

SUSPENDED

Daniel J Roozen

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Edited by Daniel J Roozen

To my parents, Peter and Holly,
and my loving wife Jamie
who always encouraged me
in my writing.

CHAPTER ONE

Heaven

YEAR: 2012

A Toyota pulled to a stop in front of a gas station between Point A and Point B. It stopped just long enough for Heaven to grab the duffel bag containing all of her earthly possessions and get out of the car. *Figures*, she thought with a shake of the head.

She pulled the beanie down over her ears, a cheap winter hat she picked up at the last gas station she was dumped at, and watched the Toyota disappear. The sign on the side of the road read: Des Moines - 50 Miles. Thoroughly frozen by a passing breeze, she pulled her windbreaker together and zipped it up, hoping to fend off some of the winter cold. It wasn't enough, though, with how cold winter was this year as they headed into December, and it just got colder the farther north she went. *Got to just keeping moving.*

Heaven pulled out a crinkled 4x6 of a middle-aged man posing in front of Mount Rushmore. Somewhat tacky, she would admit, but it meant freedom to her. Freedom. Something these people in their foreign cars, wrapped up in their mundane lives, knew little about. Carefully, she slipped the picture back into her pants pocket.

Qwik Stop. Another tacky name for a place that meant you can get (almost) everything here. Hefting the duffel bag over her shoulder, Heaven trod past the pumps to the gas station entrance. One man finished filling his

Honda, hung up the pump, and drove off. Other than that the place seemed pretty empty, just a small town and a refuel between here and there. The bell on the door jangled as she entered.

Heaven turned her jacket pocket inside out and examined the money in her hand. Not much left, just a few bills and a few small coins. Her stomach rumbled, encouraging her to put her last bit of cash towards food, but she didn't have enough to go all the way. There was no way she was going back now, though.

Walking slowly towards the back of the store, Heaven took stock of the situation. The attendant stood on a chair behind the counter near the exit, refueling their cigarette stash, or something equally as boring. She felt her heart beat a bit faster as she neared the coolers in the back. Propping the cooler door open, with one hand she grabbed an egg salad sandwich and with the other hand she slipped a small carton of chocolate milk into the front pouch of her bag.

She held back a yelp as the bell on the door jarred her concentration. She stole a glance back as another man — burly, hairy, and wearing a black leather jacket — entered the Qwik Stop. Must have been a biker, she figured. The attendant greeted him and a tingle went down her arms as her adrenaline level went up.

Heaven waited as the biker ducked into the bakery cabinet for a few donuts, then she swiped several meat sticks from a nearby display and stuck them in the pocket of her windbreaker. She checked on the attendant at the register; he didn't seem to notice her. Her heart jumped again — the kind of thrill that one could get addicted to — and she grabbed a bag of cookies to hide behind her belt.

She walked down the aisle, slowly now, afraid of raising suspicion. “Hey,” she said when she reached the counter, tossing the sandwich down.

The attendant — she looked at his name tag; Larry —

grabbed the sandwich and scanned it. "3.25," he said flatly. Heaven tossed some money on the counter and tapped her foot impatiently, waiting for the change. The biker came up behind her and dropped his donuts on the counter.

Heaven mumbled a quick "thanks" and walked out the door, the two behind her chatting about yesterday's football game. She leaned against the store's window and listened to the hum of the motorcycle engine as she breathed a sigh of relief. It didn't seem to matter whether it was brand name jeans or a bit of food, the anxiety, and the thrill, was the same.

The hum of the motorcycle engine. A Boss Hoss, ZZ4 bike with a V8 Chevrolet engine and a long orange flame on the side. She smiled. The keys were still hanging in the dash. It didn't take more than that split second for her to realize that this was her ticket to the Minnesota Twin Cities. The anxiety, and the thrill, spiked again.

She climbed on top, keeping an eye on the door. The owner lingered inside, laughing with the attendant. She looked down at her feet. "Come on, Heaven." She had to have seen this done a hundred times on TV, right? Kicking up the stand, she put her weight down on the clutch with her right foot, twisted the handle, and the Boss took off. The bike twisted and quickly fell on its side, pitching Heaven onto the pavement.

She looked up, eyes wide in fear. The biker knew there was a problem now. He was out the door as soon as Heaven had the bike back up, but by then it was too late. She throttled up and took off.

Heaven cheered and the tires screeched as she peeled out of the station's lot, fist held high in triumph. When the gas station sat in her rear view mirrors she took the time to look back at a very angry man, rage red and screaming epithets. Heaven laughed, the anxiety gone now, replaced by a kind of high.

The sign read "Des Moines - 50 Miles," but she now

had her ticket all the way to Mount Rushmore.

Heaven carefully carried a tray of poker chips in various colors through the casino. They were small denominations, of course, the last of her food and travel money, and she had to use a fake ID to get in. She had a foster brother once, Jake, who had an acute interest in different forms of gambling, one of the few nice memories of foster care. But he never let her come out gambling with him, however much she asked.

Blackjack, Poker, Texas Hold-Em. All card games. “Don’t bother with the slots or Roulette,” he had told her, as if he was an expert at the casino, and maybe he was. “Those are silly games of chance. You’ve got no control. Stick to cards.” There was still chance in cards, but there was also strategy. And then there were tricks.

Heaven slipped her ID away and headed for the Black Jack table. *Today I am Juliet Foster, 18 and playing at the casino for seven months now*, she thought, head held high. She took a seat at the end of a blackjack table and plopped down a one dollar ante.

“You have to keep track,” Jake’s voice echoed in her mind. He had trained her for this. He’d spend his nights and weekends at the casino — their foster dad certainly didn’t care; he just wanted the monthly check — and then come back and teach her the tricks of the trade. “At the beginning, hold back. Everything is a mystery. The chance for getting any particular card is the same. But as the game goes on, you’ll know more about what’s coming.”

She glanced nervously at the guy on her right: 40-something, average height, brown hair, and glasses. Harmless. A nice guy, even. “What’s your name?” she asked as the dealer tossed out the first set of cards. One

down, one up. She got a nine of hearts.

“Joe,” he said. “You?”

“Just Joe?”

He smiled, peaking at his face down card. He looked at her over his reading glasses. “Hit,” he called. “Yep, just Joe.”

“Miss?”

“Huh?”

“The dealer is asking if you want another card,” Joe explained.

“Oh, I’m good,” she said, after taking a brief glance at her card. “My name’s Juliet,” she told Joe.

“Pretty name. Nice to meet you.”

“Can you teach me how to play?” A smile, a flip of her golden curls, and a flutter of her eyelashes and he was under her spell. She’d seen it before with guys when a pretty girl looked their way. He would now hit when she needed him to hit, or stay when she needed the card.

In a few hours, and a couple other tables and a couple other guys, Heaven had turned her few dollars into ten thousand. She had been playing cards for a long time at her foster homes, but wasn’t sure so much about the casinos. When people counted cards in movies, not to mention get in with a fake ID, casino security only ever came just when the plot demanded. But when did they come in real life?

She decided not to chance it and gathered up her chips to cash out. As she wound back through the casino, on a whim, she flipped a hundred dollar chip into the glass of a guy at the slots. Free money felt sooo good.

Heaven grabbed her duffel bag from the lockers before heading to the cashier station. “How much do we have?” the cashier asked in a grating tone when Heaven set her tray down. She tapped her foot impatiently and scanned the casino for security. “Looks like ten thousand. You certainly played well tonight. I’ll have to get this from the safe.”

