is possible that each person is always the same person—and when we die, we just ‘spawn’ into our life in a new universe.”

“Very intriguing,” Postice said, drifting into thought.

Chapter 19

“Will you allow me to share a few more stories?” Postice asked.

Evie sensed deep longing in his voice. For company, or camaraderie, or just a connection with someone that understands.

“Of course,” she said.

“I haven’t been idle these last many years,” the old man said. “I met Roger at a convention a few years back, as he probably told you.”

“He did,” Silas said. “As did Mademoiselle Ranier and Esmeralda.”

Postice smiled brightly, apparently remembering the two after all his searching. “Oh my! Two absolutely lovely ladies!”

“They weren’t so complementary toward you,” Evie said, then felt her face warm at revealing something said in confidence.

Postice patted her hand. “Don’t worry, dear. I am well aware of my reputation. In fact, it is my reputation at these conventions that helps me separate truth from fraud. And believe me when I say I have exposed a great

many frauds over the years. It seems to be a gift that I can expose a hoax so quickly.”

“I can believe it,” Silas said.

“To get back to my stories. I have been searching for the source of my dreams—and now yours, it would seem.”

“Have you found anything?” Evie asked. Knowing the source could answer so many questions.

“I have. And the answer is rather scary.” He paused, waiting to see if there were any objections. When there were none, he went on. “I believe Mademoiselle Ranier can interact with several parallel realms—or universes. And little Esmeralda can see magical things as well. These realms . . . universes . . . exist, and are closely related.”

“Oh!” Evie interrupted. “Like Roger’s probabilities.”

“Probabilities?”

“Yes. Roger says that there are trillions of trillions of universes, and they clump together by something called a probability density function.” She held up her hand and spread her fingers. “They clump like spread fingers. Like right now is this point,” she pointed to the tip of her middle finger, “and this entire tip is things like what color socks someone decides to wear. And these parts,” Evie pointed to the web of her fingers, “are things that might never be possible, like dinosaurs typing. And this finger,” Evie pointed to her ring finger, “is something big being different, like the Normans losing in 1066,” Evie showcased the whole tip of the her ring finger, “and all the different socks for those people.”

“Very intriguing theories,” Postice said.

“And inside each finger are trillions and trillions of universes,” Silas added, hoping that he understood enough to be confident.

“Interesting,” Postice said. “My investigation has led me to a similar conclusion. The only way the dreams can be possible is if someone, or something, is able to travel across these universes and times.”

“Have you been able to prove it?” Evie asked.

Postice shook his head. “I don’t believe there will ever be proof of any kind for any of these ideas. Much like ‘what happens after death’ research, there will never be proof of a definitive answer, only speculation and anecdotal evidence.”

“Anecdotal?” Silas asked.

“Evidence that hasn’t been generated through a rigorous scientific process,” Postice said.

“Like the stories of people visiting heaven with the bright light,” Evie said.

“Quite right. There is no scientific way to prove that.”

“Can you tell us your evidence?” Evie asked. Even if it wasn’t proven, it might lead to answers or at least a next step.

Postice nodded. “I spent years traveling across the country, and world, searching for people, much like Ranier and Esmeralda. Compiling a list of all of their abilities and what they can and can’t do. For example, Esmeralda can essentially see the collective ‘present’ and determine if there are any abnormalities that pop up. And Mademoiselle Ranier, and other true psychics, can do more than just the present—they can tap into the past, sometimes far in the past, but are limited to how many realms they can interact with.

“I haven’t actually investigated the spiritual side yet, but that might be something for the coming year. Reincarnation stories and recalled memories are very rare, but highly unique, which makes them both contradict established science, and also get rejected by science. But taken as a whole, there is significant evidence for the existence of the multiverse, and for abilities to interact across and through the multiverse. But dreams are a completely different category. People that can produce dreams are the only ones that can travel across ‘time.’ And production is different than viewing.”

“What do you mean?” Evie asked.

“Projecting a dream into another person’s mind is an action that takes a significant ability. Watching a movie takes little effort. Anyone can do it. But making a movie takes tremendous effort. Viewing time, past and future, may likewise take little effort. But affecting, or giving a dream . . . that would be quite a feat.”

“Viewing past and future is easier than giving someone a dream?” Silas asked.

“Exactly,” Postice said.

“Like Mademoiselle Ranier and Esmeralda,” Evie said. “They can ‘view’ these other universes, but not necessarily do anything in them?”

“To the best of my knowledge, yes. I can’t answer for them, but in all of my interviews with different subjects, all of them were able to prove—to my satisfaction—that there was an element of ‘viewing’ something other than

their current surroundings, but none of them were able to offer proof of being able to manipulate the other environment. Viewing seems to be a lot easier than actually changing or manipulating.”

“That means that whoever is giving us these dreams must be pretty powerful?” Evie asked.

“Most likely. They must have very advanced abilities. And with all of life, there is probably a give and take. A strong ability to interact with the mind, might mean less physical abilities, or someone with a lot of resources probably doesn’t have a lot of youthful energy, and so on. But I can’t say for sure, because I have no proof of any of these beings existing. Especially the ones that can travel to past and future.”

“But you suspect they exist?” Evie asked.

“I believe Roger used the spiral example for describing a person’s life, correct?” Postice asked.

“Yes,” Evie said.

“And part of that is each person being on a different point in life for any interactions?” Postice asked.

“That sounds right,” Evie answered.

“As an example, at the exact moment of this conversation—in time—I am an old man, of unquantified age, and you two are much younger. When, in fact, for each of our lives, I could actually be living as my 14 year old self, interacting with you two in my future. And each of you could be anywhere between 40 and 100, looking back on this moment as a memory. If one of you were the source of my dreams, you would need the ability to interact, not with my older self as I sit here before you, but with my fourteen-year-old self. That would require you to bend or travel across time.”

“Oh, I get it,” Silas said.

Postice smiled at Silas and patted his knee. “Or suppose the dream you had, Silas, with the face. Suppose that dream came from your child. That child would have to have the ability to travel to a time before they were born to give you the dream.”

“Could that be a possibility?” Evie asked. Just the concept amazed her.

“It could very well be. When you described your dream, I was immediately drawn to that exact thinking. There isn’t any obvious gain—for either of you—from the dream, as far as I can tell. So getting you two together might be the reason.”

“You mean we are being brought together by our future kid?” Silas asked, completely stunned.

“It’s not out of the realm of possibility,” Postice said, smiling at Silas’ reaction. “Although there are reasons for that being less likely than other answers.”

“Like what?” Evie asked, halfway relieved. Kids seemed like a distant thought for her right now.

“Sacrifices,” Postice answered, lifting his cane and slowly pointing around until it finally settled toward the small garden plot.

The couple instinctively followed the direction of the cane, but needn’t have bothered, they realized where the end pointed from the man’s story.

“There is definitely a price for every interaction, and why would your future child risk giving you a dream that would demand a sacrifice?”

The young couple paused and took in the gravity of that question.

“So who else would have sent the dream?” Evie asked.

“I don’t know ‘who,’ but I might know ‘what,’” Postice said. “I have given those with the ability to view past and future the name ‘Timewalkers.’”

“Timewalkers?” Silas repeated, and looked to Evie.

“Yes. Using Roger’s thesis that the ‘cylinders’ as you call them are collections of life spirals, these lives interact in the physical world when people come together—much like us. And if the cylinders are as tightly packed as Roger hypothesizes, then there must be a ‘multiversal’ interaction that some people are able to have, such as Mademoiselle Ranier and young Esmeralda. It wouldn’t take much of a leap to posit that some people have the ability to move forwards and backwards along a cylinder, or jump between different cylinders, or even visit outside of the cylinders!”

“Like the psychics?” Silas asked.

“Right,” Postice said. “What can Mademoiselle Ranier do? She can see several different universes around her, and some of the past. Young Esmeralda can see many multiples of universes clustered around the present. I have found several other types—one young woman was able to ‘visit’ the past—or at least she thought it was the past—up to a thousand years ago. And Nostradamus was able to somehow conjure up visions of the future, or at least some people believe that.”

“Interesting,” Evie said. “By grouping the different types of abilities, it would make sense that a full picture could be made of all of the possibilities.”

“Yes! And that is exactly what I’ve been trying to do. I used the conventions to piece together a picture of what Roger wants to create theoretically. I have found many ‘viewers’ of different abilities, but no manipulators.”

“Like the people that can produce dreams?” Evie asked.

“Not just that. People who would be able to interact with the environment, in some way—such as touch or sound. As you and I are interacting, I am manipulating the air to produce my audible voice, and also changing the characteristics of light to present my visage to you. For all we know, there could be ‘viewers’ around right now, but we can’t detect them because they can’t interact with or manipulate our physical surroundings.”

“Surrounded by a cloud of witnesses,” Silas said.

“The Good Book,” Postice said quietly and nodded.

“That’s something that Paul and Jessica talked to us about,” Evie said. “It was one of the Bible verses used to try to piece together Roger’s model.”

“I would call ‘viewers’— or Timewalkers—witnesses,” Postice said. “And just like witnesses here, they usually don’t interact or interfere with any actions, they just watch. Hence the abilities of most ‘psychics’ to observe different things, but can’t manipulate.”

“What about ghosts that can move things?” Silas asked.

“Poltergeists,” Evie said.

“I haven’t witnessed one personally,” Postice said. “And haven’t found anyone that could replicate any of the effects of one. So, I would conclude that if poltergeists do exist, they are of a supernatural state and limited in their willingness to give interviews, or are part of a different realm or universe.”

“Funny,” Evie said. “What about the dreams then?”

“If poltergeists have the ability to move objects, then the people with the ability to give dreams would interact with the mind. I call them ‘Thought-putters.’”

“Then they’re different than Timewalkers?” Silas asked.

“Honestly, I have no idea. They could be the same people—people with the ability to both travel along time and also interact by inserting dreams into the minds of certain people. Or they could be different classes of people, those that can view different time period, and those that can make people experience thoughts and dreams. I haven’t interviewed anyone that can do either. Or anybody that can view past and future at will.”

“So the ‘holy grail’ would be time travel?” Silas asked.

“You are doing well at keeping up, young man. That is one thing I have constantly been on the lookout for as well, and so far only have suspicions. It seems that time travel has thus far been elusive.”

“Time travel is hard?” Silas asked.

“So far it would seem impossible, long term. The act itself would be exhausting. To physically travel to any place right now is tiring—as you experienced yesterday—but to try to jump across a metaphysical dimension would seem to be devastating. Even imagining that physical time travel was possible, the very presence in another time would have physical consequences. Untold virus and bacteria differences exist between times, not to mention how different they would be between universes, which would endanger both the traveler and the general population.

“However, one professor I interviewed did speculate that some plague outbreaks could have been caused by rouge time travelers. It would seem that in our bodies, there exist some inactivated form of all of the different plagues over the centuries, and when exposing a new population to even these inactive forms, several diseases could actually manifest.”

“Someone traveling back in time could create a plague?” Evie asked.

“Absolutely. You and Silas and I have billions and billions of current forms of bacteria on and in our bodies at this very moment, good and bad bacteria, all at war with each other, along with our immune systems, just trying to survive. These bacteria can jump back and forth between people, most of which ends up being harmless, because all of us have very similar protections. But if, and when, a new bacteria surfaces through time travel, the general population would take potentially years to develop a fully protected immune system.”

“Then the Black Death could have been time travel?” Evie asked.

“Quite possibly. The idea that rats and fleas spread it is very well documented, but who was patient zero? It could have been a time traveler, or even someone from another universe. But because there are relatively few such outbreaks, it doesn’t seem time travel is very likely overall. If one person discovered time travel, it wouldn’t take long for a large percent of people to start time traveling.

“Not to mention the time traveler would be exposed—probably more so than the general population—to older versions of the bacterium of today. These older forms could be more lethal than the current versions, and would

be much more likely to be deposited onto the traveler. Bacterium from water, soil, plants, animals, even in the air, would be constantly picked up by the traveler, and almost certainly overwhelm their immune system. Death would be a certainty within a short span of time. Not quite the intended outcome of attempting time travel to begin with.”

It was a lot to take in, but it made sense.

“That’s where ‘Timewalkers’ come in,” Postice said. “Time travel without the physical body.”

“What exactly is a Timewalker?” Evie asked.

Postice slid the end of his cane in the grass slowly for several seconds and then looked up at Evie. “I wish I could tell you. I haven’t found any direct evidence of such ability. But from the full picture I have crafted, there would need to be some of these beings around. Connections between universes have been shown by Mademoiselle Ranier, and Esmeralda, and many others, and Andrews’ kids show that memories seem to exist between times—at least going backwards. Thus, the connection between universes along different times would be the next step.”

“That definitely sounds reasonable,” Evie said.

“And the dreams connect something,” Silas said.

“Exactly. My dreams, in particular, were all of the *future* and that means an ability to connect the future to an individual in the past.”

“And our dreams were of the future,” Evie said.

“At least one,” Silas said.

“Your dreams do feel different than mine. Your dreams came true in a relatively short time span, and produced little actual gain other than knowledge.”

“So the sacrifice could not be needed?” Silas asked, still a bit shaken by the thought.

“Potentially,” Postice answered. “I am by no means an expert on anything other than my own dreams, so it could be that *present* dreams, such as yours, might not require a sacrifice, whereas a *future* dream would. Or maybe the sacrifice is based on what is gained. In my dreams, I gained knowledge of the future which I used to make money. Money might demand something deeply personal.”

Both Silas and Evie physically relaxed at that information, growing very less tense about having present type dreams.

“I don’t have any way of actually knowing. To find out for sure, you either have to live through it, or find a Timewalker to ask.”

Evie straightened up. “Do you know of a Timewalker?” she asked.

“Not a single one,” Postice shook his head, meticulously pronouncing each word. “I have been searching for years, and nothing has come of it. I wouldn’t know what a Timewalker looked like to begin with, or how they would act. How do Mademoiselle Ranier and Esmeralda stand out?”

“They actually look quite normal to me,” Silas said. Evie nodded also.

“Timewalkers are probably very normal people as well. You two have received dreams. Do you look special? I have had dreams also, and aside from my money and story, what makes me special in some way? I would imagine a Timewalker would blend in perfectly in any society. Does a person that claims to be reincarnated have any special characteristics?”

“Maybe we all have the same traits and just don’t notice.” Silas said.

“What do you mean?” Postice asked, his gruff demeanor showing again.

“Oh, I meant nothing by it,” Silas stammered, trying not to agitate the old man.

“I want to hear of this!” Postice said with a stamp of his cane.

There was no getting out of it. “Maybe we all have different abilities and just haven’t discovered them or haven’t used them enough to know they exist,” Silas said, throwing out his new theory.

“I would believe such a thing,” Postice said, exhaling slowly. “Buddhists seem to be able to connect to different ‘planes of existence’ after meditation, and many cultures have purification or other rituals that lead to some spiritual event at the end.”

“Like a vision quest,” Silas said, “where there is a time of purification and fasting, and then an actual vision of some sort appears.”

“Yes! And the fact that several different cultures have similar beliefs and rituals means that there isn’t a limited distribution of these abilities in the populations.”

“I believe that the world of today and technology are limiting us in our use of these abilities,” Silas said.

“Very interesting,” Postice said with a small smile. “I will have to do much research on this. Who do you think they are connecting with in a vision quest?”

“I couldn’t be sure,” Silas said, avoiding looking at Postice. “After learning more about this multiverse theory, I would probably guess it is themselves or their ancestors.”

“Themselves?” Postice asked, seemingly surprised by that answer.

“One theory Roger has,” Evie said, jumping in to aid Silas, “is that everybody is alive.”

“Everybody?”

“Roger’s hypothesis is that when a person dies, they are just born into a new universe in the multiverse. I don’t know the exact details of it, just that Roger believes everyone who ever lived is alive somewhere in every universe of the multiverse.”

“Like George Washington is still living his life spiral,” Silas said, “in whatever universe. And when a person dies, they ‘spawn’ into another universe.”

“Spawn?” Postice said with a laugh. “Quite the gamer are you, Silas?”

“That’s where Roger’s probability density function comes in,” Evie said. “I didn’t get why, but now with putting all this background information together a little more, that is starting to make sense.” She held up her hand again with fingers spread. “It is most likely that someone will ‘spawn’ on a finger, rather than in the web area.” She explained holding her fingers up and apart.

Postice thought this through. “So if there are trillions of universes, and our ‘consciousness’ only exists in a single one? Then there must be a way for all of the other multiverses to have people and experiences.”

“Seems so?” Silas said, not sure of the full understanding of the statement.

“I must hear more of this from Roger,” Postice said with a newfound energy that the young couple hadn’t seen yet.

Postice stood quickly, with only a small push with the cane, and started toward the house. At that moment Alfred appeared at the door. “Coming in, sir?” he asked.

“Yes. My morning stroll is complete. I have a new project.”

“Very well. I have also narrowed down the list of potential dig sites from the dream of Evie and Silas.”

“Outstanding,” Postice said, sounding absolutely ecstatic. “Let’s have at it, Alfred!”

Alfred led the trio to the table just inside the door, surprised at the eagerness and complimentary nature of Postice. Evie and Silas glimpsed Wentworth bringing a large rolled up paper.

Alfred pulled out the chair for Postice and waited for the man to sit down. Then he laid the tablet in front of the older man. "I started with the current reported dig sites all over the world. And then removed any that would be more 'current' or not part of the 'ancient' world, or digging in remote areas for dinosaurs and such. From there, using the detail Silas provided of the dirt composition, I removed the jungle type areas, etc, and that left these twenty-ish sites."

"Good work, Alfred," Postice said.

"That list does not include any 'unauthorized' digs, or personal digs, unfortunately."

"I see," Postice said. "But it is a start."

Wentworth used the table to unroll the paper, and a map segment of the ancient world appeared.

"The most likely use of the word 'ancient' would apply to here," Alfred pointed to the Middle East, "or here," he pointed to Greece and Turkey, "or here," he pointed to Italy, "or here," he finally pointed to England and northern France.

Postice turned to Evie and Silas. "What do you think?"

The young couple leaned in and looked at the map. "I wouldn't have any idea what to look for," Silas said. "The only thing I remember is the dirt, being dry and sand/dirt mix."

"If I were to guess," Evie said, "I would say the language wasn't Latin, or probably Italian, or anything related to English. But that is where my guess would have to end. I would never be able to tell if the conversation was Greek or Turkish, or Arabic."

"That's a good start," Postice said. "And if I were a betting man—and I am—I would put money on Greek or Turkey, because that is considered a better part of the Ancient world than the middle east, at least until the 6th century or so."

"Wentworth!" Postice bellowed, not recognizing he was standing at the table.

"Yes?" Wentworth replied, somewhat surprised by the loud call.

“Oh,” Postice replied with a laugh. “Very good. Get some numbers and call these places, and we will see if young Evie can match the voices.”

Silas and Evie in amazement at the direction and the logic behind his direction.

“You did say you remember conversation, correct?” Postice asked, looking expectantly at Evie.

“That is correct. But I don’t know if I would be able to compare the dream voices to real ones.”

“No harm in trying,” Postice said. “Start dialing, Wentworth!”

“Right away, sir,” Wentworth said, taking Alfred and the tablet to the other room.

“We’ll listen to the dig teams, and then figure out what is the most likely place.”

In a few moments, Wentworth reappeared along with a speakerphone. For the next part of an hour, the group dialed the dig teams in Greece, Turkey and the Middle East and talked with them to get a feel for conversational language. Evie wasn’t sure on most of them, until hearing a side conversation. In the background a man was asking for more space to move debris and refuse from the site.

“That voice!” Evie said. “I know that voice.”

“Are you sure?” Silas asked. “I can’t tell any voices apart.”

“Get that man on the phone!” Postice said. A flurry of conversation, along with some not insignificant arguing on the other end, transpired, and then the phone went quiet.

“Are you there?” Postice asked loudly, thinking the phone had hung up.

“We are here,” a man answered. “Who is this?”

“Hello. My name is Evie, and I think I recognize the voice of the man that was just there. Can you speak in your language?” Evie hoped that would help.

A few statements, probably condemnations for the strange call, flowed over the phone speaker. And amid the voices, one stood out to Evie.

“That one! I recognize that voice and language.”

“Alfred!” Postice bellowed with youthful vigor. “Get all the details on that dig. We need to travel there.”

“Yes, sir,” Alfred said, smiling at seeing his employer’s excitement.

“We can’t go there,” Silas said to Evie.

“Nonsense,” Postice said, waving the cane as high as he dared with all of them gathered at the table. “I will see this through! You shall go in search of your dream.”

But it wasn't as easy as that. “We aren't set up for any traveling, and I have a job to get back to, and I'm sure Evie has stuff to do as well. I am out of clothes, and other travel supplies, and had only planned to be gone a few days.”

Postice stood up, most of his slouch melting away, and looked at the young couple, his height almost matching that of Silas for a moment. Evie and Silas both steadied themselves for some sort of outburst from the old man.

“You are right,” Postice said slowly. “I have been a fool. All of this actually made me feel young again, and I was excited to keep going. This is the best lead I have had in years. I forgot that other people actually have lives to live.”

Evie and Silas heard the old man apologize, and while they were correct to object to being ordered to the dig, they felt some sadness for the man.

“I can call work and see what my options are,” Evie suddenly said, hoping to at least try. She looked expectantly at Silas, who gave a small shrug.

“I probably won't have a job if I don't get back in the next day or two,” Silas said, knowing his window with Myron kept shrinking.

“Then I shall hire you!” Postice declared to Silas, with a small smile. “That can give you a job. And as for you, my dear Evie, whatever you need as well if your job situation isn't flexible.”

“I'll call work,” Evie said.

A few minutes and phone calls later, and the plans were made.

“Sounds like we have a team!” Postice said. “Alfred, please make preparations for the trip. I would say two months' worth to start?”

Silas and Evie stood with mouths agape at hearing the length of their travel.

“That long?” Evie asked, recovering from the initial shock.

“If that is what it takes,” Postice said. “I don't have any inclination of stopping until all of the answers have been found!”

Chapter 20

The next day, after a whirlwind of travel plans and shopping had been finalized, Wentworth arranged a car from the hotel to the airport for the afternoon flight.

Their flight arrived early the next morning in Athens, after two layovers and the time change. Silas and Evie walked the small tunnel from the plane to the airport proper with their carry-on bags. Upon entering the baggage terminal, a crowd of people scurried around them and one young man stood out, holding up a sign with “Postice Party” on it.

Evie and Silas hurried toward the sign, making sure they didn’t lose the young man amidst the crowd.

“Postice party! That’s us!” Evie said to the young man.

“Hello!” the friendly young man greeted them in a Greek accent. “My name is Nico.”

“Hi, Nico. I’m Silas,” Silas said, giving a firm handshake.

“And I’m Evie,” Evie also shook the young man’s hand.

“Good to meet you. I have the car outside. Do you have any baggage to collect?”

“No,” Silas replied, having heeded Alfred’s advice to travel light. “Everything should be arriving at the hotel or the site shortly.”

“Neat!” Nico said with a huge smile. “Then we can get going.” He walked quickly past most of the crowd, deftly leading Silas and Evie around the street merchants wanting to prey on the newly arrived tourists. Silas and Evie struggled to keep pace with their young guide while managing to avoid people and obstacles.

Nico pressed a button on the key ring and lights on a new Lexus flashed briefly. “Nice car!”

Evie and Silas got in the car and settled into the soft leather seats. “This is very nice,” she said.

“Top notch client,” Nico said. He started the car and pulled out, driving faster and more recklessly than Silas thought he should.

“Anywhere in particular?” Nico asked them once they were out on the roads.

“I thought you knew where we were going,” Silas said.

“Oh,” Nico said. “I know the hotel and the dig site as places, but I was wondering if you wanted to go anywhere else.”

“Do you have any suggestions?” Evie said.

“It’s your first time here?” Nico asked.

“Yes, for both of us,” Silas said.

“Then I will give you the Nico tour. I can take you to the real stuff, not just the ‘tourist’ stuff.”

As good as the Nico tour sounded, he seemed awfully young to be driving them around.

“How old are you?” Silas asked after Nico changed lanes and turned left.

“Just turned nineteen,” he replied with big grin.

“Nineteen!?” Silas thought, shooting a concerned look to Evie.

“That’s pretty young, isn’t it?” Evie asked.

“Nah,” Nico said, weaving through traffic. “I’ve been working on digs since I was ten, and started driving around when I was twelve.”

“Ah,” Evie said. It didn’t sound like much of a childhood.

“But I’ve learned a lot,” Nico said. “My dad works at the digs, kind of like a lead organizer of sorts. We worked all over, a lot of getting digs started, and then moving on.”

“Sounds chaotic,” Silas said.

“Nah, I love it,” Nico replied, his teeth flashing with his big grin. “History is my calling, it seems, and there is no better way to learn it than by experiencing it. Plus there was a lot of down time at digs, and I have the internet.” Nico held up his phone with one hand to show Silas and Evie.

Both inwardly cringed as they watched Nico take his eyes off the road as they sped along the curvy roadway.

“I’m actually really tired,” Evie said. “How about we start at the hotel for now, and catch up on sleep.”

“Sleep? It’s morning!”

“Morning for you,” Silas said. “We’ve been traveling since yesterday.”

“Couldn’t sleep on the plane?”

“Not good sleep,” Silas said.

“Hotel it is then. I have a note here that the hotel has your new sim cards.”

“Sim cards?” Evie asked.

“For Europe and international calls. Many American phones do not work here or are very expensive.”

“Thanks,” Silas said. And then he closed his eyes.

“And here is the hotel!” Nico said, waking both Silas and Evie. “Will you need anything else right now?”

“That should be it,” Silas replied. “We just have to check in.”

“Here is my number.” Nico handed two business cards back to Silas, who gave one to Evie. “Call me anytime. I will keep the car ready.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Silas said.

Evie and Silas checked in, collected their packages, and sim cards, and slept for most of the day to recover from the travel.

Nico arrived very quickly after they called for him early the next morning.

“Are you more rested today?”

“Absolutely!” Evie replied.

“How far to the dig?” Silas asked.

“Probably twenty minutes,” Nico said “Shouldn’t be too long. Are you going to dig? Or just oversee?”

“Are we allowed to dig?” Evie asked, looking at Silas.

“I guess we’ll find out. But you seem to be dressed for some digging, and from the 1920s, apparently,” Nico laughed, checking out their attire.

“Well, I wasn’t sure what to wear, so this is what we got in Boston,” Evie said, adding in a small laugh but feeling her face warm, and seeing Silas’ face turn red as well.

“Oh, it will work for anything. Just that most people dress like me, even at the digs.”

“Does it get dirty?” Silas asked.

“Dusty maybe, and sometimes dirty. But not bad at all. Jeans and t-shirt would be fine. Most of the digging has been set up, and that is the dirtiest of the work. Now the team’s just doing the fine work, and some assessing for future work.”

“Guess we won’t be fighting mummies,” Silas said, causing Nico and Evie to laugh.

“Not today, Brendan, not today.” Nico pulled into the small flat area for parking and smiled at Silas in the mirror.

“Oh well,” Silas said, laughing at Nico, “maybe next time.”

The trio arrived at the dig site, and Nico parked away from the main group to protect the car. The dig leader noticed the arrival and took a small group out to greet them.

“Hello, Evie and Silas?” the man said greeting Silas and Evie.

“Hello!” Evie said.

“Hi. You can call me Yank.” He eyed their attire. “You won’t be doing any digging.”

Well, that answered that.

“Don’t worry,” Silas said. “We don’t want to get in the way, just watch.”

“Okay,” Yank said and turned to instruct the others before continuing with Silas and Evie, “They will allow you access to watch, and keep you from interfering.”

“Sounds like a good plan,” Silas said, stepping away.

Evie and Silas observed the comings and goings of the dig team all morning, learning of the history of the dig from Nico and others, and getting a feel for the overall goal of the dig.

“This used to be an ancient city, it would seem,” Nico said. “One of the most politically important cities in the region during the time. Probably around three thousand people lived here at one time. And the city attracted travelers from all over. A hub of trade for the early settlements.”

“And was there any science?” Silas asked.

“Perhaps,” Nico said. “During this time, there wasn’t much known about science, but I would suspect the travelers would engage in stories and sharing of knowledge. This area was active a little before the city of Alexandria was founded, and in Alexandria before docking, all books had to be copied for the library.”

“I didn’t know that,” Silas said. “So this city could have had a library?”

“A lot of old cities had some sort of center of knowledge. Many of the digs in the area showed signs of very robust libraries.”

“Has the dig team found any artifacts here yet?” Evie asked.

“Some.” Nico led them over to a small shack set up in the corner of the dig.

Silas looked over to the watchers to make sure they didn’t object to going toward the shack, but nobody made a motion to stop them.

Entering the shack, Nico pointed to some shelves. “Mostly pottery and some tools,” Nico said. “Nothing I would call remarkable or unique.”

Evie looked over the different objects. “Nothing cylindrical?”

Nico scanned the room. “Not that I can see. Is that noteworthy?”

“We’re here in search of some cylinders, actually,” Evie said.

“You suspect they are here?” Nico asked

“We are hopeful,” Silas said.

“Why do you suspect that?”

“We work with Mr. Postice, and he thought this might be the place,” Evie said, trying not to go into detail about the dream.

“I don’t know a Mr. Postice. And these cylinders . . . what are they for?”

“Honestly, we don’t know,” Evie said, causing Nico to give them a strange look.

“You come here for cylinders that you think are here for some reason, and you don’t know what they are for?”

“Exactly,” Silas said with a small laugh. “I don’t know if you are superstitious, but we both had a dream that there were cylinders at an ancient dig. We are pretty certain this is the dig site.”

“Ah,” Nico said, seeing clearer now. “That is impressive. I don’t know of anyone that would travel so far, and spend so much, just for a dream.”

“We wouldn’t have been able to,” Evie said, “But Mr. Postice was nice enough to fund our trip.”

“And why do you think this is the right place?”

“Evie recognized a man’s voice from the dream,” Silas said.

“That was you on the phone?”

“Yes,” Silas said, a little embarrassed. “That was us.”

“You identified Marco! Marco does the cleaning. He isn’t a digger.”

“Cleaning?” Evie asked. “What is that?”

“Marco takes care of the tools, and moves the big dirt and debris to the refuse areas,” Nico explained. “He never touches the dig itself.”

“Is Marco around?” Silas asked, “it might be good to meet him.”

“Should be. He usually starts around lunch.”

The trio walked out of the shack and took a slow loop around the dig, looking for Marco.

“Marco!” Nico cried out when he saw him.

Marco was a man of short stature, compared to Silas at least, probably five-six. He seemed in his mid-forties, but with a gait and posture of a much older man, the work taking its toll on him.

Marco shuffled up to the trio. “Hi Nico,” he said keeping his eyes toward the ground.

Nico said something to Marco in Greek. Marco’s eyes went wide.

“Hi,” Marco said to Evie and Silas, still avoiding eye contact. “I didn’t do anything,” he stammered in English with a heavy accent.

“They just wanted to talk to you. They aren’t accusing you of anything.”

“Okay,” Marco said. It seemed he understood English enough to converse in it at least haltingly.

“They had a dream,” Nico said in Greek, “and in it, you found something.”

“I do not dig,” Marco shook his head.

Nico smiled to Marco. “We know. We are just wondering where you are working now.”

“I work over that hill now.” Marco pointed in the direction he had just come from.

“Can we go see it?” Silas asked.

“Not much to see,” Marco said. “But yes.”

The trio walked with Marco until they crested the hill and saw the dig from a little bit higher view. “Look familiar?” Silas whispered to Evie.

“Not really,” Evie said. “I didn’t really pay attention to the landscape.”

Silas bent down and scooped up the dirt, testing it. “This might be close,” he told Evie, standing up again.

“Can we stay here for a bit?” Silas asked Nico.

“I don’t see why not. Unless you get too hot in the sun.”

“Thanks,” Evie said. “It should be easy enough to stay out of the way up here.”

Evie and Silas settled in to watch the work, especially the work Marco was doing to keep the area clean of debris.

“What is this part of the dig?” Silas asked Nico.

“This seems to be a part of an ancient trash dump. But it didn’t really get used it seems. There are no artifacts in the areas that were tested.”

“Pottery fragments or anything?” Silas asked.

“Nope, nothing.”

“Isn’t pottery trash something that normally is found?” Evie asked.

“Normally, I guess. Depends on the dig. There was another trash heap over on the other side that is being dug up.”

Silas looked at the surroundings. “No real significance to this hill?”

“None at all. Why do you ask?”

“Because of Marco,” Silas said. “I guess the dream was very specific with Marco being a central character.”

“Interesting,” Nico said. “You know, I did suspect something. This area, the dirt had different properties—like it was filled in.”

“Filled in?” Evie asked. “Like something was buried?”

“Something like that. But the test digs didn’t find anything.” He walked to a nearby depression, with some holes scattered around. “This is where I thought the dirt was different. But they did some digs already.” He pointed out a few test holes.

Silas sat down and scraped some dirt out of one hole.

Evie looked at him hopefully.

"I can't tell," Silas told her. "I don't know if this is the same stuff."

"You two with your dreams," Nico said. "What you need to do is talk to my aunt."

"Your aunt?" Evie said.

"Yes, she has special powers, supernatural," Nico said. "She has visions all the time."

Evie's mind started spinning. Could Nico's aunt provide information?

"You think she'd talk to us?" Evie asked.

"Of course. There is a big family gathering today at my grandmother's. You two can come along. My family hasn't talked to Americans in a while, and they might be very interested in you."

A few hours later, the trio walked off the dig site toward the car.

"I wouldn't call it a wasted day," Silas said, smiling to Evie, "but it wasn't as exciting as I was thinking it would have been."

"True," she said. "I was actually expecting it to be 'open and shut' very quickly, especially since I recognized Marco's voice."

"Digs are usually quite slow paced," Nico said.

"Even psychic digs?" Silas asked, causing everyone to laugh.

"I wouldn't know about that," Nico said, "I have never been to one of those before. But you will find this evening pretty exciting I think."

"Is the hotel on the way?" Evie asked, "It would be nice to get out of these clothes, and cleaned up a bit."

"It can be," Nico said. "I can make a small detour back to the hotel, and then off to Nana's. It would be a shame to change though, I'm sure my family would love to fight mummies with you."

Evie and Silas cleaned up and changed clothes from their 'dig' attire, into more respectable clothes for meeting people.

"Very normal," Nico complimented them at the car.

"That's good to hear," Evie said, "I don't like being under or overdressed when meeting people."

"Not to worry," Nico assured her. "My family will find you acceptable, no matter what you are wearing. Just a short drive now to Nana's house."

"And here we are," Nico said, pulling in to a small settlement of houses. "Everyone is probably around back."

Evie took Silas' arm as they nervously approached the strange house. The back gate opened and a tall slim man, probably twenty-five to thirty, stood at the entry. "Hi Nico."

"Hi Jack!" Nico said. "This is my older brother Jack. Jack this is Evie and Silas from America."

Nico explained the situation to Jack, which resulted in a good laugh. Jack ran off as Nico, Silas, and Evie entered the back garden, and very quickly returned with a short hunched woman in tow.

"Auntie Lara, these are two people from America who had a psychic dream," Nico explained to the old woman.

Lara looked over the couple from the front, and did a small circle around them, and returned to face them. "No psychic!" She then raised her hand and touched Silas' face on the left cheek, and performed the same action on Evie's left cheek.

"You will have beautiful and smart children," Lara proclaimed. "Good genes."

Evie and Silas looked at each other and laughed nervously. "We aren't married," Silas said.

"In time," Lara replied with a confident smugness, walking toward the crowd. Nico urged them to follow.

Evie and Silas spent the next few hours in the midst of Nico's family, eating more than their fill of authentic Greek foods, and chatting with members of the family.

"How is your aunt psychic?" Evie asked Nico during the meal.

"She can see visions of children," Nico said. "Just like at the gate. She has been doing that for over seventy years now. She started as the matchmaker for her village, and everything she ever predicted has come true."