She heard a scream and some commotion from behind and she twisted her neck to look. A tall Latino woman squeezed her man in glee; he had just proposed. On the other end of the spectrum, an older man cursed loudly as he backed away from the roulette table, losing his bet once again.

“Here we are,” the cashier said, coming back with the money. Heaven had to stop herself from jumping. At that moment she caught sight of two hefty men in black suits fighting through the crowd towards the cashier station. Definitely towards her, she noticed as she met their stare.

“Right. That looks right. Thanks,” she said quickly, grabbing the money and stuffing it in her bag. *They’re too late*, she thought as she rushed out of the casino.

She heard the cashier behind her calling out about leaving her ID, but she ignored her. Let them have it; she needed her freedom.

THE EVENT

Heaven gunned it as soon as she left the casino parking lot. In seconds she was on the Interstate and back in the open air. Not far down the line she noticed the cherries light up in her mirror and she wasn’t sure whether the cops were coming for her, so she pulled off at the first exit and coasted into the suburbs.

Heaven rolled the motorcycle to a stop at an intersection. *It might be best after all*, she figured. It was already dark and despite bringing her warmest coat, a windbreaker which seemed to do anything but, she was shivering.

The snowfall wasn’t too heavy yet this year, though the white fluff coated the edges of the roads at least down to the Iowa border. It was beautiful, the trees lined with fresh white snow. If only it didn’t have to be so cold. But she’d take the cold over the place she came from.

The sign read: Mapiya, population 14,500. Southern

St. Paul suburb. She scanned the buildings and street signs for an open — and dare she hope, cheap — hotel at this time of night. Heaven noticed a gas station up the hill a block ahead. Hopefully someone there could give her directions.

She pushed down on the clutch and started the bike back up when everything changed. The night sky flooded with bright blue afternoon light, blinding her. Heaven covered her eyes when she felt an instant blast of summer heat, practically burning her skin it felt so hot compared to the winter air.

The change came so suddenly she felt sick. A moment ago she was shivering from the winter, and now she was getting goose bumps from the hard rush of hot air. Her eyes were just beginning to adjust when she heard the sound of a freight train in the sky. Heaven opened her eyes and looked up.

The sky that was empty just a moment ago was rushing in with dark clouds, swirling just above her, it seemed. Such a fearful sight, but it felt so surreal that she just sat there and watched. Thick clouds turning, spinning, reaching down from the sky. Heaven grew up in Missouri, around tornadoes her whole life, so she knew what it meant; it was a wall cloud, forming into a tornado, but this was the first time she had seen one form right in front of her like this. Staring at the forming tornado, for a moment she almost forgot that night had instantly fled. *Mesmerizing.*

“Hey!” Someone crashed out of a building on her left. “Hey, you on the bike,” he called out to her, but Heaven ignored him, shock setting in. The clouds reached lower, the tornado forming together now, almost to a point. The man ran up and jerked her off the bike, pulling her out of shock. The bike fell hard on its side. She ran with him back to the building to stand just inside the doorway and watch the tornado come.

As the tornado stretched to the ground it turned north,

railing loudly on them now. The tornado touched down, it looked like, just north of there, over a hill. Another man, coming up a stairway behind them, shoved them aside as he ran out of the building, holding a phone to his ear. Standing in the middle of the street he finally noticed the tornado and brought his hands down, staring up in awe.

“Can I use your bike?” the man beside her asked, his eyes wild in desperation. She noticed he was younger, maybe her age, and dressed a bit strangely.

“What?”

“I’m parked up north, past the bridge. I need to...” He looked up at the tornado again as it tossed debris in the air. “I need to follow that.”

“Sure. Come on.” They ran out to her motorcycle, picked it up off the ground, and she handed him a spare helmet. “Just promise not to fall in love with me.”

He blushed, caught off guard. “Isn’t that what girls might say when they like a guy?”

Heaven shrugged. “What can I say? You’re cute.”

CHAPTER TWO

Chevelle

YEAR: 2099

Chevelle glanced up at the teacher, his long crooked nose firmly planted in the class textbook, and tapped nervously on her desk with the stylus. She contemplated the question glowing on her desk screen — a question on a flat from the 2000's, or the Aughts as they used to call that time period. How was she supposed to know? She wasn't really interested in classic movies.

It was your assignment, she thought, her inner critic rearing its ugly face again. But at a time when movies can surround you in all their glory, there's so much more she can do than watching the old flats. Like boys.

She stole a sidelong glance at the guy on her right, Blayze Clay, quarterback on the football team, the Mapiya Moonbacks, and a definite hottie. He seemed to be getting along on his test just fine. She leaned over a bit farther to catch a glimpse of the answer. Chevelle grinned as she turned back to her desk and scribbled the answer with the stylus.

Next question. Blayze caught her with a glance and she smiled wide. He tossed her a wink and shifted his posture so she'd be able to read his desk easier.

“Forgot to study the assignment again, Chevelle?”

Chevelle jerked back and looked to the front of the room. The teacher's textbook lay lonely on his desk. She turned slowly and looked up at him with the best puppy dog face she could manage. “My... dog ate the assignment?”

The teacher folded his arms. "You'll have to do better than that. You're going to spend the afternoon in detention with me. And you, Mr. Clay..." Blayze snapped to attention. "Accomplices get to come, too. I'll see both of you at three o'clock."

After class, Chevelle shut off her desk and filed in line to exit, disappointed only in getting caught. *Chevy, you've got to do your own work to get ahead*, Eric would say. *Bah!* Next time she'd get the SparkNotes.

"Hey, Chevelle," Blayze said, stepping out of the classroom behind her. "You got a minute?"

She tucked her bangs back behind her ear. "Sure. Sorry... about getting you in trouble back there."

"Nah, no worries," he said. "I wanted to ask you a question. The Summer Dance is coming up this weekend, and I was wondering if anyone had asked you yet." Ever since there was a federal law making school a year round event, summer vacation sprinkled throughout the year instead, the Summer Dance had become big. Almost, but not quite, *prom* big.

Chevelle perked up — she had been waiting for this question — and shook her head. There was this one kid, and she felt sorry for him, but word from her girlfriends was that someone on the football team was going to ask her, so she held out.

"Would you go with me?" he asked.

Chevelle tilted her head with a smile, slipped on her overly large sunglasses, and nodded before she started to turn away. "I'd love to," she said, not letting him see the smile that beamed from cheek to cheek. She put a sway in her walk for Blayze's benefit. *Just wait until I tell Eric*, she thought. *He won't believe it!*

"Whaddya think?" Chevelle asked. She stood in Vis á

Vis, a top name fashion store at the mall, in one of their forty holooms. The shopping style of using hologram fitting rooms became popular when effective holograms were invented. Instantly being able to see yourself in a piece of clothing required a lot less floor space for the actual clothing, replaced by open rooms with a human size holoprojector and computer interface.

Chevelle held her head up with an air of entitlement. Eric, her best friend since childhood, sat loosely draped over the couch and she did a little twirl in front of him. It was so exciting! This red one came down just enough in the front with the V-Neck to say, “available, but not to just anyone.”

Eric waved his hand to say the dress was just so-so. “Okay, I’ve got three others lined up. Just hang on.”