"Such as?" Silas asked, wanting more details.

"Who would be good together. Like how many kids, boys, girls, stuff like that."

"And she's never been wrong?" Evie asked.

"Not that I know of," Nico said. "She hasn't been as active since I've been old enough to keep track though. You could ask my Nana."

That sounded like a good plan. Not that they were trying to out her, but just to learn more about her abilities.

Throughout the evening, Silas and Evie enjoyed the atmosphere and being included in the gathering. Waves of laughter rolled from one corner of the back garden to the other, at almost perfectly timed intervals.

As the family started filtering out, ending the evening, Silas and Evie found an opportunity to talk with Nana and Lara.

“Thanks for the awesome evening,” Evie told Nana. “I know it wasn’t supposed to include us.”

“It was my pleasure,” Nana replied in heavily accented, but strong English. “Having you enjoy yourself was reward enough.”

“Thank you again,” Silas said. “And if it isn’t too much of a bother, could we ask Lara a few questions?”

“Sure,” Lara said.

“We were wondering about your ability,” Silas said, “If you have psychic ability, and what it is.”

“I have had an ability to see good connections between people, since I was a girl.”

“Like see the future?” Evie asked.

“No,” Lara shook her head. “Just the connections—auras. Between two people. I see how well their auras get along.”

“Very interesting,” Silas said. “And what about children?”

“When the auras mix, I can see how the children will turn out,” Lara said. “It appears as like a color.”

“What about us?” Evie asked, both to have Lara explain more, as well as get a glimpse of her children.

“You have strong children in your future. Some of the strongest I have seen in a long time. Back during the war, there were many strong children born, and everyone came to me to find out about their children.”

“Do you know how you do it?” Silas asked.

“Auras are sort of like a colorful haze around a person to me. Not exactly colors, but like that. And when two people combine their auras, they mix, which is very good at indicating what their children will be like. Strong children end up being very light colors, and bad children are very dark colors.”

“And us?” Evie couldn’t help but ask.

“Very bright, my dear,” Lara said, giving Evie a smile. Lara leaned in and whispered directly to Evie. “The brightest.”

Evie felt a wave of relief pass through her, even though she didn't fully believe in Lara's ability. Silas smiled at her. And they were going to have strong children. Evie hoped the old woman was right.

"Why are you in Greece?" Lara asked. "It wasn't just to come to this amazing family gathering."

"We're looking for an artifact at the dig site," Silas said. "Do you know anything about that?"

"Artifact? I don't see anything about that." Then she paused for a few seconds and spoke directly to Silas. "Just listen."

He didn't know what she meant, but didn't want to ask. "Thanks for answering all of the questions, and for the amazing evening."

"You are welcome anytime," Nana said.

Nico drove the couple back to the hotel.

"We haven't heard anything about auras yet," Evie said to Silas, once they were inside the lobby.

"True. I don't know how they fit into Roger's model."

"It's interesting that she was able to see ours. And make some pretty wild conclusions." She giggled awkwardly.

"Absolutely," Silas said, and laughed. "Hey, how about a movie tonight?"

A movie sounded perfect.

"Good plan," Evie said. "Your room or mine?"

Silas started to give his answer when Evie's phone rang.

"Hi Chris!" she said. Then she mouthed "sorry" to Silas and disappeared into her room.

Late morning Nico drove them back to the dig site. "Any plans for what to watch for today?" he asked.

"Probably just watch Marco again," Evie said. "I still think Marco is the key."

"I agree," Silas said, looking for the man.

"Marco is up on the hill again," Nico said, pointing to the man driving a wheelbarrow around the curve of the hill.

The trio looped around the dig, and made their way up the hill to where Marco stood. The sun wasn't as hot as yesterday, and they didn't feel as tired after the climb.

"Did it rain last night?" Silas asked, looking at the dirt.

“I don’t think so. Why do you ask?”

Silas crouched down and scooped up a handful of dirt. “The dirt feels a bit different than yesterday.”

“Closer?” Evie asked.

“I didn’t really feel the dirt in the dream,” Silas said, “but the consistency looks better, a better ratio.”

Nico ran to get Marco, as Silas and Evie studied the dirt. Marco and another man followed Nico back to the couple.

“The dirt from hole over there,” Marco said. He held his hands wide to show the width of the hole.

“A hole? That sounds like the dream!” Evie whispered to Silas.

“Can we go to the hole?” Silas asked.

Marco led them just beyond another small hill. The hole was more of a pit, dug seemingly many years ago, and off of the main dig. It was only about four feet deep in the ground, but it had a very distinctive circular border around it.

As Silas approached the lip of the pit, he felt a sort of buzzing in his mind—almost like an old radio being tuned in, with static between stations. As he looked into the small depression, the static cleared and he heard a very small but distinct voice in his head. The voice definitely did not belong to Silas, but confidently proclaimed, “THERE!”

“Did you hear that?” Silas asked Evie excitedly.

“Hear what?” Evie shook her head, raising her eyebrows at him.

“I heard a voice say ‘THERE!’ just now!”

“Really?”

“Yes!” Silas said. He pointed at the hole. “We need to dig here!”

Silas’ announcement created a stir among the dig team, and soon a group of four men with some equipment approached the pit.

“There is something in the pit,” Nico tried to explain.

Much talking amongst the group began, and the dig leader arrived and formulated the plan.

“We should move back and let them work,” Nico suggested to Silas and Evie. “They want to be in charge of this.”

“I’m all for that,” Silas said, and he and Evie backed up to where they could still watch.

The team worked on the pit, setting up a barrier and different tools for large and small scoops of material. A few hours later the hole widened and deepened, without any artifacts being found.

“Are you sure about this?” Nico asked Silas.

“I heard a voice, for sure,” Silas said, trying not to doubt himself. “I have no idea who or what it was from. But your aunt told us to listen today, and I heard something.”

“I believe you,” Nico said. “I don’t know if *they* do though.” He pointed to the dig team.

“Doesn’t it usually take weeks for digs to show anything?” Silas asked. He couldn’t imagine they would give up already.

“Usually, but that’s after some kind of initial find. This seems a bit of a different tactic. I don’t think anyone likes to dig a hole without reason.”

“I see,” Silas said. “Tell them to please just dig a little deeper.”

Nico relayed the information and everyone waited for more results.

“Would it help if I offered to dig?” Silas asked, uncomfortable with the situation.

“No. Not at all,” Nico shook his head. “These are professionals and know what to look for. Your activities would only probably make things worse.”

“Okay. I just don’t want them to think that I was making things up.”

“They probably already think that,” Nico said. Silas tried to laugh too, but he didn’t feel like there was anything funny.

A sudden fervor of voices around the pit caught their attention. Nico raced to the pit to find out what was happening. He looked around, and pointed back and forth between the pit and Silas and Evie, then raced back to the couple.

“They found an artifact!” Nico announced excitedly. “Come!”

Evie and Silas ran with Nico to the edge of the dig barrier around the pit. A strap hung down into the pit, where two members of the dig team were gently attaching a harness to an artifact.

“It’s some sort of metallic device,” Nico informed Silas and Evie, translating some of the picked up conversation.

Silas leaned into one of the small dig buckets and scooped a handful of the soil. “This seems to be the exact match for what I saw in the dream,” he quietly told Evie, looking at the composition in his hand.

“Here is something they found,” Nico told Silas, pointing to a small object that looked like a flat stone. Several objects were placed safely out of the way around the team. Silas approached the stone and reached out to touch it.

“Don’t do that,” Nico said, catching Silas before he reached the stone. “You could damage it. But does it look like something you recognize?”

“Sorry,” Silas said, giving it a long look. “It might. But I’m not sure. The dirt does seem very familiar.”

Evie shook with nervous excitement and grabbed onto Silas’ arm. Silas smiled back at her.

The main artifact floated slowly up in a fine net mesh, to carry it without creating any significant pressures points that might cause damage. From the side, the object looked like two circles . . . possibly two cylinders.

“Look!” Evie whispered to Silas, gripping his arm tighter. Silas grabbed Evie’s hand and pulled her back, standing back from the swinging object floating in the air, and the machine lifting it out.

“I know!” Silas whispered back, trying to contain his excitement.

No sooner had the metallic artifact been placed onto a protective shelf, when a cry came from the bottom of the pit.

“What is that?” Evie asked Nico.

“They say there is a third,” Nico said.

Silas and Evie looked at each other, registering disbelief. The dream was coming true.

“Possibly three cylinders, in some sort of arrangement,” Nico translated. “The artifact is very old and corroded, and dirty, and will take a long time to clean up. The material seems to imply that it is very ancient, but nobody has ever found such a thing from a dig.”

“This is a remarkable find,” Yank told Silas and Evie. “I don’t know how you knew where to find it.”

“That is what we came here to find out too,” Silas said.

“This artifact seems to be some sort of mechanical device,” Yank said. “But it will take years to figure out what it does.”

“Do the pieces fit together?” Evie asked.

“It is hard to tell, due to all of the damage and corrosion,” Yank answered. “The hard part with ancient mechanical devices is that the metal corrodes and

swells up but also dissolves in other spots, so it is difficult to tell how things fit together properly.”

“But three doesn’t work,” Silas said.

“We found three metal cylinders,” Yank said, not understanding what Silas meant.

Silas shook his head. “If there are three cylinders, and they all touch, nothing can move. One cylinder will always be blocking motion from the other two.”

Yank nodded, understanding Silas’ statement. “I will keep the dig going.”

“What now?” Evie asked Silas.

“Any etchings on the artifact?” Silas asked Nico.

“Let’s go look.” The three walked over to the table with the artifact now on display. A large crowd gathered to observe the strange newly unearthed object.

“What kind of etching?” Nico asked.

“Something like a lizard or reptile,” Silas said.

The three slowly moved through the crowd, sometimes receiving pats on the back of congratulations for finding the object. They reached the artifact and Silas pointed to one of the sides holding the two cylinders.

“Right there. Is that something carved into it?”

Nico studied where Silas pointed and then asked one of the curators to brush that area. As some of the dirt fell away Nico could see what Silas pointed at. “It does look like a reptile of some sort.”

“Do you recognize what it could be?” Evie asked, not sure of what the animal could be.

“I thought it looked like a crocodile,” Silas said, shaking his head.

“It looks like many different lizard heads,” Nico said, “Crocodile, gecko, or maybe even a dragon. Could be many different things.”

A loud discussion behind them stopped Silas from answering.

Nico listened then straightened up with a big smile. “One of the dig team recognizes the artifact shape from somewhere.”

“Where?” Silas asked, not believing their luck.

“All he said is that he saw a picture of a similar object somewhere many years ago. It stuck out because it was much more complicated than other items in the book.” The group walked quickly to the man.

“What book?” Evie asked, pointing to Nico to translate.

“He spent many years as a child in the library,” Nico said, translating the rapid speech.

“A library?” Evie asked excitedly. “What library?”

“He thinks it was at the library in Genoa,” Nico said. “He grew up studying in a few cities in Italy. Genoa seems the most likely.”

“Genoa?” Silas echoed, not believing the words. “Italy?”

“Yes,” Nico said. “There was a large collection of works sorted and indexed in the library at Genoa. This artifact seems to have properties that might be cataloged there.”

Back at the hotel that night, Evie and Silas relayed the news of the discovery to Postice and also to Roger. Roger was thrilled that the dream had come true. Postice was equally excited that the library provided a next step toward learning the source of a dream.

“I will phone the curator at the library and get a research team on it right away,” Postice said. “You can catch a flight from there to Genoa and meet up with the team. And it’s remarkable. It truly is. I have no idea what it means, but your dream came perfectly true.”

Evie and Silas had no idea what it meant either. But they knew they had to continue on their journey, to Genoa, to find out.

Chapter 21

The short flight from Greece to Italy the next morning didn't give the couple much time to sleep, but excitement prevented them from sleeping anyway.

Stepping into the baggage area of the airport in Genoa, there was another driver with a sign marked "Postice Party."

"Hello!" Silas eagerly greeted the stone-faced older man.

"Hello," he replied. "Postice?"

"Yes," Evie said, giving a friendly nod and smile. "We are Evie and Silas of the Postice party."

"Very well," The man replied, and turned toward the car.

Evie and Silas gave a quick shrug to each other and understood this driver would be less friendly than Nico. He hardly said a word to them on the short drive to the library. Once he'd gotten them to their destination, a courteous clerk greeted them.

"Hello! I'm Olive," the clerk introduced herself. "And you two must be Evie and Silas."

"That's us," Evie said.

Olive led the couple to a large room with many older books and introduced the team of university researchers seated around the tables.

“We got a team working as soon as Mr. Postice called, and they have been setting up books that might have the artifact in it. Your pictures helped, but it is still unclear as to what we are looking for. From the corrosion, it seems that we don’t have a clear representation of how it would look in the book.”

Evie and Silas spent several minutes summarizing the multiverse theory, how it was a cylinder, and how all the cylinder artifacts seem to mesh together.

“And you think this artifact might be some representation of the multiverse theory?”

“We think so,” Evie answered.

“It would make sense,” a gruff researcher said, then fell silent and focused back on the book he was searching.

“That’s Bert,” Olive told Evie and Silas, nodding toward the man. “Bert, please continue your thought.”

Bert sat up, with a small twinkle in his eye. “Ideas don’t just happen, they are usually discovered or thought up by multiple people at nearly the same time. So it would also make sense that ideas recur over and over through time.”

“You think Roger’s theory has been thought of before?” Silas asked.

“Absolutely,” Bert answered immediately. “Discovered and forgotten many times probably, just like everything else. Da Vinci came up with the helicopter 500 years ago, and today we have them, same with submarines, and so on.”

“How old was the artifact?” Olive asked.

“About 2000 to 2400 years old,” Evie said, “based on the estimation from the dig site.”

“If there is a repeated cycle for ideas,” Bert said, “then it would be probably a three to six cycle based on the rarity of the idea. That would mean every 800 years for three cycles, and every 300 to 400 years for six cycles and so on.”

“Does that help us?” Silas asked.

“Most ideas pop up again and again until they are common,” Olive said. “Uncommon ideas sometimes seem to follow a pattern of time. Eccentric

people—geniuses or madmen—seem to stumble or focus on ideas that escape most other people, and this happens at some pretty stable intervals.”

“The crackpot interval,” Bert added without looking up from his book.

Evie wondered if Roger would appreciate that or be offended.

“The cylinder theory seems to be a crackpot idea at best,” Bert said, “which means that more than one person probably had it since the beginning of recorded time. Assuming the person who built those artifact cylinders was one of the crackpots, and Roger is the current crackpot, then there would be some repeated interval between times of discovery.”

“Interesting,” Silas said. “I’ve never heard of this.”

“Of course not,” Bert said. “The crackpot theory is my idea. I’ve been looking through the records of the library for most of my life, and I am at liberty to state and prove this theory.”

Silas looked at Evie and smirked—the current crackpot.

“Looking between the 12th century and 16th century seems like a good starting point,” Bert finished, not noticing the joke passed between Evie and Silas.

“That sounds like a lot of time,” Silas said.

“It’s not really that much,” Olive said. “Because we have a pretty extensive index of possible sources already cataloged. For example, it would be probably drawn out more than written about, and the drawing would be more common and copyable than a written text in that era anyway. There are only a limited number of books containing artwork of that time, but some of them are pretty extensive.”

“That’s amazing,” Evie said.

“It is,” Bert said. “The people back then cataloged artworks by hand, with sketches that were remarkably detailed, and then shipped the actual artwork to major hubs all over Europe. At least from the 14th century on, after the Renaissance started. That is what I am working on now.”

“Can we help?” Silas asked.

“We don’t like outsiders handling the older books,” Olive said, shaking her head.

“Give them a couple books,” Bert said. “And have them wash their hands.”

“No gloves?” Silas asked, raising his hands like a surgeon.

“Not for the older books. Turning the pages gently is easier without gloves, since you can feel the page much better. Don’t be too rough though.”

“We’ll try,” Evie promised.

The sheer magnitude and age of the books and the contents impressed both Evie and Silas as they looked through the pages. Details and colors jumped off the pages and made the art look like it was drawn yesterday, and the skill needed for cataloging and organizing all of the different works of art seemed incredibly impressive, even if computers of today were used.

By early evening Evie and Silas were tiring, and needed to get checked in to the hotel, as well as eat and unwind from the travel. They were back at it early the next morning.

“Have you found anything?” Evie asked. The team of researchers was already hard at work.

“Nothing so far,” Olive said. “But we are hopeful. It isn’t every day that there is a goal of such possible importance.”

The room remained quiet for the entire morning, except for the sound of the carefully turned pages and the occasional closing and moving of books. The research staff filtered out individually or in small groups on breaks and to get lunch. Evie and Silas also took breaks to stretch and relax their eyes.

“Care for some lunch?” Silas asked Evie just after noon.

“Sure,” Evie said. “I could use a stretch too.”

The couple left the library and found a small deli nearby. Ordering the food to go, they walked around the city, taking in the old sights.

“It’s amazing that this is all so old,” Evie said.

“And still standing. Such history everywhere.”

The sights soon took center stage as they walked around absorbing the structures and imagining the history all around them.

“That was a good walk,” Evie said as they returned to the library.

“Yes it was. Thanks.”

“For what?”

“Just for walking with me. It feels nice to do things like that.”

“I like it too.” Evie grabbed his arm and gave it a squeeze.

As Evie and Silas returned to their room in the library, they heard a slight buzz of excitement.

“Hurry!” Olive commanded them as she greeted them at the door. She walked briskly to a place at the table with a book opened.

“Look at this!” Olive motioned to the open book.

Evie and Silas focused on the book, already opened to a page with three paintings cataloged on it. The first painting took the entirety of the left page, and the second painting took a majority of the right page. Down in the lower part of the right page was the third cataloged painting, almost an afterthought.

“Here is a glass,” Bert said, holding out a magnifying glass to the couple.

Silas motioned for Evie to take it, and she leaned in to look at the painting.

“It looks like a painting of a person,” Evie said.

“A standing portrait,” Bert corrected. “Look to the right.”