She turned back to the computer’s holographic interface, glad to have Eric with her to get it right. Yeah, it was girly stuff, but this was their thing; he was up for anything. They had been hanging out so long, he was more like her brother than anything, she figured.

The red dress shimmered away. The next dress was short and blue, still sparkling, but with a sharp black outline and a very low back. Chevelle looked at herself in the mirror and decided it said gorgeous and modest in the front, but the back said that she also had a wild side.

When she turned out to Eric, though, he quickly shot it down. “Too revealing,” he said, sounding like that overprotective brother again. Chevelle sighed and turned back to the computer. Well, that was why she brought him with, right? Besides the fact that he had the air to get her here; she hadn’t yet bothered to get her driver’s license.

The third dress she wasn’t so sure of. There wasn’t anything particularly wrong with it; it just seemed a bit... boring? And she couldn’t figure out if sequins were her style, but the black certainly complimented her hair. She finally decided she’d try it out anyways.

She noticed Eric's eyes widen when she made the selection and the hologram covering her shifted to the black dress. "That's the dress," he said.

"Are you sure?" She looked down at it again. The dress went all the way to the floor, and the slit only brought it up to the knee.

"Turn around," he said, and so she did. "Yeah, that's definitely the dress."

"I don't know. You think he'll like it?"

"I'd date you with that dress," he blurted out, and it kind of took her aback. *He doesn't really think that...* "I mean, that's how much he'll like it. Trust me," he quickly corrected. *Whew.*

"Okay, let's get it then."

Chevelle tossed her new dress over the back of the chair at her desk and plopped herself down on her twin bed. She propped herself up with a large pillow and shoved a purple lollipop in her mouth. She looked at her left hand. Three thin metal strips conformed to her hand, reaching from her wrist to the tips of her fingers; it was the latest in mobile phone technology. Clenching her hand like she was holding a brick, the metal strips glowed and a holographic computer interface formed in her hand.

She found Eric's number and let the phone dial. Pulling back the silk curtains just above her bed, she saw the lights in her next door neighbor's window switch on and soon Eric came online. Her window looked across a short gap of yard straight into Eric's room. "Hello?"

"You're not asleep yet, are you?" she asked, a bit of a tease in her voice.

"No. Just got upstairs. The nurse is making dinner," he said.

Chevelle dropped her voice to a more serious tone.

“How’s he doing?”

“Not so good. I’m trying not to think about it.” Chevelle’s heart went out to him; he didn’t sound so good. She could hear his voice squeak as he talked. “I just wish my mom were here.”

Probably best to change the subject. She saw Eric pull open his curtains and sit at his desk, feet up on the table and snacking on a half-eaten box of Fig Newtons. “So what do you think of Blayze?” she asked, a bit concerned now. Eric always tried to be upbeat, but Chevelle wasn’t certain whether he really approved.

“I don’t know,” Eric said with a shrug.

“Come on. You play on the same team. You must know something about him.”

“Blayze is okay, but he’s not exactly known for paying attention to the girls.”

And that might be okay, she thought. She was uncertain yet whether it was social status or the thrill of a new boy that excited her. Chevelle played with the lollipop in her mouth. “We spent lunch together talking, and we have a couple of classes together,” she said, taking the lollipop out for a second to examine it. “He seems all right.”

“Well, I hope you have fun at the dance, then,” Eric said.

“You’re really not going to come?”

He shrugged again, chomping down on another Fig Newton. “I’ve got no one to go with,” he said with his mouth full.

“Just ask someone, anyone. It’s not that hard.”

He laughed. “Yeah, maybe not for you, Chevelle Ewens, Princess of Mapiya High,” he teased.

“You know what you need to do, for your school project?” she said with a smile.

“What’s that?”

“You need to investigate. Tomorrow is Wednesday, right? We could skip lunch, check out the town, and be

back for 3rd Period.”

“We can’t just go there,” he said, taking his feet off the desk. “South Mapiya is cordoned off by the government for one thing. There’s a guard and barb wire fences...”

“Aw, come on. It’ll be fun,” she insisted.

“Do you know how disappointed my dad would be if he found out I was skipping school?” This was Eric, though. He’d cave if she put enough pressure on him. “And what do you think we’ll find? It’s a wasteland; there’s nothing to see.”

Chevelle crunched down on the lollipop and threw the now empty stick in the trash. “So you think the government fenced off the place and put up guards because there was nothing to see?” she asked.

“Well, I don’t know.”

“Besides, what’s the worst that could happen? We’re still minors. If we got caught they’ll yell at us a bit, have our parents give us a slap on the wrist, and we’ll be ready for the dance on Saturday.”

“Yeah, back to that...” Eric said.

“Be nice, Eric. Blayze is a good guy.”

“No, that’s not it. He’s fine, sure, but...”

“How about Dorothy from second period? You’d like her; she’s kind of hot.” It was Tuesday, July 7th, so he had only three days left to find a date.

Eric shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe I just don’t feel like going. Dances aren’t really my thing.”

Now he was just making excuses. “That’s not what you said last year when Caydance invited you to the prom.”

“Ha! She was three years older than me and it was the Senior prom!” Then he had to cover for himself. “I mean, not that proms are my thing either, but...”

“But she was certainly better — how do you want to say it — better *built* than us Sophomores your age,” she finished for him.

“Heh, can you blame me?”

“Anyways, I’ll see you tomorrow, Eric. You’re taking me to South Mapiya.”

“Yeah, yeah. Goodnight, Chevy.”

“Night, Eric.” The phone clicked as he hung up and the hologram disappeared when she stretched out her palm. *Crazy idea, that, to go to South Mapiya*, she thought, pulling the curtains closed. *But it’ll be fun.*

THE EVENT

Chevelle grabbed onto the sides of Eric’s leather jacket as he whipped the bike around a corner and pulled to a stop on the side of the road, not quite out of sight of the guard station. Across a swampy area littered with cattails, and over a barb wire fence, was South Mapiya. The guard station stood on the only short stretch of road crossing the swamp.

They both stared over the cattails. South Mapiya — Wasteland. The Event that put the name Mapiya, like Roswell, on the tongues of people across the country, even across the world, left the town empty and chilling.

There was something about mystery and the unknown that peaked people’s interest, not to mention the 5,000 people who disappeared that day. According to the stories, and they were all told the stories, no one had a clue as to what really happened. The evidence left behind in the wasteland of South Mapiya pointed to a catastrophic disaster, but there was no explosion that day. No boom, no flash of light, no mushroom cloud. So what really happened?

“Are you sure you’re okay with this?” Eric asked.

“It was my idea, silly,” Chevelle said back, slapping Eric’s shoulder as she slid out from behind him on the bike. Eric shut the bike down and the blue light underneath it turned off; it hovered down to rest on the curb. “Now, you sneak across while I go distract the

guard.”

Eric waited as she walked up to the guard station. Slow and steady. Give the guard no reason to suspect she was up to something. She was just a flirtatious, young girl who didn't want to go home yet. She risked a glance back to Eric, who was starting into the swamp now. The weather had been relatively dry lately; hopefully it wasn't too wet for him.

She came within earshot of the guard sitting behind the glass booth. “Oh, just what I needed,” she called out. He was pretty handsome, too. *I won't mind doing this dirty work*, she thought with a smile. “A strong man to keep my mind off things.”