Evie looked closer, and the portrait was of a man, she didn’t recognize who it was, standing near a desk, most likely his work desk, and with a small painting on the wall on the opposite side of the desk. In the painting was what looked like a four-cylinder device.

“Holy . . .” Evie whispered, standing up and handing the magnifying glass to Silas.

Silas leaned in and scanned the page and the cataloged painting.

“It does look like the artifact, or a working model actually,” Silas said quietly, standing up again.

“We think so too!” Olive said energetically.

“Who is this man?” Evie asked. “Who’s the artist?”

“Well, the good news is that this painting is pretty unremarkable in composition and attributed artist,” Bert said.

“What does that mean?” Silas asked.

“It means that there probably hasn’t been much motion of the painting since it was cataloged,” Olive said, trying to contain her optimism. “Popular or remarkable works typically get bought and sold and travel all over. This one doesn’t seem to fit into the popular category. Nobody has heard of it.”

“We’re cross referencing now,” Bert said, “and trying to find any records of transfers. But the bad news is that because it is so unremarkable, it may not exist anymore. It might be impossible to track down.”

“Oh,” Evie said softly. “That would be terrible. All this work and another dead end.”

“If we are lucky there may be some last records of it, and we might find them,” Olive said, trying to brighten the mood.

"If we are doubly lucky," Bert said, "the records have found themselves onto the computers, and we might know in a few minutes."

Evie and Silas stood by as Olive scanned the computer, hoping to find any records of the painting.

"It doesn't look like there is a popular given name for this painting," Olive said, her shoulders sinking while looking at the computer screen, "at least that I can make out."

"All we have now is the catalog number," Bert said. "And we have to do hand searching for that."

"How can we help?" Evie asked.

"There are many records books, and this catalog number is the starting point," Olive said, moving to a stack of books already on the table. "Look through the books for that number, and find any reference for it."

The task now became reading a compact table of numbers looking for one particular number. All of the researchers, along with Evie and Silas, took frequent breaks to keep from going cross-eyed looking through the old books.

"I have to call it a day," Silas said. "I've never been good at keeping attention when looking through books, and this is even worse with all the numbers starting to run together."

"There is no rush," Olive said. "The team will be here tomorrow too, to keep up the search."

"Thanks," Evie said. Then to Silas, she said, "Don't worry. We're close."

"I know," Silas said. "Sorry. I'm just a bit annoyed at this up and down type stuff. We find one thing, only to be sent on another journey to jump through more hoops."

"I understand," Evie said, leaning into Silas and grabbing his arm. "I feel the same way, and I'm glad you're here."

Silas slid his arm out of Evie's grasp, and wrapped it around her shoulder. She responded by snuggling into Silas, and they slowly walked around the block, letting their eyes adjust, and going to meet their driver.

"This is quite amazing," Silas said, "the travel and . . ."

"It really is," Evie replied, snuggled into Silas' side. "I would have never expected this the first time we chatted."

"Seems like a lifetime ago," Silas said. "We have done so much since then, and it has only been a couple weeks."

Evie looked up at him with a small laugh. "15 days."

“15 days,” Silas echoed as they spotted the car.

The next morning Evie and Silas ran through the rain from the car to the library entrance, and shook off the rain from their coats.

“Good morning!” Olive greeted them. “We are still working. And optimistic!”

“As are we,” Evie replied. She felt refreshed after a good night’s sleep.

Pages turned, and the rain produced a calming atmosphere during the search for the catalog number.

“Here is a number!” one researcher called out, mid-afternoon.

Olive and the rest gathered around to authenticate the record.

“It is a match!” Olive announced after double checking.

“Catalog number matches,” Bert confirmed, his face lighting up. “And the transfer code seems to be valid.” He searched through a short computer list to match the code. “A museum actually.”

“What does that mean?” Silas asked.

“It seems that the artwork passed through Genoa, on its way to a museum,” Olive said, reading the catalog entry. “The French Museum in Marseilles. October, 1523.”

“500 years ago?” Silas asked. That seemed like an impossibly long time.

“Don’t be discouraged!” Olive said. “This is good news. The French Museum isn’t heavily trafficked in non-popular works, so it might actually still be there.”

“Really?” Evie asked, not accepting their luck until they actually can see the painting for themselves.

“Marseilles wasn’t very active in either of the world wars, and the museum pieces that didn’t really appeal to many, probably weren’t taken by the Nazis, or destroyed in any Allied activity,” Bert said. “There is considerable reason to believe this painting will still be there.”

“There is more cross-referencing to do, to make sure there weren’t any other side sales anywhere,” Olive said. “But I would say you could call Postice with the news, and make passage for Marseilles.”

And so France was next on their list.

Chapter 22

“If that is the painting, it probably isn’t going anywhere soon,” Postice told Evie and Silas. “Take the long way to Marseilles. Roger told me of a contact he gave to you in Paris. You should take in the sights and visit them.”

Evie and Silas agreed and decided to take a train trip from Genoa to Marseilles, going over the alps, then up to Paris for sightseeing and to find Roger’s contact.

“We should get a sleeper car,” Evie said.

“Two rooms again?”

“My dad would probably like that.”

“And Chris?”

“Oh definitely. Chris would insist on two rooms. But Red would definitely push for us to share. So there’s that.”

A day and half later, during the cool, but not cold, mid-morning, Silas and Evie found themselves staring at the center of Paris.

“Did you ever think this could be so beautiful?” Evie asked, taking in the ambiance of the city.

“It is pretty, that’s for sure,” he said, not really impressed. “But I wouldn’t call it spectacular or anything.”

“You grouch,” she joked, giving him a push. “The history, the people, and then the buildings. It all is so amazing.”

“I think the only memory I will remember vividly,” he said, looking down at her for a minute, “is you.”

She snuggled into him for a long minute, not saying anything. “Thanks,” she whispered. “That is very sweet.”

“It isn’t just in a romantic way,” he said, causing Evie to scowl at him before laughing. “But also because we’ve done so much in such a short time. I don’t know what I was expecting that first day I picked you up at the airport, but I’ve been amazed at you ever since.”

“Oh, Silas.” She snuggled closer, watching the people pass and the city start to bustle as the day progressed.

“Shall we walk and search for the mythologicals?” he laughed, giving her a small hug before starting off.

“We shall,” she said, looking up with a joyful smile.

The pair walked around Paris, taking in different sights, avoiding other areas that seemed more dangerous to tourists, and reveling in each other’s company.

“What name did Roger give us?” Silas asked, suddenly unsure of his memory.

“He said it was the Centaur’s Stable. Quite a strange name, I would say.”

“That’s what I thought. I haven’t seen it and was wondering if my memory had skipped a beat.”

“I haven’t seen it either, but I don’t mind walking around again.”

“I don’t know,” he said, “my feet are getting kind of tired.”

Evie pulled out her phone, and rechecked the message from Roger and also did a quick search for it. “It doesn’t seem to come up very often. And the location matches where we’ve been walking.”

“Fate—or something—seems to want us to work hard for everything.”

“Wait,” Evie said, zooming in on her phone. “I think I see the problem. We’ve been walking around the back side of the building.”

“This definitely looks like a row of businesses from the front,” he said, pointing to the very obvious doorways facing them.

“That may be,” she said, holding up the phone. “But it seems there’s another culture hiding in the weird street construction.”

Silas looked at the phone and recognized his misconception. “That’s good work, Evie.”

Evie felt her face warm at Silas’ compliment. The couple walked down the street to the end and took the corner. Another narrow street slowly formed between buildings, leading to a small enclave, with maybe a dozen small shops at most.

“I would have never known this was here,” Silas said, entering the small marketplace.

“Me neither,” she said, taking in the different shop names. “This almost looks like a Renaissance Fair. All of these shops seem to cater to medieval themes.”

Silas walked up to the first shop, a small establishment selling candles and lighting fixtures, that might have been common 500 years ago.

“How do?” the proprietor asked, a French accent piercing the mostly silent enclave.

“I am fine,” Evie said, taking a candle and giving it a fragrance test.

“Not much scent,” the proprietor informed Evie. “Mostly for lighting.”

“I see,” Evie said, gently returning the candle to the stand.

“Made here?” Silas asked.

“Yes,” the proprietor said, pointing behind the booth. “Old ways.”

Silas smiled and nodded, noting the equipment in the shop and also understanding the work needed to produce the shop full of candles.

“Blacksmith?” Silas asked the man. The man pointed to the center of the small circular perimeter of shops.

Silas followed the man’s pointing toward the center of the market. The presence of new people—immediately recognized as tourists—had created some buzz among the shops. He stepped into the street again, walking slowly toward the blacksmith. The talent and skill of a blacksmith intrigued Silas, and he hoped to observe some authentic work.

Before Silas could tell if the blacksmith was working, Evie tugged on his arm. “Centaur’s Stable,” she whispered, nodding toward a small sign on their left.

“How about a circle to there?” he asked. “If we visit more of the shops, we won’t be too obvious as to our motive.”

“That’s a great idea.”

Slowly they made their way through the different shops, stopping for varying times at each one, depending on their interest in the wares.

Silas nodded his head toward a small disheveled man dressed in a raggy outfit, and Evie looked over.

“Real life beggar or actor?” she asked in a hushed tone.

Before Silas could answer, the beggar locked eyes with Silas and moved to stand up. The man’s legs seemed to be fused together at the knees, or he wore metal leg braces. In order to stand up, the man rolled face down, into a push-up position, bent sharply at the waist, and used his arms to propel his torso upwards with enough force to rise to his feet. The man pointed toward Silas and started muttering. The words made no sense to Silas, as this man wobbled at what appeared to be full speed into the market.

Silas grabbed Evie by the arm, preparing to run away from the man, just as a noise stopped the man in his tracks, causing him to turn and rush back to his permanent post.

“That was so strange,” Silas said, releasing his grip on Evie. “Did you understand any words?”

Evie shook her head. “None.”

A small crowd now gathered around the beggar and escorted him off the corner and out of sight. The rattling noise grew fainter as the man continued shaking his metal donation cup, now further away. Silas noted a figure dressed in a shiny thick leather outfit—boots, pants, vest, and hat—quickly walk away from the beggar’s corner in the opposite direction. A few seconds later and the entire crowd disappeared around the corner.

“What just happened?” Silas asked the lone remaining witness to the events as the man walked by.

“Someone gave the beggar a coin,” The man answered with a shake of his head. “A British crown from seventeenth century, almost perfect condition. Worth quite a sum.”

Silas felt his muscles relax at the news. “An afternoon performance?” he asked Evie.

“It could fit the character of the whole experience,” she said, shrugging her shoulders.

After a minute to calm down, Silas and Evie resumed the browsing in the market. The blacksmith displayed many different articles, but Silas missed

the opportunity to watch the construction process. Continuing on, Evie and Silas spied a small group of six people enter the market and head straight into the Centaur's Stable.

"That's interesting," she said, watching the last visitor enter the door.

"Very. Regulars perhaps?"

"Maybe," Evie replied, continuing their journey from shop to shop.

The shop immediately before the Centaur's Stable contained a few shelves of what appeared to be hand-crafted books. The female proprietor smiled brightly as Evie approached.

"Looking for something?" the proprietor asked, in a soft gentle French accent.

"Nothing in particular," Evie replied to her. "Just admiring the handiwork."

The proprietor picked a particular book from a shelf and handed to Evie. Evie looked at the engraved cover before opening the book gently.

"Mythology."

"Very interesting," Evie said, glancing at a few pages. "How much?"

The proprietor sized up Silas and Evie. "Forty dollars."

Evie closed the book up. "Too much for me. Do you have anything on fairy tales?"

"Mythology is better than fairy tales," the proprietor replied with a friendly smile. "It is worth forty, but I will take twenty."

Evie made another move to hand the book back, but Silas stepped in, offering a twenty euro bill to the lady.

"Thanks," she said, taking the money to complete the transaction. "Enjoy the reading."

"You didn't have to," Evie said, but smiled up at Silas.

They moved to the next shop, The Centaur's Stable, and instead of being an open air shop like the others, all of the wares resided inside the building.

Silas slowly ran his hand down the brightly colored door before he opened it and looked inside. Rows of shelves lined the walls, with many different sized jars on each row. Silas couldn't make out what the jars contained, but figured a mixture of herbs and other 'home remedies' would fit the ambiance.

Seeing a larger shop floor, with the previous shoppers still browsing around, he stepped inside and Evie followed. They approached the first row of shelves and examined the jars. His initial guess proved mostly correct.

“Ingredients for potions and such?” she asked.

He read some of the labels. “Seems more of a physical magicks shop, as Noel would say.”

“This definitely stays in the character of the entire Renaissance Fair theme.”

“I don’t think I would believe any of the labels here,” he joked quietly to her. “And I don’t think I would buy anything from here.”

She nodded silently, opening her newly acquired book and scanned a few pages. “There is a section on potions in here. I bet we could find several uses for these ingredients.”

“Nice,” Silas said, still looking around, but not really interested in the jars that much anymore.

Silas counted the six shoppers, himself, and Evie as the only ones in the area, not noticing the shopkeeper among them.

“Have you seen the shopkeeper?” he asked, as they scanned the little shop.

“No, actually,” she said, now focusing on looking for anyone that would resemble an owner.

“That’s too bad. I was hoping that Roger’s contact would be here.”

Evie nodded, still looking through the book, trying to locate a matching ingredient to any potion recipe.

After a few moments, one of the six shoppers picked out a jar from a shelf and started looking around for someone to complete the purchase. Silas and Evie watched, waiting for someone to appear to assist, but as time went by, nobody appeared.

The customer grabbed a scrap of paper off of the counter, and wrote quickly on it. Rereading the message, and seemingly happy with the message, the customer slid the scrap to the middle of the counter, and walked out with the jar.

Shortly after, the rest of the group left.

“Did they just shoplift?” she asked him.

“I don’t know,” he said. Slowly he crept to the counter, intent on seeing what the scrawled message said. As he got over the counter, ready to try reading the message, a door behind the counter opened, making both Evie and Silas jump.

An old twiggy figure appeared. Silas guessed it was an old lady, only because of the long gray hair down her back. She appeared anywhere between sixty and ninety-years-old, maybe five feet tall on a good day, and weighing no more than eighty pounds dripping wet. She moved slowly toward the counter, almost sliding her form along the floor, rather than walking.

The woman slid to the counter and noticed the scrap. Nodding to herself, she took the scrap and put it in a small jar behind her, and then looked over at the shelf for the missing item.

It seemed almost as if she hadn't noticed Evie and Silas standing there, and visibly jumped when Silas made a small wave to her.

"Hello," Silas said, trying to be friendly.

"Hmmp," the old woman replied, scanning Silas and Evie.

"Hi," Evie echoed with a friendly smile. "This is a very nice shop."

The old woman nodded slightly in Evie's direction, but made no move to engage.

Evie moved forward with a spark of inspiration. "Is this a good book?" she asked the old woman, presenting the book from the shop next door.

The woman looked up at her, almost looking bored, then looked at the presented book.

The bony hands reached out and took the book from Evie. Evie shot Silas a concerned look.

The woman paged quickly through the book. The pages flipped back and forth, as the old woman seemed to be looking for something in particular.

"Tourist," the old woman said, tossing the book in Evie's direction, but intentionally throwing it on the floor. The book landed with a solid thud, and Evie shot an angry look at the old woman before bending over to pick up her possession.

The door opened again, and an equally old man appeared. He had a smooth top to his bony head, with a ring of gray wispy hair falling just over the middle of his ears.

The man was dressed in dark colored robes, with wide sleeve openings at the wrist, allowing his bony arms to be exposed as he placed his hands on the counter.

Evie cleared the dirt and dust from the floor off of the book, still quite angry at the old woman.

“Problem?” the man asked, almost looking angrily toward Silas, a very thick accent apparent, but definitely not French.

“No,” Silas said, thinking that was the better answer. “We were just browsing.”

“What’s wrong with my book?” Evie asked.

“Tourist,” the woman repeated, pointing to the book.

“That isn’t a good book,” the man translated to Evie. Silas figured the old man’s accent to be very Eastern Europe or maybe Russian.

“Why not?” Evie asked, making an effort to calm down.

“Let see.” The old man held out his bony hands.

Evie cautiously approached the counter, and slowly offered the book to the man.

The man took the book and rapidly started paging through it, mimicking the steps of the old woman.

“Fake,” the old man said after scanning only a few pages and handed the book back to Evie.

“How do you know?” Evie asked, both curious and a little perturbed at the quick declaration.

The man looked at the old woman and then tilted his head at Evie, as if to say, ‘I’m 1000 years old! That’s how I know.’

The woman slid behind him and disappeared back through the door.

“Come.” The man motioned to Evie, and started walking slowly after the woman. Evie shot Silas a worrisome look, wondering if she would get her book back. They followed the old couple through the door.

The woman stood against a wall, busying herself with odd tasks, while the man walked to a large chair behind a desk. He sidled up against the chair—bigger, height and weight-wise than the old man—and pushed himself up to sit in it, facing Silas and Evie.

They followed into the room and noticed the stacks of books on the old man’s desk. Many looked quite old, and many more were piled haphazardly all over the room.

“History changes,” the old man said, offering Evie back her book. “Fake books all over.”

Evie took the book and looked around the room, noticing the wall behind them contained shelves, also mostly filled with books. For an unknown reason,

a singular book on the shelf caught her eye. Stepping towards it—keeping the woman in her peripheral vision—she froze, completely stunned.

“Real book,” the man said, nodding to Evie.

Evie read the cover of the book Silas bought for her, and then compared the cover of the book on the shelf.

“Take,” the old woman said, not looking up.

Evie handed Silas her fake book, and took the real book from the shelf. The exteriors seemed identical, but the real book had a heft and weight the fake book lacked. She paged through the book cautiously, reading several passages. The book contained much more detail and also seemed to speak directly to her.

“Maybe this is what Roger was talking about,” Evie said to Silas. “This book seems quite special.”

“Roger?” the old woman echoed, turning and cocking her head to look at Silas and Evie.

“Roger told us to visit the Centaur’s Stable,” Silas said slowly, not sure if their age or the accent made him to speak in that manner.