The road was set up with long mechanical arms, as if he could let traffic through at any time, but she had never seen a car go into South Mapiya. “Go home, lady,” the guard said. *Tough crowd*.

“Just let me rest for a bit,” she said, pulling down the bottom of her T-Shirt as if trying to be modest. “It's been a hard day. I can't go home to my husband just yet. I just can't. Can we just talk? Your job lets you talk, doesn't it?”

“What's wrong?”

“After working hard this morning at the restaurant the boss threw me out just before lunch. You know, when the tips start getting good.” Chevelle tossed her long black hair over her shoulder and tilted her head to the side. “And I can't go home to my husband. I don't know if he's drunk yet today; he beats me less when he's drunk.” She looked up at the guard, trying to tell if he was buying it, and moved a little closer. She needed to add... a bit of something. “But you look like you know how to treat a woman.”

“How old are you?” he asked, sounding suspicious now.

“23,” she lied.

Chevelle glanced down at the security monitors on his

desk. The center monitor showed Eric just about to try to climb over the fence. Before he could find any other reason to object she leaned up on her tiptoes, wrapped her arms around the guard's neck, and gave him a nice long kiss, keeping one eye on the monitor to see Eric fall to the other side of the fence. With Eric over, she let go. "Can we just talk for a while?"

"Sure." So they talked. The guard sat down and she leaned up against the wall. This was as far as she had planned, so she just talked to keep him busy until Eric came back. She talked about her husband, Fred, a real monster of a man, and how he beat her in the mornings if she didn't sneak out early enough for work. And her dream to find true love.

"Have you told anyone about this?" he asked. "Like the police."

"I tried once. I don't know. They just made it worse. I didn't have any evidence to keep him away so they couldn't protect me." She started thinking that maybe this wasn't the best lie to dwell on.

It wasn't long after that when something really strange happened. Chevelle was trying to change the subject, and talk more about the guard, when she looked behind him to see buildings in South Mapiya. "What in the..." she muttered. The guard turned to see. Not just buildings, but streets, streetlights, traffic signals, mailboxes, everything. South Mapiya was back, looking very much like an authentic early 21st century suburban town, all the way up to the guard station and the fence, as pristine and new like it had never gone.

"No way," the guard said, standing up slowly. With the buildings came a sudden fierce cold, though it was the middle of June, and a strong wind of warm air flew in from the north, so strong it tore off one of the mechanical traffic arms and ripped off the top of the guard station. Dark gray clouds rushed in, spinning fast in the sky.

"This way," Chevelle said, leaping towards the

swamp and not even waiting or watching to see if the guard followed. Fighting against the wind and against fear, she slid off the road into the swamp. The tornado forming just above her, she lay flat on her stomach with her hands over her head.

The guard joined her soon after, kneeling beside her and putting an arm over her in protection. She waited as her shirt and pants soaked up the muck of the swamp. The tornado spun up around them with a heavy noise like a freight train, and all the time she was just hoping Eric was okay. When the tornado passed, she struggled to get back on her feet.

“Oh crap,” Chevelle said. The front of her shirt and pants was now caked with mud. A crash and a bang came from the north as the tornado touched down. “It’s headed for my house.”

At that moment, with a loud gargled roar, a motorcycle — one with wheels! — flew past them. She recognized the rider on the back as Eric, with his arms around a skinny blond.

CHAPTER THREE

Alina

YEAR: 2012

The lab always seemed slightly creepy to Alina when she was there all alone, even with all the lights on. The fluorescent lights flickered periodically and pipes *clank, clank, clanked* at random intervals. And the concrete walls seemed to suck in all the light. *It is just a normal building*, she had to tell herself. *And a normal room with no outside windows.*

Alina stared at her computer screen through thick-framed glasses. She dragged the mouse across the desktop to open a spreadsheet and enter some numbers. She looked over at the glass window taking up most of one wall — Motega’s office. The machine was behind a door on the opposite end of the room. Waiting. Alina’s desk faced the exit, like a receptionist.

Cecilia, the lab tech, closed the door to the lab and walked over to her, flicking a letter in her fingers. “Look what I’ve got,” she sang.

“What’s that?” Alina asked, deliberately not looking up at her, both anxious and fearful at what it would say.

Cecilia placed the letter on her keyboard. “It’s from the U.”

“I’ll look at it later,” Alina said, tossing it on top of a pile of bills. She adjusted the thick frames on her nose.

“No, no. I want to see what it says.” Cecilia waited and hovered over her. Alina clicked at her keyboard, trying to wish her away. “If you don’t open it, I will.”

“That’s a federal offense,” Alina said halfheartedly. “Now go away, I’ve got to finish these calculations before lunch.”

Cecilia ripped the letter open with a squeal. “Dear Alina Bol,” she read. “We are pleased to inform you that your application has been *accepted* and we would like to set up an interview.... You’re in!”

Alina wrinkled her nose. “I’m in,” she said, not sounding very enthused.

“Well, don’t throw a party or anything,” Cecilia said, dropping the letter back on the desk.

“It’s just... I don’t know if I’m going to go or not.”

Cecilia rolled her eyes. “Oh my goodness, Alina. You cannot keep doing this to yourself over him.”

“It has *nothing* to do with Motega,” Alina said, though she did wonder what he thought of her big, frumpy hair and quickly grabbed a binder to tie it back.

She turned back to her computer and once again tried to silently wish Cecilia away. She had been her best friend for a long time (Alina had even gotten her this job) but right now she was just not letting her think. “And what would I do about you? We wouldn’t be able to work together anymore.”

You mean you won’t be able to work with Motega, she chided herself.

“We’ll be fine. You will once again find me another job in your department, or not. It doesn’t really matter, Alina. You won’t be more than twenty minutes away. Motega will find himself another assistant.” She held a finger up to stop a protest. “A male assistant. I’ll make sure of that. Perhaps a handsome young guy for me. And everyone can just move on with their lives.”

Alina frowned. “I don’t know.”

“All right. You know what? None of my business,” Cecilia said, throwing her hands up. “But you have got to make a decision for yourself. Motega or your career. Gosh, you guys are not even dating — He’s always so

wrapped up in his work anyways — but you are just.... No, I'm going. Just let me know what you decide.”

They both jerked up as the door creaked open and her eyes went to the letter. “Am I interrupting anything?” Motega asked as he stepped in. He stood tall, and bulky, like a football defensive lineman, though he had never been into sports. He wore his hair long and, although third generation Native American, one could still notice the distinctive features in his face. *Which makes him that much more handsome.* A stray thought, but it made Alina's heart flutter. She stuffed down any evidence of her thoughts. She grabbed the letter and stuffed it in her desk drawer.

Cecilia grinned at Alina and just shrugged. “Nothing at all.”

Motega stepped over to his office. “Well, I'm done with my errands. Just dropping off my briefcase. Either of you up for lunch?”

Alina pushed herself away from her desk and got up. “Actually, I had an appointment in town, over lunch. I'm just going to grab something quick afterward. You two have fun, though.”

“And I've got to go over the QED again,” Cecilia said. “We can't be too careful, can we?”

Alina's appointment was a visit to the eye doctor to get rid of her unsightly, thick-framed glasses.

“I have to warn you, Miss Bol. You will see significantly worse with these contacts.”

“That's okay,” she said, taking off her glasses. “I'm just tired of always wearing them, you know?” Alina sat in her eye doctor's office, an array of glasses on the wall beside her, holding her first pair of contacts.