“Roger,” the man echoed nodding to the old woman.

The woman moved from the corner, and now that Silas could see her feet, he smiled slightly, thinking of The Addams Family’s Morticia.

The old woman slid next to Evie and sized her up. Evie had a few inches on the old woman, and definitely more muscle mass, but still felt nervous. The woman extended a bony finger to Evie’s neck, and then slowly traced the finger down Evie, between her breasts, and stopping at her belly, before retracting the finger.

The woman turned to Silas and performed the same ritual. Straining to reach his neck, the woman slowly traced the bony finger down his sternum to his belly.

“Sad,” the woman said, looking at the old man and shaking her head.

“You come from Roger?” the old man asked, still in a heavy accent.

“Yes,” Silas answered, slowly stepping back slightly from the old woman in case she tried something else. “He said something about mythology and the multiverse.”

“Multiverse,” the old woman echoed, slowly gliding back to her previous spot near the corner.

“Yes,” Evie replied. “We have been following a winding path trying to figure out why we had similar dreams.”

“Both?” the man asked.

“Yes, we both had the same dreams,” Evie answered, a little more nervous now.

“Explain,” the old man replied, seeming to sort through a pile of books, looking for something.

“The first dream was at an archaeological dig, and an artifact was discovered. In Greece,” Evie said. “And the second dream was a university lab on reclaimed memories.”

“Scary?” the old man asked, grabbing what looked like pen and making a few rapid scratches on a pad. Silas tried to see what he was writing, but couldn’t make anything out.

“No,” Evie answered, still a bit nervous. “Nothing scary.”

“We first found the university lab, and we just came from the dig in Greece,” Silas said, thinking that the man was writing down important things.

The old woman cocked her head at Silas. “True?”

“Yes,” Silas answered, guessing as to the interpretation of her question, “they both came true.”

The old man looked up at the woman, and they shared a nod.

The woman came back, and waved her bony hands slowly around Evie’s head, and stepped up to Silas. Seeing that there was no physical contact this time, Silas bent down slightly to let her do the hand waving. When she finished, she gave a slow shake of her head to the old man. The man jotted down more notes with the pen, making a slightly unnerving scratching from whatever tip the pen had. Then he took out another small book and compared whatever the scratchings were on the paper to the book, and made a final tally of sorts.

“Three, Six, Eighteen, C,” the old man read from the book and paper.

And without a word, the old woman exited the room.

“What is going on?” Silas asked, breaking the strange silence.

“You are polluted,” the old man said.

“Polluted?” Evie said, a bit unnerved.

“Your powers are polluted,” the old man repeated.

“Powers?” Silas asked, confused by the statement, looking to Evie.

“Ears okay?” the old man asked the two, getting off the chair with a slight ‘thump’ as his feet hit the ground.

“We hear fine,” Silas answered. Hearing wasn’t the problem.

“Good,” the old man said, walking over to a large book, almost half his size. His bony hands grabbed the book, and he grunted slightly trying to lift the tome, to little effect. Then he gave a slightly embarrassed look to Silas, with a twist of his head toward the book.

Silas understood, walked over to the book and lifted it up.

The old man walked over to the desk and pushed a few books out of the way, causing many more to fall off the cluttered surface and pointed. “Here.”

Silas placed the book as instructed, and stepped back.

The old man struggled slightly to lift the heavy front cover of the large book, and soon managed to find the correct place in the book. He motioned to Evie and Silas to join him.

The pages showed an array of people, planets and much of nature, and also a series of mythical creatures all seemingly interacting. The scene felt peaceful, rather than the typical violent struggle portrayed in fairy tales.

“This is the natural state of all beings,” the old man said, starting to speak more than single words. Silas failed at hiding a small laugh.

“Funny?” The old man asked, sternly.

“No! Sorry,” Silas apologized, the laughter passing. “I wasn’t expecting that full sentence.” Silas smiled to the man as his face grew warm. Evie elbowed Silas in the ribs for embarrassing her.

“You think I am dumb?” The old man asked Silas, not seeing the humor.

“Not at all,” Silas answered, his face growing hot again.

“Good.” The man returned to the pages of the book.

“The natural state,” The man said. He pointed a bony finger to several of the seemingly connected beings. “In it, everyone can connect to everyone else in the cosmic realm. Pollution stops up the connection.”

“What kind of pollution?” Evie asked, not sure how it fit with the picture in the book.

The old man waved his hands all around him, “Distractions! Phone, TV, work, family. No peace, no connection,” He continued. “Air, water, noise, food, all chemicals now. Not natural—pollutions. All these close the connection. Cosmos connections need to be very pure.”

“Yikes,” Silas said. “I guess I’m terrible polluted.”

“Me too,” Evie said. She was around computers all the time.

“Who is pure then?” Silas asked.

“You read Fairy tales?” The old man asked Silas.

“Sure, when I was younger,” Silas said, giving a shrug to Evie.

“Snow White, Cinderella, Rapunzel, Little Red. All pure. Connected to everything.”

“Those are Fairy Tales,” Evie said. They weren’t real stories, even though she cherished the memories of her parents reading to her from that book.

“Are they?” the man asked, lifting his bony finger toward Evie’s face. “Why are they written?” He smiled widely, with a crooked grin.

“Because children are pure?” Silas asked, catching the meaning.

“Not pure,” the old man said, with shake of his head. “Just not as polluted.”

“Timmy!” Silas said.

Evie nodded, understanding the reference.

“And getting the pollution out can help with the connection? Like vision quests and other purification rituals can improve that connection.” It was like their talk with Postice.

“Yes.”

As Silas and Evie studied the book with the old man, the old woman slid back in, carrying a few jars. The old man took the jars slowly and placed them on the desk. “These are for cleansing. Help with your purifying.” He put a bony finger on each of the small jars one by one.

Silas shot Evie a somewhat nervous look, and raised an eyebrow. What were they in for now?

“Potions to reset your connections,” the old man said, pointing back to the large picture in the book.

“And then we’ll be able to connect to nature?” Evie asked.

“In time.”

“Wow,” Evie said. “I’ve always wanted to talk to faeries.”

“No!” the old woman said with a scowl. “Faeries evil!”

“Connect with the good cosmos first,” the old man told Silas and Evie.

“Faeries exist?” Silas asked, looking at both the old man and old woman.

“Yes!” the old woman exclaimed, giving a very serious glare at Silas. “Evil!”

“All creatures exist,” the old man said. “Most are . . .” The old man struggled to find the right word.

“Stuck!” a female voice from behind them said. “At least if they are in this world.”

Chapter 23

Silas and Evie jumped at the voice and spun around. They recognized the bookkeeper from the shop next door.

“Oh, hi, it’s you,” Evie said, and then she remembered that this woman had sold her a fake book.

Almost like the woman knew her thoughts, her face flushed red. “Hi. My name is Katya,” she said. “And I’m sorry I sold you that fake book earlier.”

Fake or not, it was still pretty cool. “That’s okay. Hi. I am Evie. I think I have the right copy now.” Evie smiled back at Katya.

“Why are you here, really?” Katya asked. “I don’t think you are general tourists.”

“Roger told us about this place, and how mythical creatures might be explained, so that’s why we’re here. And I’m Silas, by the way.”

Katya nodded her acknowledgement. “Oh, Roger. And I see you have your purification tinctures.” Katya pointed to the jars on the desk.

“Will they work?” Evie asked.

“Depends on how polluted you are, but usually they do, to some extent.”

“We were ‘sad’ apparently,” Silas said, recalling the old woman’s reading results.

“That’s pretty typical. Most people are polluted and have no cosmic power.”

“Do you know about Roger’s theory?” Evie asked Katya, since she’d obviously recognized the name.

“Some of it. From what I’ve heard, I think a lot of it is correct, except for the permanence part.”

“What’s that part?” Silas asked.

“Roger believes that every universe is set, from begging to end, and doesn’t change,” Katya said.

“And you don’t believe that?” Silas asked.

“Many mythical creatures exist by ‘jumping’ from one universe to another. So any jumps would go against the permanence part of the theory.”

“The permanence, as I understand it,” Evie said, “is because of how the Bible says that God knows everything from beginning to end. That would almost have to make every universe set from beginning to end.”

“I don’t think that means that things can’t jump around,” Silas said, not sure what the differences were between the arguments. “If the jumps are ‘predestined’—or whatever that word is—then they can all happen, and also be permanently set.”

“Hmmm,” Katya said. “I’ll have to think on that.”

“I don’t think the permanence part really stops crazy things—like Timewalkers and thought-putters and probably the mythical creatures,” Silas said.

“Timewalkers? Thought-putters?” Katya asked.

“Someone that travels in the multiverse and gives people ideas,” Silas explained. “Like dreams, or the future.”

The old man started paging through the large book. “Dreams . . .”

Silas watched the man turn the large colorful pages and stop at a picture showing a large white cloud figure holding a light blue water droplet in its hand.

“That’s a dream,” Katya said, pointing at the droplet in the picture. “The dreammaker then delivers that dream to someone.”

“Might be how a Timewalker interacts, too,” Silas said, thinking about giving dreams of the future. “But it’s hard to understand how they could create dreams without changing things.”

“Why would they not change things?” Katya asked.

“The theory—as far as I can understand it,” Evie said, “is that no matter how or what, these events would happen in that universe. For example, if a thought-putter gave a thought to an investor that would make lots of money, Roger’s theory says that whether the thought-putter gives the thought or not, the investor will behave the same way, and end up in the same places.”

“That is interesting,” Katya said. “But it doesn’t behave the same with all of the mythical creatures.”

“What makes mythology different than thought-putters?” Silas asked.

“Mythological stories typically deal with many aspects of the magical realm. Items and beings ‘popping’ in and out at will, or randomly. Like Leprechauns, for starters. They wander around a certain place at a certain time, and if you catch one, they supposedly give you their magical pot of gold. Where did the gold come from? Where did the Leprechaun come from? Where does it go afterward?”

“I guess a Leprechaun wouldn’t really have life spiral,” Evie said.

“Life spiral?” Katya asked. “What’s that?”

“A birth point,” Silas said. “All of us have a birth point, and exist in the same timeline—or universe—while a Leprechaun seems to be able to pop in and out.”

“Wouldn’t any creature, from fairy to dragon, have a life spiral in any universe. Seems like that is quite possible,” Katya said. “And the prevalence of myths seems to support that.”

“Why is mythology important?” Silas asked.

“All of the stories have fantastical events in them that don’t match our current perception of reality. Yet the stories each have an element of truth in them that is worth studying.”

“Dragons exist?” Silas asked.

“Why not?” Katya answered with a smile. “I don’t know what they actually looked like, but because of the number of tales that involve dragons, that makes it very unlikely that all of the authors created the same descriptive beast out of thin air independently.”

“Imagination can be a powerful thing,” Evie said.

“True,” Katya said. “But too many—most actually—of the details seem similar. That doesn’t seem to match random story-telling.”

“When would dragons have been traveling to and from Earth?” Silas asked.

“Ages. Only recently, the last few hundred years, would the pollution be too great for most creatures.”

“A two thousand year old artifact could have a dragon etching on it?”

“Sure. Back then all kinds of creatures would have been able to jump easily to any Earth like ours. But the Earth that we inhabit now isn’t the same as it once was.”

“How so?” Silas asked.

“Imagine the world one thousand years ago,” Katya said. “No pollution, fewer people, much unsettled land.”

“Pollution? Like air pollution?” Evie asked, making a connection.

“Absolutely,” Katya replied. “The pollution all around us closes up the cosmic connections for the entire planet.”

“So you’re saying that when the Earth was clean, there were connections between other universes?” Silas asked.

“Yes!” Katya said. “Imagine two clean Earths, in different universes. The planets look identical, and that makes it easy to move from one to another.”

“And the more pollution, the different they look?” Evie asked.

“You got it,” Katya said. “But now, with the amount of pollution on the Earth, very few Earths look similar enough to create a connection. And any Earths that are similar have very limited free areas for jumping to and from without being seen because of all of the development and people around.”

“A thousand years ago beings were able to move from Earth to Earth?” Silas asked, not believing that could be possible.

“That’s what all these books say.” She waved at all of the books in the room and ending by pointing to the large book on the desk. “That is why Leprechauns seemed to jump in and out. They could jump from one Earth to another at will, ending up in the identical place. Now, with so few identical Earths, almost every mythical creature is confined—trapped!—in their sole Earth.”

“Stuck.” Evie recalled the word Katya used.

Katya nodded with a sad face.

“And humans have been hunting them as well when they get here?” Silas asked.

“Pretty much,” Katya said, her tone growing darker.

“How do you know all this?” Evie asked.

“My parents came from the forests of Poland many years ago,” Katya said, pointing toward the old couple occupied with their own works. “And they still practice the old ways. We get by running a tourist shop, but we also sell to real customers. We’re barely making a living now, though. The new generations don’t appreciate the older arts. They don’t believe in angels and demons, let alone the Fairy tales.”

“Angels and demons?” Silas asked.

“Angels!” The old woman from the shop bowed her head.

The old man slid up to the desk and proceeded to turn a few pages in the book. A bony finger pointed to a new mural on the pages. Evie and Silas moved up to examine the picture closely.

“Angels and Demons are different than the other mythological creatures,” Katya said. “Most mythical creatures have a home on Earth—as you have probably read in different stories. They live on one Earth at a time. Angels and demons seem to be outer worldly creatures that don’t inhabit a universe, but seem to have the power to appear into any universe, sometimes at will.”

“A Leprechaun has to be on some Earth all the time?” Evie asked.

“Yes,” Katya answered. “All worldly creatures, even including flying creatures like dragons, must inhabit some Earth at all times, have a home.”

“So when there is no identical, or close, Earth to jump to,” Silas said, “those creatures end up trapped where they are.”

“Subject to being hunted and slaughtered by humans,” Katya nodded, visibly saddened.

“And those creatures probably would be more inclined to inhabit less advanced Earth timelines?” Evie asked, catching up.

“Exactly,” Katya said. “The more technically advanced an Earth gets, the more polluted it gets in terms of actual pollution, but it also connects to fewer and fewer other Earths because of the large differences.”

“Turning stories of actual events into fairy tales that we no longer believe,” Silas said.

“Yes,” Katya said softly. “These books are the old stories—*true* stories—that have been declared myths due to the pollutions of our bodies, minds, and planet.”

“The stories could be of an older Earth in this universe,” Silas said, thinking out loud. “Or it could be of some stray connection from a less advanced universe that dragons inhabit?”

“Either one could be possible,” Katya said.

“Are there any mythical creatures on this Earth right now?” Silas asked. He looked around, as if one might be watching them at this very moment.

“If there are, I feel sorry for them. They are probably the last of their kind, constantly forced to hide and keep out of sight, and know they are trapped here for the rest of their lives. Like Bigfoot. Or the Yeti. They probably have been on Earth since the beginning, jumping on and off all over the multiverse, and now they are trapped here. We try to sense them and help them, but we are not very often able to.”

“And the Loch Ness monster?” Evie asked.

Katya nodded. “Any creature that seems out of place or rare.”

“Sense them?” Silas said. “Do you have any special abilities?” He motioned to the old woman and old man.

“Mum and dad are part of the intellectuals of old,” Katya answered. “Much like alchemists and like that.”

“Casting spells?” Evie asked.

“Not spells,” Katya corrected. “Creating potions and tinctures that can do different things to help a connection.”

“Like clear up pollution?” Silas asked.

“Yes, that is the hope. Many of the jars actually contain different remedies for all kinds of different pollutions.”

“There is a cure for technological overload?” Evie asked, half-joking.

“That probably falls under sleeping powder,” Katya said in return, laughing. “But I’m curious. Why how did you start talking to Roger in the first place?”

Evie glanced to Silas. “Because we had a dream. The same dream. Two dreams actually.”

“Oh!” Katya said, then suddenly started speaking to her parents in their native language.

Her mum slid over to a shelf and pulled a book out, bringing it to Katya.

Katya took the book and looked it over before handing it to Evie. “This is a book on dreams. Dreamstealers and Dreammakers.”

“There are Dreamstealers?” Silas asked, and a chill moved through his body.

“Yes,” Katya said. “The book is worth reading, if you want to know real answers about dreams.”

“Thanks,” Evie said, holding the book gently.

“Dreams are not what you think,” Katya said. “Entering the dream realm is heavily influenced by pollutions, as you would expect, but inside the actual dream realm it looks like a busy factory floor. All of the dream ‘workers’ running around connecting sleepers to dreams. Dreammakers help to ‘write’ and deliver the dreams, but Dreamstealers can actually take the dreamer—or sleeper—to dangerous places.”

“The sleeper?” Evie said. “Like the person?”

“Not the physical form,” Katya said. “But the spirit or mind of the person, yes.”

“Can that be dangerous?” Silas asked.

“Some people can die in their sleep,” Katya answered quietly. “Some of those are probably natural deaths, but some of them are also likely due to Dreamstealers.”

Evie and Silas exchanged a shocked look.

“I don’t know much about the dreams made for any one person,” Katya said. “But Dreamstealers seem to have the power to create nightmares to frighten a person to death. Frightmares.”

Silas shook his head as he processed what she was saying. “I would have never thought.”

“But now, you two having the same dream, doesn’t seem like something a Dreammaker would, or could, do. That sounds like something beyond their power.”

“How do you mean?” Evie asked.

“When you dream normally, is there ever a beginning?”

Silas and Evie thought for a moment. “I don’t recall one,” Evie said, with Silas nodding in agreement.

“That’s because dreams never do. Dreams start in the middle—right in the action. Are you ever just sitting watching TV in a dream?”

“No,” Evie said with a laugh. “That would be a boring dream.”

“If you were, that would not be the main point of the dream. Dreams are constantly being created and recreated, mixed and stirred, with no beginning. So, any two people having the same dream at the same time is impossible ‘naturally,’ if you want to call it that, from the dream realm.”

“And by having the same dream,” Silas said, “this means it wasn’t from the dream realm?”

“It might have been from the dream realm, but it wasn’t just a dream. There is something intervening to make it happen. Something more powerful than the dream realm.”