Tired of Motega dismissing you, she thought.

Disgusting, thick black frames. I'm sure he always sees the glasses, not me.

But I'm leaving, aren't I...?

"Can I try them on now?"

"Certainly," the doctor said. "There's tissues here. And don't forget to use the solution."

"Of course, thank you." When the doctor left the room she opened the little contacts case tentatively. After messing with them for a bit, and dropping one of the lenses which called for a frantic search, Alina finally got the contacts into her eyes. The whole process of nearly touching her eyeball she found more than a bit disgusting, but Cecilia and the eye doctor had assured her that she'd get over it.

When she finally got them in, she sized herself up in the mirror. She looked... *Wonderful*. She looked and felt... good about herself. She could finally see her eyes, a deep, dark brown. *Ugh*, there was still the matter about her hair, though.

The doctor came back in after a couple minutes. "How do they feel?"

"Very nice," she said, still evaluating herself in the mirror.

"Would you like a spare set?"

She held up her hand. "No, thanks. I've really got to be going."

"All right. It was good to see you again, Miss Bol."

Alina got up and shook his hand. "You, too."

"We'll send out a reminder in another year to come get your vision checked again. Have a good day."

"Bye." Alina stepped out the door and looked around. Everything did look a bit worse, a bit of blur around the details, but she felt so much better for being able to keep those glasses in their case.

After the eye doctor's Alina grabbed a quick bite to eat and went back to the lab. Motega still wasn't back from his chat with Dravin, an FBI agent she and Motega had run into earlier. She grabbed the letter from her desk and stuffed it into her jacket pocket. Winter temperatures had been degrading so fast she was wearing her thick down jacket.

Stepping out of the lab, Alina went over in her mind again what she planned to say. After the experiment tonight everything would change, one way or another. So she wanted to tell Motega now; she wanted him to at least know, to put it all on the line.

I really value our friendship, Motega, she said in her mind as she walked up the stairs. *And I don't want to ruin our working relationship, either....* She shook her head, not really knowing what to say.

The lab was in the basement of a squat brick office building. It shared the lease with a local law firm and a dentist's office. There was parking in the alley around the back, but Caribou, where Motega and Dravin were having their little chat, was just a couple blocks away, so she slipped on her hat and a pair of stretchy gloves to brave the winter cold.

Thankfully, the walk was short. She ran into Motega and Dravin at the entrance. Dravin looked fierce, and serious, and walked with a determination in his step. "Hey, Motega," she called out as they approached. "Could we talk?" She glanced at Dravin. "Alone."

"Don't mind me," Dravin said, punching past them and into the building.

Alina rubbed her hands together. Motega looked so cold, with a thin autumn jacket and not even a hat. He just waited patiently as she froze. "Can we talk inside?" she said finally. "It's freezing out here."

"Sure," Motega said, opening the door for her. They stepped inside so they could share the awkward moment

in relative warmth. “What is it?”

Motega, I want to have your baby, she thought, gazing into his gorgeous green eyes. No, no. Much too forceful. “Motega, don’t take this the wrong way,” Alina said.

Ugh, that’s a terrible opening. But she forged on anyway. “I... I applied for a job at the U of M,” she stammered. And now *that* secret was out. “I just got the acceptance letter today. It’s a teaching position, and they’ll fund some of my own research. I know you rely on me here, and if you tell me no, I’ll understand...”

Motega smiled, and put his hands on her shoulders. That just raised her anxiety another step. “How could I take that the wrong way?” It felt like a high. She wanted to run, escape the anxiety, escape the gaze of his inviting and caring eyes, but she also wanted him to keep holding her. *Hold me closer*.

“This is great news,” he said, and her heart sunk. “Tonight, after the experiment, we’ll have two things to celebrate. I know how independent research has always been stressful for you.”

No, she thought, but her face smiled. “Yes, thank you,” she said, at the same time wanting to pummel him. He was supposed to be upset. He was supposed to say how much he liked her and couldn’t bear to see her leave, or any other number of sappy romantic things. But he just congratulated her, happy to see her go.

Because he has no idea you like him, her inner voice told herself again. Was it really just some childish fantasy? Like a teenage crush?

He smiled again. “Sure. Well, let’s finish up in the lab and we can talk more later.” He motioned to let her go down the stairs first, always the gentleman. She glanced outside; it was really dark out. The days were getting so short now. *Well*, she took a breath and let out a sigh as they descended the stairs. *I told him*.

THE EVENT

Alina got behind her desk and clicked away on the keyboard. She logged in and brought up an array of charts and statistics on her monitors. A few graphs were most prominent — average charge of the ions in the test gel packs, temperature, spin of the particles — but she had a wide array of variables to monitor, if she chose to. But really the experiment should be a non-event. No sudden flash. No explosion or sound. The only change would be displayed in these few graphs on her monitor.

“Monitoring ready,” Alina reported.

The door to the machine room was propped open now. Dravin stood in the opposite corner, leaning up against the door to Motega’s office. He tossed his coat jacket over the back of a chair, casually displaying his side holster for all. Cecilia was checking the connections, the power to the machine.

Motega, tall and handsome in his white smock, stood at the QED, tweaking a couple of the dials. He really wasn’t your typical science nerd or geek. He was only one quarter Native American, but the traits flowed smoothly across his face. If she didn’t know him, and without the smock, she might have guessed that he was an athlete, in football or wrestling, with his thick and solid upper body and strong arms.

Forget him. He doesn’t like you that way, she berated herself again.

Motega rechecked his notes on a chart on his clipboard to verify that they hadn’t missed anything. “Okay,” he said finally. “We should be good to go.”

Alina looked sideways at their visitor. “Dravin? Anything else you need?”

Dravin Davidson, ever the cool FBI agent, just shrugged. “This is your show. I’m just here to watch.”

Turning back to her monitor, Alina muttered under her breath. “Here to verify we’re not stealing the

government's money is more like it." She glanced back at him, but he didn't act like he heard. "All right, well, that's it. Let's flip the switch."

She watched the monitors. The graphs stayed steady, normal. She heard a click as Motega pressed the button and another click when the button switched off.

The overhead lights flickered and went out, replaced by the red glow of emergency exit lights. Her computer, too, lost power, saved when it switched with a click to battery backup. *Must have blown a fuse*, she thought, ignoring the lights and concentrating on her computer readouts. The graphs fluttered, then normalized, now to rest at two complementing levels. All the indicators looked positive. The device seemed to have properly entangled all the particles in the two gel packs.

"Who are you?" Motega said.

Alina jumped to her feet, staring and gaping at a teenage guy with spiky brown hair standing next to the Quantum Entanglement Device in the machine room.

"I..." the kid said, looking just as astonished to see them. The door to the lab sat wide open. *Wasn't that shut just a second ago?* she thought. A loud noise like a rush of wind thundered in from outside.

Before anyone else mustered up the wherewithal to speak, the kid rushed out the door and around the corner. "What's going on?" Alina wondered aloud, but Motega just shrugged. Did they... could they have... teleported a kid to their lab? It seemed silly, but she couldn't think of anything more plausible.

Dravin snapped out his cell phone and tried dialing a number. He cursed; no signal down here. Cell phone in hand, Dravin rushed out of the lab.