“This is making my head hurt,” Silas said, pressing his hands on his head for effect.

“Me too,” Evie agreed. “Thanks for all the information. I will definitely read these books.”

Katya pointed to the jars on the desk. “Don’t forget your purification jars, they might be helpful.”

Chapter 24

After the two days of train touring up to Paris and then a day to Southern France later, the couple found themselves at the hotel in Marseilles, waiting for the meeting with the museum curator the next day.

“We don’t really get many visitors here to this area,” the curator, Philippe, said. “The annex isn’t open to the public, and most of the artwork here is stored temporarily. There’s been a recent push to get most of the works displayed somewhere.”

“I see,” Evie said. “So it might not be here?”

“That catalog number from Genoa is an ancient one. I don’t know how many different cataloging systems have been used since the sixteenth century. That is the first obstacle.”

“The first?” Silas asked. “What’s the second?”

“Well, there have been many museum renovations since then, so finding it is possible, but not finding it is much more probable. Might be the ‘needle in the haystack’ situation.”

“Just like every other search,” Evie said, smiling. “Maybe that voice will come back and tell us where it is.”

“I haven’t heard that voice since Greece,” Silas said. “I don’t know who or where that voice came from, so I wouldn’t make any bets on it.”

“I have a few museum catalogers working on locating the painting,” Philippe said. “They will do a full scouring of the museum, which is needed anyway.”

“That is much appreciated,” Evie said, shaking hands with him. “If there is anything we can do, let us know.”

“As for now, the museum staff is handling the work. When we find any information, I will let you know.”

“Thanks,” Silas said, shaking hands as well.

Silas and Evie walked out of the museum into the historic French city, and marveled at the scale of the history that had passed through those streets.

“It’s a nice night tonight,” she said, grabbing onto his arm.

“Yes it is,” he said, letting her snuggle into him.

“How about a walk along the seaside?”

“Sounds good,” Silas said, making a mental note of the path to the hotel.

“We’ve learned a lot on this trip. I haven’t had the opportunity to travel much, and this has been a good way to do it.”

“It’s nice of Mr. Postice to pay for all of this. I could never afford any of this myself.”

“Me neither,” she said with a small laugh. “But just being here is nice too.”

“I think so, too,” he said, enjoying her snuggling against him.

The couple walked for almost an hour, taking in the sights, and watching the sun start to set over the sea.

Evie’s phone rang. “Hi, Chris! I’m on a sunset walk right now. Can I call you back?”

Silas couldn’t hear the other end of the call, but did hear a motorcycle engine rev up behind him. Evie released her grip as she walked to a small wall on the edge of the walking path, trying to wrap up her conversation with Chris.

Silas spun around as the motorcycle sound approached, sounding like it was speeding up and coming straight for them. He barely stepped out of the way just as the motorcycle handlebar passed by, almost clipping him, and saw the driver and passenger clearly.

The driver had a steely look in his eyes and was aiming straight to run over Silas. Had Silas not stepped out of the way, the motorcycle would have collided directly with him.

Silas instinctively started running toward the motorcycle without knowing why, but only for a single second. In the time between starting to move and realizing why, Silas caught a glimpse of an object he immediately identified as a gun in the passenger's hand. And the passenger was taking aim at Evie!

Silas started sprinting the few yards to Evie as soon as he knew something was wrong, but the speed of the motorcycle made it impossible to catch. The first shot rang out as the motorcycle sped past Evie, lining up with her right side. Evie flinched as the bullet entered her abdomen, pushed back against the wall by the impact. She hit the wall and bounced off, but managed to stay upright, a confused look on her face.

The second shot rang out as the motorcycle sped away, and the bullet clipped the left side of Evie's waist, causing her to double over with a small spin to the ground.

"Evie!" Silas yelled, rushing to her. He found the bullet impact wounds and immediately applied pressure to try to stop the bleeding.

"Call an ambulance!!" he yelled to the nearby sunset watchers, praying desperately that their command of the English language was sufficient to understand him. "999!" he shouted again, hoping that he recalled the correct number for French emergency services.

Blood covered his hands as he pressed down on her lower torso.

"Why?" she asked, trying to understand what was going on after the shock of the impacts. She never noticed the motorcycle at all, just felt the impacts and force of the bullets.

"Just breathe, Evie," he said, trying to sound calm, but inside he couldn't process anything.

"Help!!" he called out again, hoping for anyone to offer needed assistance.

Two men ran up. "I have called an ambulance," the first man said in English. "Please hold on."

The other man had retrieved a first aid kit and offered some bandages to Silas. Silas removed his hands for only a second to grab the clean gauze and then continued to press on the wounds.

The French men were now talking to Evie, trying to comfort her, as Silas went into shock at seeing the blood filling the bandages.

Only two minutes after being called, the ambulance arrived and the trained paramedics approached the scene. One immediately inserted an IV into Evie and started fluids to compensate for the blood loss, comforting her in French and English that they were there to help. The second evaluated her vital signs and then pulled out more fresh bandages, and took over from Silas.

At first, Silas refused to let up the pressure, but the two French bystanders grabbed him by the shoulders and assured him that the paramedics would save her.

A French police car arrived seconds after the ambulance and took control of the crowd. Shortly after, two additional policemen started gathering details from the crowd about what happened.

The scene turned into a blur to Silas, watching the curious crowd, the bright flashing lights of several emergency vehicles, and many voices all around him.

Less than two minutes after arriving, the ambulance packed Evie up onto a stretcher and sped away to the closest hospital. Silas fought to go with, but the police kept him back, assuring him the EMTs needed room to work and they would take him to the hospital to be with her.

Getting into the back of the police car, Silas stared into the setting sun before breaking down at the chaos that had just descended upon them.

At the hospital Silas was taken to a waiting area away from any other patients, and he finally had some alone time to process. His hands were caked in blood and his once white shirt was now blood soaked from the middle down.

“Evie!” Silas sobbed, still unsure of her status.

“She is in surgery now,” a nurse came in and informed him. “She is alive and seemed strong enough during the start of the surgery.”

He took in the information and nodded.

The nurse produced some clothes and led him to a bathroom to clean up and change clothes. “The police will want your statement soon,” the nurse informed him.

He nodded silently again and walked along with the nurse to change.

The water in the sink turned red from Evie's blood on his hands as he tried to clean up. He scrubbed for several minutes, attempting to clean away all traces of what had happened. He took off his shirt and pants, and scrubbed the blood off his chest, torso and legs. Evie had lost so much blood.

Mostly clean on the outside, he put on the hospital clothes the nurse provided, and walked out to the nurse, and now two waiting police officers.

He then recounted to the officers how the walk started, provided details of the time based on the sun position, and the call Evie had just received.

"The call!" Silas said. "Evie's phone!"

One officer made a call over the radio that a phone was missing, and to bring it to the hospital.

"I saw the driver," he said. "He looked intent on running me over! I was almost hit by the motorcycle. That is when I noticed the gun, and ran after the motorcycle, trying to stop it. I saw the flash from the first shot. Then I saw Evie spin around from the second bullet."

He provided only a few more details, other than how he rushed to Evie and tried to stop the bleeding.

"We are searching for the motorcycle. We will keep searching until we find it."

Silas nodded but wasn't in any mood to respond.

The nurse offered him some coffee to steady his nerves, and after the police finished with the interview, she led him to a waiting area. He sunk into a chair and held the coffee.

"Is there anyone we can call?"

"I should probably call some people," he said, but made no movement. "Mr. Postice, Roger, and her dad."

A doctor approached. "It would be wise to give you an examination, too, just in case you suffered any wounds."

He resisted at first, but the doctor and nurse eventually persuaded him to move into an examination room.

"Would you like anything to calm you down? A sedative?" the doctor asked, after taking several vital sign measurements.

"No."

The doctor nodded to Silas, finishing up his examination. "It seems you haven't suffered any physical effects. You have suffered a shock though, and should be kept under observation for a while."

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Good. I will have the nurses check on you frequently.”

Four hours after Silas and Evie arrived at the hospital, the nurse sat down next to him in the waiting room. “The doctors are confident in her survival now.”

“She’s out of surgery?”

“Not yet. The emergency team has stopped the bleeding and stabilized her, and now the surgeons are working to repair and clean the wounds.”

“How bad is it?” Silas asked, feeling a small amount of relief sweep over him.

“Abdominal wounds, like the ones Evie suffered, need a lot of care due to the high chance of bacterial infection. A special team is now working on her to make sure she doesn’t get an infection. One of the emergency nurses told me that this looks like a bad appendix case—and those are quite routine with this team.”

“This is my fault,” Silas said. “I should have noticed the motorcycle sooner.”

“It isn’t your fault. And you should try to get some sleep.”

“I doubt I’d be able to sleep.”

“You should try,” the nurse insisted, taking Silas by the arm and leading to an empty room. “Lie down here.”

Silas obeyed, knowing that it would be futile.

A minute later, Silas was dead to the world.

“Silas,” a nurse gently shook him a few hours later.

“Yes?” A moment went by where Silas didn’t remember the past events, but then all of the horrible events flooded back.

“She is out of surgery now.”

“What time is it?” he asked.

“A little after four AM.”

“What time is that in America?” he asked, still confused.

“Midnight and earlier, most likely,” the nurse said.

“Thanks,” Silas said, getting out of the bed. “Can I see her?”

“She is sleeping in a room. I can get a chair in there if you want.”

“That would be nice. Thanks.”

He left the room and followed the nurse to a different floor, and then to a dimly lit room, with several monitors displaying information, along with

occasional beeps and other noises. A chair was slid in for Silas to sit in, and placed on the far wall, still allowing for the medical staff full access to Evie if needed.

He sat in the chair for a while, watching and listening to the machines, then left to make some calls. He called Postice first, waking the old man, and delivering the bad news. Postice woke Alfred and Wentworth and made sure to assemble the best medical staff possible from all over Europe to assist if needed. Silas thanked him for his concern, and apologized for waking him at such a late hour.

Silas also called Roger to give a brief update. Roger wasn't particularly involved in the travels of the young couple, but Silas felt compelled to inform Roger and Maggie of the development.

Calling Roger turned into a delaying tactic to keep from having to call Evie's dad. But eventually the call with Roger came to an end, and Silas was forced to make the call to Evie's dad.

Evie's dad was naturally upset and concerned, immediately making arrangements to fly to France and be with his daughter. Silas expected an angry father, determined to extract a pound of flesh from Silas for allowing harm to come to Evie, but Evie's father only showed concern for both of them. A quick check of the flight schedules showed the next available flight to be in ten hours. With the flight time and time changes, Evie's father would arrive the next morning.

Silas felt tremendous relief after making the calls. Then he went back into the room, scanning each of the machines, looking for what could be a sign of any trouble, even though he had no idea what the readings were, and what would be considered good or bad. Satisfied the readings and beepings and other noises were in the normal range, Silas settled in the chair and watched and waited, eventually drifting into a light sleep.

A nurse came in, and he woke with a start. He didn't realize he had fallen asleep again. The nurse smiled quietly at him. She nodded to Silas, indicating that everything seemed to be satisfactory, and left.

He looked outside through the window in the room. The room seemed to be about the same size as in any hospital, with the bed three feet from the interior window, allowing the medical staff to look in and check the machines quickly. The door opened up to the foot of Evie's bed on her right side, a small curtain at the right side of her head, to block the interior window. The chair

had been slid all the way to the far side of the room, in line with the door, to allow Silas to stay mostly out of the way.

The exterior window, on the left side of Evie's bed, faced the seaside, slowly brightening with the reflection of the sunrise.

"Do you need anything, Silas?" a nurse asked, on the next check of Evie, probably thirty minutes after the previous check.

"No. I am fine."

"There is a small cafe on the first floor, if you get hungry. And you should drink something." She left a small glass on the table by the window.

Silas scanned the machines again, wanting to make sure for himself things were okay.

Two more checks from a nurse followed, with more readings, and changing some of the mysterious fluids in different machines.

Some time later a man in a medical coat with a stethoscope draped across his neck walked in.

"Hello," he said but didn't wait for any acknowledgment. The doctor walked directly to Evie and opened her hospital gown neck a little. Unwrapping the stethoscope from his neck, the doctor put the ends into his ears and started listening to her chest.

A little grunt escaped her lips with the touch of the cold stethoscope. "Evie?" the doctor asked somewhat loudly. "Are you with us Evie?"

"Yes," she managed to utter, waking up from the sleep and medication.

"Good!" The doctor said, listening to several different places. "Deep breath please, Evie."

Evie attempted to take a deep breath. "Ouch!"

"Good," the doctor complimented her after listening. "You seem to have very good lungs."

"Thanks?" Evie smiled.

The doctor lifted the blanket around Evie's torso, and the gown, checking the site of the surgery.

"All looks good so far," the doctor announced. "Everything looks to be draining well."

"Yay," Evie smiled, slurring the single word under the medication.

"You should start to wake up fully in another hour," the doctor informed Evie and Silas. "We'll talk then."

"Is she going to be okay?" Silas asked.

“All indications that are that she will make a full recovery. The drainage is clear, which is the best sign.”

“Okay.”

Silas slipped off to sleep for another short nap.

“Silas?” Evie asked.

“Yes!” Silas shot up. “Hi Evie. How are you feeling?”

“I feel like I’ve been shot!”

He couldn’t tell if that was a joke, or if she had no memory of the past twelve hours. “You were shot, Evie.”

“I know,” she said, wincing from the pain as she managed a small laugh.

“Your sense of humor wasn’t affected then. I’m so sorry, Evie.”

“I know. I can tell. It’s not your fault.”

“There is still no information on who or why. It seemed very much like they were after us. But I don’t know anybody here and can’t think of any reason for it.”

“Don’t worry too much. I’m sure the police will figure it out.”

“Postice also hired just about every private investigator in town to find out, too.”

“That grumpy old man gets results doesn’t he?” she said. “Oops. Guess the medication enhances the honesty.”

“Ouch! Don’t make me laugh!” she said.

“That was all you.”

The nurse looked in and noticed them talking. A moment later the doctor entered the room.

“How are you doing, Evie?”

“It hurts to laugh,” Evie said, “I probably need more of the good stuff.”

“You are definitely getting your share. But we can’t have you feeling too good at the moment.”

The doctor repeated the listening with the stethoscope and checked the drainage again, nodded to Silas with a smile and left.

A little after ten AM, Silas sensed some commotion out in the hall and stood up to try to get a better look at the scene outside. A tiny young woman, probably early twenties, petite, with reddish brown hair, and fiery green eyes burst into the room.

“You Fucking Son of Bitch!” she immediately shouted loudly at him, even before the door of Evie’s room managed to swing shut, causing everyone around to look toward the outburst.

Silas could see her mouth moving, and her arms flailing in anger, and he sensed she was cursing him loudly with every possible combination of insult, probably in several languages. But he didn’t hear anything after her initial outburst.

Instead, he suddenly picked up the loud static in his mind again. Time slowed to a crawl. The static turned into a loud tone—similar to the Emergency Broadcast System tone—and it took over every sense.

The tone grew in intensity in his mind, making him unable to focus on anything else. Slowly the tone changed into the static again, and time slowed further. Only the static and the now slow motions of the young woman seemed to matter.

The static cleared, now tuned to the correct radio station, and a single word filled his mind. A word so clear and loud that try as he might, Silas could not prevent it or ignore it. A stranger’s voice speaking clearly to him again.

His head turned, looking first at Evie and then at this new woman standing in front of him and finally back to Evie. As this voice formed a single word clearly in his mind, it also took control over his mouth. Silas spoke the word aloud in unison with the radio message in his head.

One word—he heard someone else speak it in his head, and he heard it uncontrollably utter from his own mouth at the same time:

“MOM?”

The End.

Appendix A:

Time Textbook

Preface to Time Textbook

Fundamental Theory of Change

– A text into time

There will be a lot of bold statements in this text, many without any given proofs, just due to the common sense nature of the claim, or easy realization by the reader after some thought.

Time does not exist. Everything that has been associated with ‘time’ is actually a change, and time was invented to account for this idea of change.

Change is universally constant and occurs only in one direction, and the accepted standards of time track this change precisely.

If time tracks this universal change perfectly, then is there a difference between time and change?

The answer to that question is yes, as will be discussed in the following text.

This text is not meant to discredit the idea of measuring time, but to explain why time as we know it is a different concept.

Chapter 1: Observation

Theory: Nothing exists without an observer.

Proof: How many people are on the planet right now? 7 Billion? 8 Billion?

How do you know?

The only answer is: someone [with credibility of some sort] told us.

Suppose you had perfect recall of your memory. How many people have you observed over the course of your life?

If you wrote down every person you ever interacted with, how many could you list? Is it 7 billion? Probably not.

How many people have lived in history with no evidence of their life left behind?

We all know the famous people with significant accomplishments throughout history, but what about all of the other people with no memorable accomplishments? Even those with direct descendants may be wiped from history due to their lack of notoriety.

If a tree falls in the woods, does it make a noise?

Science and logic say that it must - no event can occur without the associated aspects also happening - and anyone stumbling over a fallen tree can imagine the sound without much effort.

However, without an observer, that tree could fall and also rot and disappear without any notice. Did that tree ever actually exist at all? What is the proof of its existence?

How many planets and solar systems have been born and destroyed before humans started observing the stars, and how many were completely beyond earth's view for their entire existence?

Unless there is an observer, nothing can be known. And when the first conscious observation happens, that is when the events begin.

This is very similar to dreaming. There is never a begin-

ning to the dream. Dreams begin in the middle with the action already in progress.

Human memory solidifies between the ages of 2 to 5. the world does not exist to anyone before these memories.

Observation creates. And defines. Very much like Schroedinger's Cat, the cat exists in both states (alive and dead) until positively observed.

How does this apply to time?

Scientists tell us the universe is 14 billion years old, and humans have just popped into existence in the last 10,000 years with recorded history. That is the middle of the dream. We don't know what happened before that.

We can all *speculate* and find evidence of things that *might* have happened, or that lived before, but we will never *KNOW* about it without an observer, or more accurately, without observing for ourselves.

This is the conundrum of time.