Suddenly, their world changed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sheriff Kevin Hunter

YEAR: 2012

“Hi, honey. So glad you’re home.” Kevin started stripping all of his winter gear as soon as the front door shut behind him. Sheryl, his wife, greeted him with a kiss on the cheek. “There’s leftovers in the fridge for you.”

Kevin glanced at the over-sized wall clock hanging in the kitchen as he fumbled with the mail. Six Fifteen. “Sorry I’m so late,” he said and tossed junk mail back on the counter one-by-one. “I had to bring one of the Valenti boys home. He and some friends of his were making trouble at the Cemetery.”

“Couldn’t you have called?” she said from the other room, though it wasn’t accusatory. “I waited on dinner for a half hour before I finally gave Justin cold spaghetti.”

Kevin dropped the rest of the mail on the counter and went into the dining room, wrapping her up in a hug. “Honey, I’m sorry.”

“That’s fine, Kevin,” she said, unconcerned. She looked up at him and smiled wide, squeezing him tight in her arms. “I’m just glad you’re home.”

“You ever think, I don’t know.” He frowned. “Maybe I should give up being a Sheriff? Take some 9 to 5 job at a bank or something? I could spend more time with you and Justin.”

Sheryl grinned. “It’s always been part of our understanding. You do good work, Sheriff,” she said with

a nod. "Having a little less of your time is part of the sacrifice I make. You get to do the work you love, this city is well protected, and I get a husband that is happy and satisfied with his life."

"I really do wish I could spend more time with you and Justin, though." He sniffed her hair, treasuring the brief quiet moment he could have with her. "Where is he, by the way?"

"Up in his room, playing with his trucks or something," she replied, breaking away. "I don't know if he wants to speak with you, though."

"Yeah," Kevin said to himself, watching as Sheryl cracked open the dishwasher and started filling it with dishes. "You know, maybe I was too hard on him."

"He'll get over it. He's only six. Go on. Kiss and make up."

Kevin took off his sweater, as well as the badge stuck on it, and walked up the stairs to talk to his son.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Kevin knocked on the door to his son's room, but no reply.

He opened the door. Justin was kneeling at the end of his bed, taking his Tonka trucks and smashing them into each other, like trucks were *meant* to be played with, of course. "Hi Justin." His kid continued playing with his trucks, a fire truck and a garbage truck, without a smile on his face. The police car was off on its own by the dresser. "Well, hi dad," Kevin continued on, putting the words in Justin's mouth. "Glad you're home. I missed you."

Justin kept his mouth shut and continued with the silent treatment. Kevin walked over to him and squatted down to his level. "Hey, Justin. I'm sorry I yelled at you this morning. Work has been kind of stressful lately, but I shouldn't take it out on you." Be honest with your son like an adult, no matter the age, he figured. Justin paused and put his trucks down. "Do you forgive me?"

His son looked up at him, as cute as ever even when

he was mad. Then he smiled wide. "Of course I forgive you, dad," he said, wrapping his arms around Kevin's neck. Kevin hugged him back, grateful that it was so easy now. Another ten years or so and he'd be having a much different conversation. Hopefully by then he learned a thing or two more about being a parent. It seemed like he was always playing catch up.

The cell phone rang then. Kevin had to get Justin to let him go and dig the phone out of his pocket. He noticed Justin pick up the police car and drive it up alongside the fire truck so the two of them together could take on that garbage truck.

He flipped open the phone. "Hello?"

"Sheriff. This is Deputy Wentworth. We just got a call from Mapiya High, South Campus. There's been a break in."

Kevin nodded, immediately switching back to the role of Mapiya's Sheriff Hunter in his mind. "Okay, thank you Deputy. I'll head right over." He shut the phone, ending the call, and slid it back into his pocket. "I'm sorry, Justin. I've got to run out again. We'll play together when I get back, though. I promise."

"Bye dad," Justin said, not looking up from his trucks. Kevin felt a pang of regret that goodbye seemed to come so easy from his son. Maybe he was *too* used to this kind of thing now.

Kevin ran down the stairs and picked his sweater up off the bench. "Where are you off to in such a hurry?" his wife asked, done now with cleaning up the kitchen. "You just got home."

"I'm so sorry," he said quickly, grabbing his gloves and ear muffs back from the box under the bench. "There's been a disturbance across town." He stopped to look at her, longing to just stay home. *Another night wasted.* "You know," he said solemnly, looking down. "I am going to quit one of these days. We can be more of a normal family."

Sheryl grinned and pulled his coat together to zip it up for him. "I don't want normal. I want you to be happy making a difference in our city. Go be a good guy."

"Hopefully this won't take too long," he said, slipping his sweater on. "See you when I get back."

THE EVENT

Daniel Martin and Kelly Reid, two members of the school board, were already waiting for him near the entrance of the school when he pulled in. Deputy Wentworth, the one who called him in, was standing and talking with them. Apparently the need for emergency was over. Kevin shut off the car and the siren died down.

He threw on his earmuffs quickly as he jogged toward the school, his feet crunching down on the fresh layer of fluffy snow. The hippodrome, a covered building for an ice rink, stood out in front of the school, wrapped in a way by the school's L-shape.

"Hey, Sheriff," Daniel called out as he came near. Daniel Martin, short, balding, and bulging around the mid-section, was Director of the School Board. Kelly, younger, pretty and Assistant Director, stood close to him.

"You just missed him," Kelly said, looking back over her shoulder at the school. "We were just telling the Deputy here. We saw him go out the back and run into the woods as we heard the sirens."

"Sorry about that. Are you two all right?"

"We're fine," Daniel assured him with a nod. "Just fine. We're just concerned about the school, at this point. Hopefully you can find who did this."

"Thank you, Deputy," Kevin said putting a hand on Wentworth's shoulder. "You can go back to the station and finish out your shift. I can look into this." He had come all this way already, he figured. Best to take a look when everything was fresh.

“Will do, Sheriff,” Deputy Wentworth said, excusing himself with a hand on the brim of his hat in a sort of salute. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Take care ma’am. Sir.” He nodded to Kelly and Daniel in turn.

“What are you two doing here?” the Sheriff asked.

“We, uh,” Kelly stuttered. “There was a meeting... of the School Board.”

Kevin looked behind them. The school was dark and there were no other cars in the parking lot besides theirs. “Where’s everyone else? Aren’t there six of you?”

“Um,” Daniel started to speak, but took a moment to catch his breath. Daniel wasn’t a skinny man and it looked like he had been running. “The others went home; we called in the break in. We’re the only ones that stayed behind, to talk to you and keep an eye on the place. We didn’t want to approach the thief. Safety reasons, you’ll understand. If he was carrying a weapon, well, I didn’t want it on my conscience if anyone got hurt.”

“Okay, I’ll want to talk to each of them in the morning,” Kevin said. “Did you get a look at the intruder? Would you be able to identify him?”

“Yes,” Daniel said forcefully. “Definitely.”

“Great. Is there anything missing? Do you want to show me what happened?”

The Sheriff followed Daniel and Kelly into the school to look around. The hallway was dark so he took out his flashlight as they walked. “We heard him first when he broke into this locker here. He rifled through the student’s belongings. It’s hard to tell if he took anything.”

“Who does the locker belong to?” Kevin asked as he shone the flashlight on its contents. A few textbooks and notebooks, a backpack hanging open, and some knick-knacks; nothing serious or out of the ordinary, at least not of the things left behind.

“I... I believe this one belongs to Jack Sweeny,” Daniel said, rubbing his chin. “I’m pretty sure, because I was talking to him at his locker just this morning. We

could check the records for you.”

“You can do that later,” Kevin said.

“Next,” Kelly pointed down another hallway. “He broke into a science classroom.”

“That’s interesting,” Kevin muttered, following Kelly into the room. Kelly turned the lights on for him. There were books on the floor. At one lab station a beaker was overturned, and another one in pieces on the floor. The teacher’s desk was a mess. Nothing stood out that told him what the burglar was after.

“Well, I’ll come by in the morning. We can talk with the teacher and the kids. See if we can find out what he was after. That may give us a hint to who was searching for it.” Kevin pointed to the station with the broken beaker. “Can you find out which kids in each period use that station, as well?”

“Certainly,” Kelly said. She flipped the lights off as they left the room and headed back to the school entrance.

“Thanks for calling me. It’s good to have concerned citizens looking out for me.”

The blast of cold air hit him again as he stepped outside. It was early, yet, but it felt so late with the sun going down so early in the day now as they went into December. He smiled and shook their hands, anxious to get back to his family. “Thanks. You two get home now. We can take this up in the morning.”

As he turned back and prepared himself for the walk back to his squad car, the sky lit up like day time. He noticed the sun almost directly above and to the south before he sheltered his eyes from the blinding brightness. Daniel and Kelly bent over to do the same. The heat blasted them at the same moment and as he started to recover from the light he tore his earmuffs and gloves off, leaving them on the ground.

The snow was already beginning to melt at his feet. The sun was quickly occluded by a rush of dark swirling

clouds. "Is that what I think it is?" he heard Daniel call out above the noise of a sudden stiff wind. The clouds were swirling together and reaching towards the ground. Anyone who grew up in Minnesota would recognize the tornado forming right before their eyes.

"Get in the dome," Kevin yelled at the others. He ran with them to a side door of the hippodrome and waited anxiously as Daniel fumbled for the keys, all the time staring up at the sky. The situation felt more surreal than anything, like they had suddenly entered a dream. The clouds in the bright blue sky darkened, turning together even faster now.

Daniel got the door open and they scrambled inside. The building was made of brick, pretty stable, so they found a corner to squat down in. Hopefully safe enough, given such short notice. Daniel wrapped an arm around Kelly, who sat shaking in fear. "What's going on, Sheriff?" Daniel wondered, as if he had any answers.

Kevin shook his head. "I don't know any more than you," he said. He would wait just a little while longer. Soon the sound of the wind outside started to die down and Kevin stood up. "But I'm going to find out."

CHAPTER FIVE

Motega

YEAR: 2012

“Well, I’m done with my errands. Just dropping off my briefcase,” Motega said, stopping by his office. Alina and Cecilia were in the main room in the lab, suddenly quiet after he caught them talking excitedly just a moment before. “Either of you up for lunch?”

“Actually, I had an appointment in town, over lunch,” Alina said, getting up from her desk. “I’m just going to grab something quick afterward. You two have fun, though.”

“And I’ve got to go over the QED again,” Cecilia said. “We can’t be too careful, can we?”

Motega made a mental note to add that to the list of things needed for the experiment. He’d have to remember to double check with her after going over the calculations again. Alina followed Motega up and out of the building. They were about to split up and go their separate ways when he noticed someone approaching them from down the street.

“Dravin,” Motega said.

“Motega Wilson, and Alina Bol, I presume.” Dravin watched them with a very calculating eye, and Motega wondered how he was not freezing wearing just a three piece black suit.

“Motega, who is this?”

Dravin pulled a badge from his suit and flipped it open for them to see. “Dravin Davidson, FBI. I’m here

about the QED.”

Alina gasped and Motega tensed up, folding his arms. “I’ve got nothing to do with you, Dravin.”

“Motega, the little science project you’ve got going here...” He glanced at the door they just came from and smiled. “It’s in there, isn’t it?” Motega raised his chin, but he wasn’t about to answer. *He doesn’t deserve it.* “It doesn’t matter right now. The point is the Federal government spent a lot of money funding time and materials for your project. They just wanted to send someone to... check in, see how things are going. You understand.”

“So they sent you,” Motega said. That was a statement, not a question. Of course Dravin would find a way to weasel himself in here.

“They sent me,” he said with a nod. He raised an eyebrow and slid his badge back into his pocket. “Motega, I’m the kind of agent that likes to ask instead of command, so you know what I mean when I ask if we could talk somewhere in private.”

“You need back up?” Alina asked, not taking her eyes off Dravin.

“No, I’ve got this,” he said.

“Okay, I’ll see you in an hour or so.”

Motega nodded, still eying Dravin warily. “Okay, see you later. Dravin, how about we take a walk down to Caribou and we can have a chat.”

Dravin nodded. “Lead the way.”

Motega stirred at his hot chocolate, staring across the table at Dravin, who was drinking nothing. He just stared back with a grin on his face and his arms crossed. Motega tried to ignore the ubiquitous stink of coffee and brought the hot chocolate to his mouth.

“You’re dressed quite light for this weather,” Motega said. Dravin wore only the FBI standard black suit as the temperatures outside were plummeting well past freezing. Motega’s winter parka hung from the back of his chair.

“You know I grew up here,” Dravin said with a shrug. “I’ve still got some of the Minnesota fire in my bones.”

Motega looked at him sideways. “And where’s your partner. Don’t you suits always travel in pairs?”

“We flew in to Elko. There’s a government building there for research and development. She’s still at Elko making sure we have the proper setup for when we transfer the QED down there.”

“What?” Motega snapped, nearly spitting out his hot chocolate. “It’s not going anywhere.”

Dravin leaned forward, steeping his fingers together. “I don’t think you’re quite respectful of your position, Motega. So let me make it clear to you.” Dravin lowered his voice as he continued, glancing to the side to see if anyone was listening. “The government owns your endeavors here in this *quaint* little town, and until you provide the results of your research, and that means the device, the government owns you.” He leaned back, now with a wide grin. “*I own you.*”

Motega took a long draw on his now cooling hot chocolate before responding. He focused on keeping his tone cool and level, not wanting to make a scene, but he wanted nothing more than to deck Dravin right here. “I’ve never even heard your name in connection with *my* project. As far as I’m concerned, I don’t know you, *Agent Davidson*. Why should I trust you?”

He smiled. “Do you trust the badge?”

Motega took another sip, slowly and purposefully, before he answered. “Not at all.”

Dravin folded his hands and leaned forward. “All right, let me start by telling you what I know. I know that you’re working on something called Quantum Entanglement. That thesis of yours, if applied correctly—

”

“A thesis which you tried to take credit for,” Motega said, his hand tensing around his mug.

“Stuck in the past, my friend?” Dravin said, grinning.

“So this theory should give the government the ability to communicate instantaneously over large distances. I know you plan on putting this to the test tonight. And that the United States government, should you successfully complete your test, owns this discovery in everything but name. By your contract, the technology belongs to us, and we’ll let you keep the money and fame.

“I also know that by one phone call I can bring a dozen agents and local policemen here to arrest you, should you not cooperate.” Dravin caught Motega’s gaze and held it. He didn’t smile. Dravin was just stating a fact. “Do I have your respect now, Mr. Wilson?”

Motega shrugged. “What do you want to know?”