The first problem with 'science' time is that it has to always exist. Time has to exist without an observer. Everything has to fit into nice little time compartments. The sun was born 4 billion years ago, etc.

With change, nothing needs to happen before the observer arrives.

Much like a hotel room with a check in time of 3pm.

When the hotel guest steps in the room, it is organized and ready, but the room could have been in any state up to that point. The hotel guest doesn't know what happened in the room before the door opened at 3pm. There could be speculation and some evidence, but the guest will never *KNOW* exactly what happened.

Another good example is how people change personalities based on who is around. The observation by others changes how most people behave.

In church, a person behaves to a certain standard. At a football game, there is another standard. When that person is alone, there is another behavior.

A good example for how people behave without observation is when a crowd gathers in masks or disguises to hide their identities. The group may get violent or hateful, or attack a person or business. People in a crowd don't feel there is any observation going on, so they act accordingly.

If every person in this crowd knew they were personally being observed, it would follow that they would behave differently in most cases. Thus, observation can cause change, but change is inherent in everything.

A computer needs a clock generator to work. Without the clock the computer wouldn't be able to work. The computer doesn't know what happened before the clock started. There might be evidence - files and other stored records on the disks, etc - but it doesn't *KNOW* what happened before the

clock started.

Those computer files could be from a different computer, or downloaded over the internet. The computer knows they are there, and can work with them, but can't prove that the computer created those files in any form.

The second argument against time is that it cannot be stored.

There are 7 fundamental units in physics:

Length

Mass

Time

Electric Current

Temperature

Intensity

Quantity

Suppose you had to make a box containing each of these units for an alien world to understand. How would you package these?

Length and mass are easy - just include a ruler and a standard mass - a meter stick and a kilogram weight perhaps.

Temperature could be done with a thermometer, but the markings may be difficult for the aliens to correlate. But because temperature has an absolute zero, there is a universal start to it.

Quantity would be hard to understand in a way, because it could be confused with mass, but showing some way of count-

ing is sufficient, such as one, two, and three marbles, and then larger sets, up to 100 for example.

Intensity and current are more difficult, not because the ideas are hard to grasp, but because the methods of generating these ideas are not reliable over centuries, or comparable to earth standards from a different viewpoint. A circuit with a battery could be made, and the current could be a set amount - but the battery may run out, etc, because of the reality of the system.

Imagining perfectly ideal situations, a circuit of a known current could be created and stored in the package, as well as an intensity system for either a star or just a light.

All 6 of these unit bases have ways of creating or showing what they are. Also, all 6 have definite zero values.

But now, how would time be captured? Does time have a zero?

There are a number of ways to show *CHANGE* but no way to capture 'time'.

Just having a clock that counts 1 second over and over would be a way to show change. But that doesn't count as time. How would a human calendar be made understandable to an alien race? In fact, even in recorded human history there have been many different calendars, making it hard to understand for humans sometimes. Some calendars start counting when a king or emperor began their reign. Calendars can also be based off of historical events - comets and such, or most recently, fol-

lowing the standardization based on the birth of Christ. None of these actually satisfy a zero moment for time, these are actually just zero moments for some change in human events.

Absolute zero is not achievable, but can be extrapolated in many ways, even with home experiments. Many practical tests have achieved temps less than 0.1 degree Kelvin.

Is there an absolute 'zero' with time? Some theorize that it might be the "big bang" around 14 billion years ago, but how is that tested? Is there a home experiment that can be done to predict the "time zero?" How does an average person determine when time itself started?

Change also has the problem of no zero, until the realization hits that change requires an observer, so change always has a zero based on observation or the observer.

Chapter 2: What is ‘time’

The previous chapter addresses the two main problems with time: storage and no zero point, and this chapter will address the keeping of time.

The first principle of the Fundamental Theory of Change is that the rate of change is constant everywhere. This should come as no surprise to most people, being as time is considered constant everywhere.

The first objection is going to be “but what about relativity?”

Remember that change requires an observer, so change happens constantly everywhere *to every observer*, but only when

that observer comes back and references another system does the sum total of the change look different in the ‘relativity’ sense. Each ‘twin’ sees the same rate of change, and only when comparing themselves to each other does the extent of the differences appear.

During any motion, change is constant for every observer. Comparative change can be different, as explained by relativity.

The system of time adopted for humans is actually based on observed change. One day is based on the rising and setting sun, the four seasons based on position of the sun and changes in temperature and foliage, a year based on the recurring pattern of seasons, etc.

All of these units of time were based some observable change. We also watch people change as they age, but there is no repeatable change pattern during the aging process, so people just get older.

Time, as we know it, is just a way to categorize change into some bracket. Years are bracketed into different historical eras based on events or people. The biggest time event was the birth of Jesus Christ, which sets the stage from B.C. [before Christ] to A.D. [Anno Domini, year of our Lord] and current history uses this date as the starting point. Side note, the calendar goes from 1BC to 1AD, there is not a ‘Year Zero’ defined in the current system.

Before the birth of Jesus Christ and the subsequent calendaring systems based on it, time was usually quantified by

the year of the current emperor or ruler, or from some major event, like the founding of the city of Rome, for example. All of these were significant changes from a cultural perspective and allowed for keeping track of the position in time. There wasn't a universal system of comparative times, and in early Greek culture, for example, when years were based off of the era of each ruler, there was no easy way to account for or 'schedule' for future events. If the calendars reset, any event scheduled for "year 25 of Caesar's reign" then gets reset when the emperor changes.

The current calendaring method is universally synchronized on a singular event, while allowing forwards and backwards tracking of events - but still based on observable changes.

In simplistic terms, the rate of change of the Universal Change Constant is the same as the time system developed and in use by every observer. One second of 'time' is can be defined as being exactly equal to one second of 'Change' in the Fundamental Theory of Change.

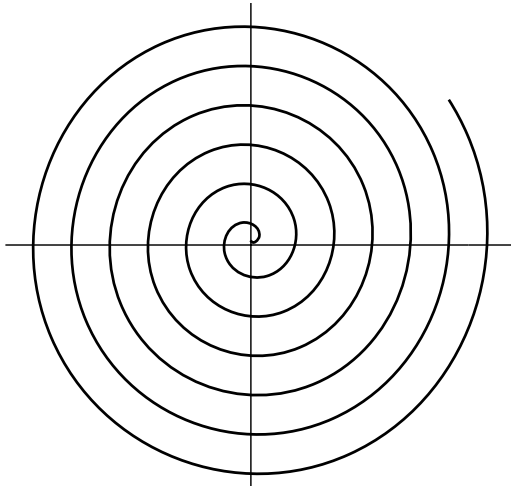
Time, as constructed, describes a continuous series of change events and labels them such that each event aligns with others to give order and remembrance, but doesn't create these events - Change does.

Why doesn't time exist then?

Because time from change requires an observer, and as such that makes every observer experience a different 'time' relative to each other. There is no absolute 'time' as we know

it, only absolute ‘change.’

Starting with a single person is one way to examine the difference between time and change. For this one person, their life can be represented by a continuous curve – and a convenient one to use is the Spiral of Archimedes, as shown below.



Mathematically, the Spiral of Archimedes represents the equation $r = \theta$ or, for simplicity, with some constant of proportionality, $r = k[\theta]$, in the polar coordinate system. It may be that k is some other function of other unknown variables.

Change, in *The Fundamental Theory of Change*, causes the value of θ to increase at a uniform rate, and this produces the rotation along the axes at a constant speed. The life of a single person can be represented as a car driving forward along the red curve, and drives one lap every year. The first year the car moves a distance, and the second year that distance

is longer, and the third year even longer, etc. This could also help explain the feelings of how fast time moves. A young child feels like it takes *forever* for Christmas to arrive, whereas an older person has the years just fly by due to the speed needed to complete one lap on the curve.

The relative effect is that “time” varies as the “speed” of the car varies.

The position of the person can be calculated by using the age as defined in ‘years’ by counting which lap the person is driving on, much like the rings of a tree. The time since birth corresponds to an exact point on the Spiral, and also determines the speed of ‘life’ as well.

Events and memories are sign posts or markers along the way.

Every person ever born has their own spiral. Imagine this one person’s life spiral as being on a sheet of paper. All of the people ever alive would be a pile of papers, each with a spiral on it.

Recorded history can then be represented as a stack of these sheets of paper, one person on top of each other, in historical order based on the moment of birth. All of the papers are glued together and there is a rod going through the origin to allow for the stack of papers to turn. This stack of papers, or lives, is constantly rotating at the speed of change – one rotation, or lap, per year.

The observable earth history, therefore, could be repre-

sented by a tube containing all of the rotating Spirals containing every person's life. The direction of time is constructed by observing the layering of the Spirals, new births on top of old lives, and the direction of the turning of the papers inside.

One fascinating aspect of the Fundamental Theory of Change is that it creates many interesting possibilities with regards to how to address time - the first being that time is also an observational construct.

One of the first questions for this theory is 'what happens when two people experience/observe things together?'

This very good question allows the power of the Fundamental Theory of Change to be explored.

The stacks of paper in the tube are not single dimensional elements. While the papers are flat in the 'time' dimension (birth order), the lives of the people on the paper, in fact, connect on many other dimensions. Temporal and Physical dimensions overlap people in life, and thus Time and Space would be two of the dimensions. People cross paths and arrive at the same location at the same time, so there must be a way for this to be represented and explained by the Change Theory. And shared experiences create memories as well, whether people are in the same location or far apart, so there must be a way (or "place") to connect and store memory and sensory data.

With the calendaring system, the event is considered universally fixed, for example, the date of some event, such as 9/11. In the Fundamental Theory of Change, every event is just

ordered sequentially to the observer. For example, “last week I was there.” “yesterday I did that.” etc. Without some method of a universal calendaring system, time would be relative and hard to keep track of. But to each of the observers, days consist of the details of their lives, and change marches on.

The invention of the universal calendaring system truly was a pivotal moment in human endeavor.

Returning to the question of ‘what happens when people experience the same thing together’ produces a great thought experiment within the Fundamental Theory of Change.

Consider an event, say someone’s birthday with 20 attendees. The calendar is set to a specific date and hour, and ‘time’ says that everyone is there at the exact same moment.

In the Fundamental Theory of Change, each person has their own Spiral, and live their lives in their own observable time. This means that the event happens and they all interconnect for those moments, but the people don’t all need to be **existing together** for their observations.

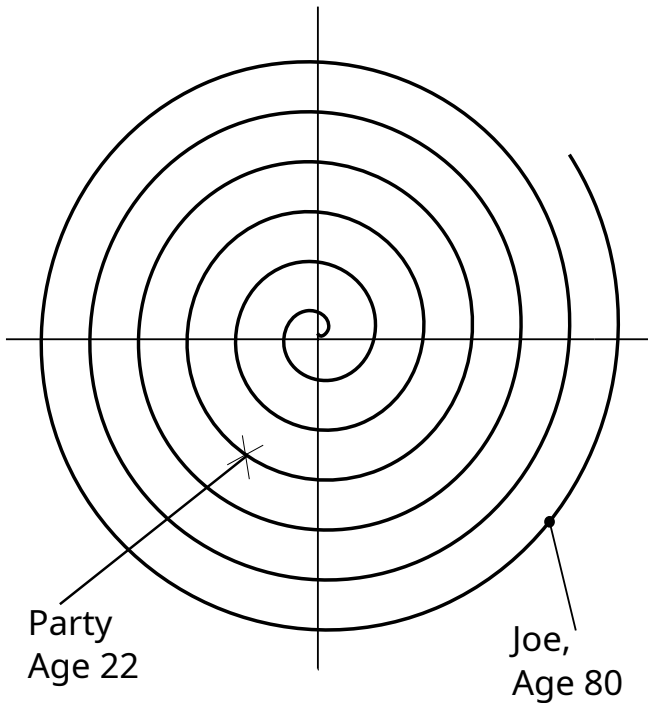
That statement takes a bit more explaining with an example. The event is Cousin Lois’ birthday. Let’s focus on 3 people at the party. Joe is 22, Jane is 24, and Rob is 30. They all attend the party and interact throughout.

Each one is driving their ‘car’ along their curves in their observational life.

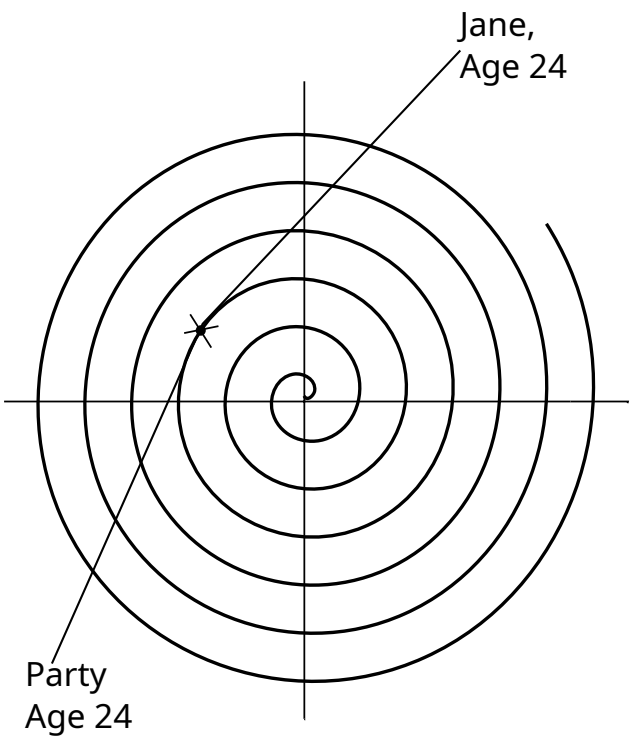
'Time' says that each one should be driving side by side for those moments, and at the same speed, for each of those interactive events.

In the Fundamental Theory of Change, they could all be at different points in their lives, and most likely are. What this means is that at the exact "time" on the calendar for the birthday:

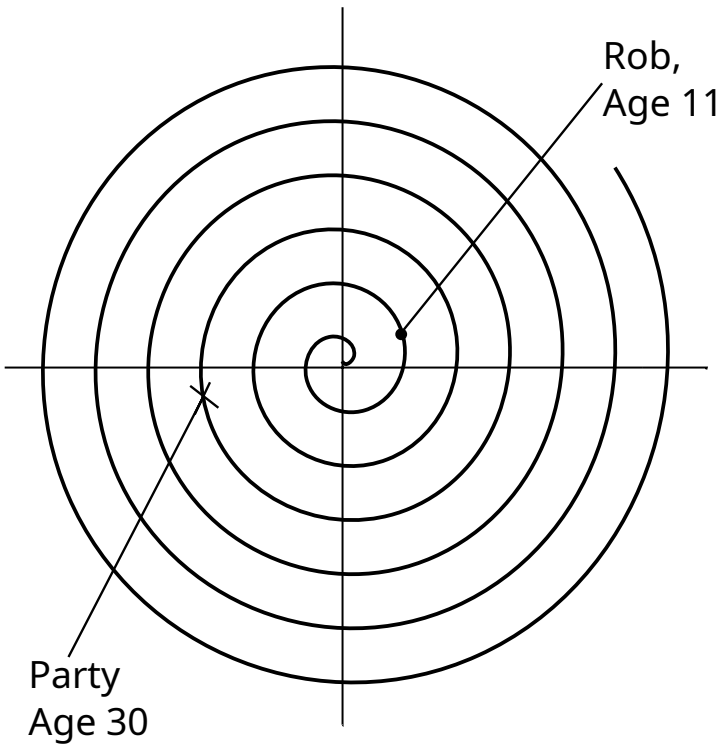
Joe could actually be 80 years old in his own observational change life, and looking back at the birthday event when he was 22, just as a memory.



Jane could be 24 and observing the moments as they happen in real time,



and Rob could be only 11 and will experience that event in his future, 19 years from now.



All three will experience the same event, and observe it on their Spiral, but it doesn't have to happen that all three are observing at the same point in their own observational spirals.

The Fundamental Theory of Change focuses on each person's observable changes, and develops 'time' from there, such as making calendar markers, rather than being calendar driven. Events still happen at the prescribed dates and in order, but the calendar date isn't the same for everybody.

Another aspect of having an observational based system of time is that it allows everybody to be alive - right now - but in their own era.

For example, George Washington is still alive, but living in the 1700s, which people in the 2000s can't interact with. To George Washington, people alive in the 2000s don't exist, because he has no way to observe them, and to the people living in the 2000s, these people only know of Washington from the history books because there is no way to have an observational interaction within the system/cylinder before being born.

One aspect of the Fundamental Theory of Change is that everybody ever born is current alive in their own observable lifetimes.

Chapter 3: Contradictions

How can everyone ever born be currently alive?

In the calendaring system, the driving ‘force’ is the chronological time of the universe - it is *now* Jan 1, 2000, for example. And everybody must obey that date - many people haven’t been born, and many have died.

In the Fundamental Theory of Change, the time is relative to each observer, so everyone can be alive at the same time, just not interact across lifetimes.

Everybody alive just observes changes in their own life, with change driving everything at the same rate. Only recorded history is able to carry over from past to present. That record-

ed history travels at the speed of information along the stack of papers, so as someone creates a record of history, that recorded history passes along to the future generations.

But people do die, so what happens then?

To answer this question requires another body of exposition.

Hopefully the idea of having a stack of lives in a ‘tube’, ‘changing’ (rotating) at a constant rate makes sense. But like the philosophers of old, the next question is ‘what exists outside of that tube?’ It’s turtles all the way down isn’t the answer in this case.

It may be that the oatmeal tube cylinder that we are currently in is the only object in the universe, and outside of the tube is ‘heaven’ or ‘the abyss’ or something outside of the observable universe. This ‘cloud’ that exists outside of the tube could be heaven, and when a person dies, their soul drops off the paper and then exists in the cloud. Or if it is the Abyss, then their existence just ends.

The Fundamental Theory of Change doesn’t purport to definitively answer the question of ‘what happens after we die?’ The theory focuses on examining a world driven by ‘change’ instead of ‘time’ and how observation becomes the primary evidence.

However, it is this fact of ‘observation’ being the critical structure that allows for many of the possibilities for what happens after ‘death.’

Possibility 1: The Bible.

It is quite possible that the tube exists inside a cloud, much like a chicken rotisserie turning on a grill. The spit turning at a constant speed represents the change everyone is experiencing, while anyone watching the grill does not experience any change. This 'changeless' cloud could be defined as the after-life, or heaven, or hell or some other cosmic entity.

God exists in this cloud, the heavens, and watches the lives of everyone as the spirals rotate.

When someone dies, their spirit departs from the oatmeal tube and joins up with others in the heavens. These could be angels or other spirits, or just souls going along with an existence in heaven. Or hell.

This would produce a single lifetime for each person, after which each person goes to meet Jesus.

The bible says in Hebrews 9:27 King James Version (KJV)

27 And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment:

Possibility 2: Reincarnation.

It is also possible that each person exists as one person over and over, reliving the same life each time through. This is hard to prove or disprove, but anecdotal evidence, in the form of deja-vu, could be explained by having remnants of past mem-

ories stick from a past life.

Past memories can be imagined as a dream – sometimes dreams are not remembered, sometimes dreams are remembered vividly, but after time they fade and can't be recalled anymore, with just snippets remain.

Nothing in the Fundamental Theory of Change claims that each person needs to remain as their own person, but the Bible claims each person is their own soul, and that soul is forever, so while reincarnating as someone else is perfectly acceptable, keeping with Biblical claims, each person, if reincarnated, would live the same life over and over.

Possibility 3: Multiverse.

Possibility 3 and Possibility 2 are very similar, as they both deal with reincarnation. The difference is that Possibility 3 adds in the multiverse.

What is the multiverse? It is the theory that there exists parallel universes in which events occur just a bit differently, or very differently, but that can't be seen.

For the Fundamental Theory of Change, the multiverse is a collection of cylinders or oatmeal tubes, each spinning at the rate of 'change' for that universe – which could be the same all over, or it could be at a different rate internally, as long as everybody in that universe experiences change at the same rate.

In each oatmeal tube of lives, something differentiates that

universe from another universe, although that difference could be great or small.

The multiverse might just be a collection of change cylinders arranged in a probability distribution of what is most likely to occur. There are infinite cylinders in each portion of the distribution, but the most likely ones are clustered around the most common outcomes. A person sneezes at 1:33:04PM on July 1, 1998 in one universe, but it is at 1:33:08PM in another, but everything else is exactly the same from beginning to end for everybody else.

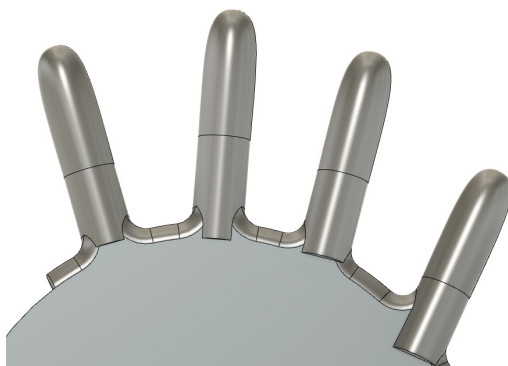
Alternately, it is also likely that the sneeze changing to 1:33:08PM - that four second difference - causes a cascading sequence of events and produces a Cat 5 hurricane in the next month, producing a completely different universe outcome altogether. But that outcome universe may be probabilistically less likely, so it doesn't exist as often - or rebirth happens in the most common universes.

One way to imagine the multiverse is to hold up your hand, palm facing you. Keeping your fingers touching could look like the probability density of the current universe. The middle finger is tallest and represents the current life you have,



which is the most common probability. The other fingers represent similar universes where something - probably something minor - is different. This would be like the sneezes at different time.

Now spread your fingers apart. The middle finger now represents the cluster of universes your touching fingers just were. That is the highest probability universe, and all the surrounding ones with just minor changes.



As you follow down your middle finger up to your ring finger, there is a dip and a gap. This represents a low probability set of universes. Something like ‘an asteroid hit at 1000BC and killed all humans’, or ‘people are born with 5 arms’ types. Something that is low probability compared to all the other universes.

The ring finger represents a new cluster of universes, with a significant change from the middle finger cluster. ‘The Americans lost the Revolutionary War’, or ‘Germany won WW2’ type universes. Within that cluster is the minor change universes – like the different times of sneezes from before, but now all happening under a different victor than the other universe cluster.

Within the multiverse there exists an infinite number of universes, all with something different.

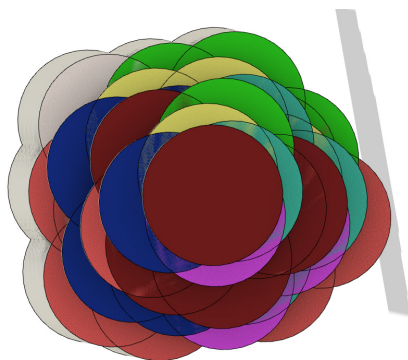
A little thought experiment can help to show the infinite magnitude of the possible universes. There are 31.5 million seconds in a year, thereabouts. Suppose every person on earth has a decision to make every 2 seconds throughout the day on average. That is 16 million decisions per person. And for simplicity, say each decision is a heads or tails type of decision. Each decision creates a new possible universe. For each person, that turns out to be - not 16 million times 2 - but 2 raised to the 16 millionth power. The result is 8.5 with 4.8 **million** zeros after it. That's a big number.

If a sheet of standard printer paper were to print 3000 of those zeros, it would take 1,600 pages just to print the zeros of the number.

And that is just one year for one person, multiply by every person who ever lived, and possibly animals and trees too, and how long they lived, and that adds many many more zeros again. That's a lot of universes. An impossibly big number of universes.

Imagine the single finger multiverses - with small changes close to the tip, and bigger changes further away. This would very much look like a hill of sorts. A hill with trillions of universes inside of it, all slightly different from each other. Zooming in on the top would show that many of the cylinder surfaces overlap. The overlap could represent all of the events that are the same.

A zoomed in hill surface might look something like this:



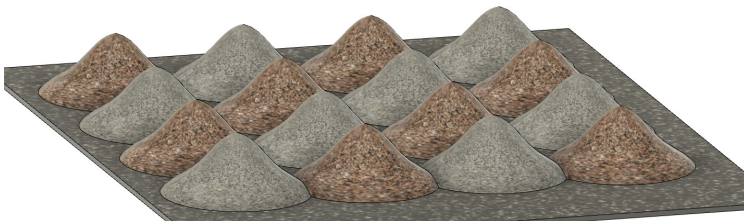
How does this relate to the question ‘what happens when somebody dies?’ Putting the theory of reincarnation together with the Biblical claim of each person having a permanent soul, then the multiverse theory suggests that each person jumps from universe to universe – as themselves – after one life ends, and begins a new life, as themselves.

This possibility also can explain deja-vu, as the faint remembrances of past lives, but it could also explain why deja-vu is just a passing feeling. One event doesn’t follow the same path in each universe, so there are just glimpses of ‘this happened before’ because the entire event follows a different trajectory to fruition, only part of the event happened the same way as you are currently experiencing.

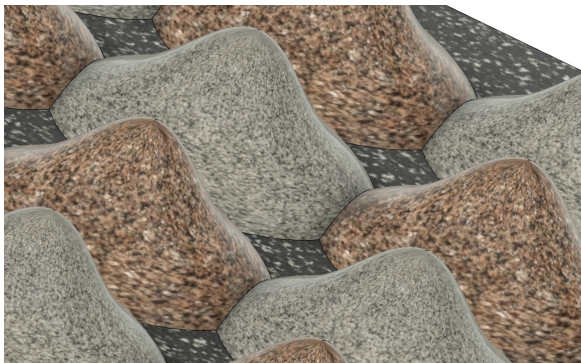
Expanding on the hill model for universes, changes in the major events would create different hills, representing mutually exclusive events. For example, an asteroid wiping out humanity in 1000BC, and Julius Caesar becoming emperor would be mu-

tually exclusive, because humans wouldn't have been around to establish the Roman Empire. Additionally, since only one victor can emerge from any war or conflict, those would also create separate hills.

All told, there are trillions of trillions of hills as well, looking much like a set of waves in the middle of an ocean, and expanding forever in all directions.



The peak of all the hills would be the most likely universe in that set, and all other close universes would be the small changes, whereas the bottom of the hills would be the greatest changes from the central universe, and have a much lower probability of occurring.



Possibility 4: The Abyss

It is also possible that after dying, each person just fades away into nothingness. This is not as exciting as the other possibilities but should be considered.

* * *

Out of all of these Possibilities, the multiverse in Possibility 3 is the most fun to examine.

Starting from Biblical truth, the claim that each person is a permanent soul says that we are all comprised of three parts – body, soul and spirit. The body is the physical form, with all the senses and physical interactions with the world around us. The soul is the life force that is permanent and will reside in heaven or hell for all eternity. It is very possible that the ‘soul’ is responsible for memories – acting as a hard drive of sorts for any learned information. And the spirit is the part of each person that interacts with God through faith, hope, prayer, etc. The spirit died when Adam and Eve sinned, and that is why Jesus desires all people to come to him and be saved, and ‘born of the spirit.’

Where is the soul now?

It is quite possible that the soul exists in the ‘cloud’ outside of the multiverse, and is what interacts with the mind to control the body.

How can this be?

Imagine a computer doing a task – like running an app or opening or closing the garage door. The computer interacts with the physical world, selecting things when pressed, etc, and operating the garage door, but there is something beyond that – a person operating the computer to direct the steps.

This is how the soul can interact with the world. The soul is the ‘real’ you – and knows everything, but is limited in what can be told to the body needing to experience things. The soul cannot just implant memories of past lives, it requires something physical to create the memories, otherwise the memories would feel like dreams. Each lifetime in the multiverse has data stored on a different partition of the memories hard drive, and the partitions cannot talk to each other.

The Bible says in Jeremiah 1:5 ‘*Before I formed thee in the belly, I knew thee*’ - so there is a connection between God and the soul before birth or conception. This suggests that God and all of the souls of every person on earth exist together outside of the multiverse.

From your soul’s perspective, the physical ‘you’ is the character in a computer game, and the soul is controlling the character though some form of communication – it could be the brain, or could be the heart, etc. There is no provable organ that the soul connects to, but since most people ‘feel’ thoughts are created in the brain, and have the most powerful senses

(sight, hearing) in the head, it could be the connection from the soul is tied to the brain.

Consider the brain - it has been theorized and even experimented on to determine when thoughts occur, and it might be there is activity in the brain that occurs before a thought happens. This could be the soul interacting with the brain to produce said thought.

It also makes sense that the character in the computer game wouldn't know as much as the soul does. As you run through a game, you learn all the levels by memory, but the character in the game doesn't share that memory. You may have a map from the guide book or from the internet, or might have played the area before several times to learn a particular trick that is needed to move on, but you have no way to communicate your knowledge to your computer character. It may be the same for the soul. The soul may know lots of things, but has no way to produce that knowledge in your brain. Therefore, each life is a new experience for your physical self.

How does this agree with the multiverse?

There is one verse in the Bible that specifically deals with the afterlife:

Hebrews 9:27 King James Version (KJV) states "*And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.*"

One way of interpreting this verse is that each person lives one life, dies, and then goes to the judgment. There is nothing at all wrong with that interpretation, and it is probably the most

correct interpretation, and should make everyone fearful for their soul.

This interpretation also matches with the verses stating that the souls of people who died believing in the Savior, but died before Jesus paid for their sins, waited in Paradise, or captivity, for the Savior. After Jesus rose from the dead, He took all those souls to heaven.

This interpretation suggests that the single oatmeal tube universe is how things are, and that there is a cloud, or heavens, outside of the oatmeal tube where all the souls and heavenly bodies exist with God.

Another possible way to interpret Hebrews 9:27 is to use the exact words, but stress it in a little different way. “once to die, but after **this** the judgment”

It could be interpreted as ‘one death leads to the judgment’ out of many lives and deaths.

In a way that may be similar to the game ‘Press Your Luck’, each square is a life, and only when the ‘whammy’ comes up does the judgment happen. It would surely be “pressing your luck” to live like that - that this life is one of many and most likely leads to another go around, hoping that the judgment doesn’t follow this one death.

If the multiverse respawning theory is true, then each death leads to a rebirth in another universe - for good or for evil.

In a big stretch of the interpretations of Bible verses, the

multiverse may exist in synchrony with the Bible. Consider the verse 1 Timothy 2:4, talking about Jesus, “*Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth.*”

Maybe there is the perfect universe somewhere in the very middle of the multiverse, where there is perfect faith, and all people are saved and have pure faith in Christ. Maybe that is the universe God is waiting for?

The Fundamental Theory of Change and the ‘cloud’ could also explain when the Bible talks about time.

2 Peter 3:8 states “*be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.*”

If God and souls exist outside of the change – like looking at the rotating chicken rotisserie – all of the days could be seen at once, all of the interactions of every person, making time stop but all things known, but then also jumping ahead with perfect knowledge to any point in the oatmeal tube.

Aside from the Bible interpretations, the multiverse theory makes a lot of sense in other ways, such as why there are NPCs.

What is an NPC?

An NPC is a ‘non-player (or playable) character’ in a computer game. It is a computer controlled character that the player may interact with but that doesn’t engage in the actual game by itself.

The NPC theory states that there are people around that do not have any internal dialog or thoughts and just robotically go through life being controlled by a computer.

How does the multiverse explain this?

If there exists 8.5 followed by 4.8 million zeros universes in one finger of the multiverse, it would be very unlikely for any two people to exist in the same universe in the same 'lifejump' if you will. This means that all of the interactions are pre-recorded and happen as they did, but with only one character actually in real time.

Suppose there have now been one hundred billion-billion lifejumps of people so far in the multiverse. That wouldn't even begin to scratch the surface of universes to inhabit - that is only twenty zeros out of 4.8 **million** zeros that comprise this one finger of the multiverse. But that would still be one hundred billion-billion lifejumps for each person, which is already an eternity.

This means that because the multiverse is so large, if a person **never** jumps to that multiverse, their entire character will need to be 'computer driven' as an NPC.

Even if the character has jumped to that universe before, they probably aren't there now, so the interaction that you would experience would be their memory - and pre-recorded actions.

Maybe this explains why there is the theory that everything is a simulation. Because in each lifejump, there is probably

only a single, or on rare occasions, a couple, actual person or people living the universe life, and everyone else is an NPC or a memory. It is possible that the universe seems like a simulation because each person is being driven by their soul, and the simulation seems very much like a computer game to the soul, and sometimes that feeling and memory does find its way into the brain.

Putting this into a Biblical context again, the multiverse exists inside the ‘cloud’ of heavens and souls and God, and Colossians 1:16 states “*all things were created by him and for him*”, speaking of Jesus, and this could explain how God has both given people ‘free will’ and also predetermined things - like who would be saved. Romans 8:29 states “*For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son*”

If God exists outside of change, in the heavens, and can see the multiverse, each universe is created by Him, and has a completely known beginning and end, then each action is both free will but also predestinated by God at the same time. Free will to jump between universes, but each universe is ‘played out’ from beginning to end for every person.

The bible also may give support to the Fundamental Theory of Change in different ways. The bible says that God knows everything from the beginning, and guides our paths, and knows our ways, so that makes it possible that each universe in the multiverse contains a fixed set of events from one end to the other of the tube. In universe A, all decisions are

fixed with person X doing Y. In a different universe person X could do Z. But since God is outside of the change cylinders, God can see every event in every universe, and know it all - and potentially guide them too.

So from day 1 of a person's birth into a universe change cylinder, all of the actions carried out in that universe are known to any being outside of the cylinder. And with infinite change cylinders in the multiverse, every possible outcome is covered.

This verse is at odds with reincarnation into a different being, but the Fundamental Theory of Change doesn't preclude reincarnation in that some lives could be the same soul in different people.

Charles b. 1820, d 1890, could become Rita b 1890 d 1940, etc.

The lives can't overlap, but the soul could go from one life to another in sequence, spending some time in the cloud.

Is living the same life over again possible?

This is a very meta question. With the infinite number of universes in the multiverse, it is possible that every rebirth puts the person into a new observational universe in their current life.

Chapter 4: Time travel

Based on the information described above, the Fundamental Theory of Change doesn't allow for physical time travel. Firstly, since there is no 'time' to travel through, there isn't an actual medium to travel through.

Secondly, if every change cylinder has a fixed outcome from beginning to end, even going back in time wouldn't be able to change anything.

Thirdly, if every cylinder/universe is fixed from beginning to end, then what actually would happen if someone suddenly appeared? Who is this person? Where is their sheet of paper? What events would this person change that could cascade all along the cylinder/universe?

This again fits with the Bible, in that Jesus had to be born - not just materialize into existence at some point in time.

However, the Fundamental Theory of Change doesn't preclude interactions between different minds and thoughts from traveling backwards and forwards across the layers of lives.

For example, someone from 2200 could link minds with someone in 1889 and tell them about the future. The person from 1889 could then use that information to set a path towards a given outcome. But if both people are confined to the same cylinder, and each cylinder has a specific set of events that will happen, then it follows that the set path would have happened whether or not the person from 2200 communicated with the person from 1889 or not.

It may be possible for someone from 2200 in change cylinder A to communicate with someone from 1889 in change cylinder B, and set events in cylinder B, but the fixed outcome also would say that these communications are also very much unneeded.

The physical limitation of time travel aside, there also exist biological effects of any potential time travel.

The current biome on and in our bodies are specifically balanced for this time in history. Any person traveling back in time would encounter a new strain of viruses and bacteria that would most likely overwhelm their immune system.

Also, the biome that traveled back would spread to people and surroundings that had no natural immunity - and the new

time traveling bacteria would be stronger than the bacteria of the current time, creating plagues and spreading diseases that will ravage the native population.

It is possible that the plagues of the current timeline were in fact caused by an outsider traveling from one universe to another. I don't think any proof could be found to disprove that idea, but also zero proof would exist to support that theory either.

Thanks for reading. I hope this book stimulated a little bit of thought.

Email Comments and Questions to
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Visit rphallaway.com for more information on the next books in the series.

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