“You’re testing the device tonight, but how close are you?” Motega hesitated, working out how to respond while giving away minimal information. “Do I have to give the speech again? Or make a call?”

“We’re there.”

“It works?”

“We’ve got small scale proof. Tonight is all about making a working prototype.”

“That’s amazing,” Dravin said. He was a scientist once. He could appreciate what a discovery of this magnitude would mean to the scientific community, but Motega wasn’t sure himself about the value of the practical application.

“Why is the government so interested in the QED anyway?” Motega said. “Or is it just you?”

“Think about what it would mean for our society,” Dravin said, sounding like he meant it, too. “For our culture. We could have walkie talkies without a distance limit, or a better cell phone network with no more lost signals.”

“Yeah, I know what it’s capable of. Fast, wireless internet wherever you are. It’s about fast communication, but once everyone has it—”

“But everyone won’t have it,” Dravin snapped, his eyes fierce now. “And you’re not thinking big enough, Motega. Not just fast communication, it’s instantaneous. It’s what would make interstellar travel bearable, being able to immediately contact earth. Or remote bomb detonation.”

“You’re kidding.” The suggestion gave Motega a bad taste. He picked up the hot chocolate and began drinking again, trying to cover over that little taste of puke in his mouth.

“Think of the military aspects, Motega,” Dravin said. “A bomb could be delivered into the hands of the next Hitler or Osama bin Laden by their own army without ever knowing what it was. Our operatives wouldn’t have to be anywhere near it to set it off.”

“Or just the opposing candidate,” Motega suggested.

Dravin didn’t blink. “The possibilities are endless.”

“I won’t let you do it.”

“You can’t stop us,” Dravin said with a laugh. “And I’ve been sent here to make certain that you follow through on your end. Your days of working alone are over.”

THE EVENT

A goose flew low in the Minnesota skies on that Monday, December the 3rd. It had to be the last goose to fly south for the winter, for the birds are usually not crazy enough to brave the Minnesota cold for too long, unlike the people. This winter had so far been exceptionally mild, though the temperature had dropped to below freezing for a week now. But whatever the case, it flew over the town of Mapiya at 6:30 PM.

The sun had just disappeared over the horizon over an

hour ago, long enough for the last rays of sunset to disappear and the seven points of light in the big dipper to come out, sparkling brightly. Darkness covered the land, though that, too, was dampened by the glow of a full moon over Mapiya.

A large swampy area filled with tall wild grass and cattails split the town nicely into two halves, the freeway off to the east. From the goose's view, one could see the school, the post office, a commercial district, and an ever growing sprawl of houses in a crisscross pattern on the south side. The library, mall, and another school campus mixed in with blocks of houses, town houses, and apartment buildings to the north. The goose naturally looked longingly at the beautiful round lake along the left side of town, dotted along the edges with mansions and cottages.

The next moment the school, the post office, the commercial district, and many of the houses were gone. In its place, a flat wasteland, wiped clean as if by a blast of flame. Bricks, concrete blocks, and other debris littered the landscape as if there had been an explosion. A wide spattering of dust and some pieces of shingles and wood siding appeared in the air out of nowhere and fluttered down into the town.

The goose didn't even notice, really, as there was nothing to notice. In the brief span from one moment to the next, half of Mapiya was gone.

CHAPTER SIX

Eric

YEAR: 2099

Eric pulled into the parking lot on his hoverbike and looked up at the large sign broadcast above the stout building. Mapiya Public Library. Not the place he'd normally let himself be found. He slid the bike up on a curb and reined it in to a stop. He pressed a large black button by his knee to shut the bike down, gently lowering to a rest on the grass. Wiping the sweat off his forehead from the summer heat, he slipped the pack over his back and trotted off to the library entrance.

The library was one of the last places Eric had expected to be at today. He stopped at the entrance. "Looking for something?" The librarian — thin, blond twenty-something — approached him.

"Well, I guess I'm not sure what I'm looking for," he said, gazing about the room. Living in the post-digital age, the library consisted mostly of computers for reference and research. On one side of the library they still had several rows of books. Despite popular preference for eBooks, physical printed books still had their niche in society.

"You don't come here often, do you?" the librarian said, though not condescendingly. He shook his head. He could count the number of times he had been in the city library on one hand, and all of them were when his parents had brought him, back when he was too young to object.

“Well, I can help you out. What do you like to read?”

He shrugged. “I’m not really a reader.” Not that he had anything particular against libraries or those who liked to read and research, it just wasn’t his thing. He played wide receiver on the Mapiya Moonbacks, the high school team, though he wouldn’t call himself a typical jock, either. “I’m more of a doer, you know? I’ll do the science experiments, not read about it as much.”

“So what are you doing at a library?” she asked, the corner of her mouth turned up in a knowing little smile.

“My teacher told me I could find information here about the 2012 Mapiya Event.” The assignment was to research a scientific event of their choice, actually. She probably expected him to pick the invention of electricity, the discovery of radioactivity, or the invention of power cells that replaced the need for fossil fuels. But they lived in Mapiya. Eric was sure he wasn’t being unique in investigating the incident that had replaced half of their town, suddenly, with charred remains and twisted metal.

“Sure. Follow me.” She stepped around the corner and led him down to the aisles of books, looking up at the numbers and letters on the end of the shelves. They stopped at the one labeled C-2 and turned down that row. “Looks like we have, hmm,” she said, running her hand across the spines of the books, “about five books here.”

She walked past Eric and grabbed a computer on a stand at the next row. Clicking hurriedly, she soon pulled up a list of items. “We also have some archived magazine articles and some newspapers.”

“Newspapers?”

She nodded. “Yep. On macrodisk. That was the medium of the time. They called them CDs, or Compact Discs. I’ll go grab them from the back for you.”

The librarian returned in a couple minutes with a few large disks the size of his hand. “Find any computer in the lab in the back and stick one of these in the side of the

monitor. The technology is half a century old, though, so the screens will be flat.”

“Thanks.” He took the disks and headed to the back.

Minnesotan Suburb Disappears in Freak Accident was the first headline to come up. He read on. On the night of December 3rd, 2012, the southern half of Mapiya disappeared. It was commonly believed to have been an explosion, as all that remained was foundations and parts of a couple old brick buildings, the South Campus high school among the few buildings still standing. Few human remains could be found.

But it was also too sudden to be an explosion. Eyewitnesses reported that one moment the town was there, the next moment it just wasn't.

Residents of Mapiya nowadays knew about The Event; half the town was gone, so it was kind of hard not to notice. But not many were interested in digging deeper. As his parents had always told him, no one really knew what happened, and that hadn't changed in the last 90 years.

“I thought that was your bike outside.” Eric twisted in his chair to see Chevelle walking, more like gliding, down the aisle to his computer, sporting her large round sunglasses. She plopped down next to him. “You're researching for the assignment?”

“Yeah.” Chevelle was beautiful, stunning, but her presence was just... captivating. Eric knew it sounded lame, even in his head. They had been friends since kindergarten, but lately he was wondering if they could be, well, more.

“Imagine that. Eric Farrell, wide receiver and hidden nerd,” she chided him with a smile.

“Miss Gross said we might find something here that we wouldn't find online.” It was about five years ago, just in time for High School, that they passed the Federal law for year round schooling, hence school and research in the middle of summer. He'd much rather be out

throwing the football around right now, or taking a swim in the lake with this heat.

“Found anything interesting so far?”

He scanned forward in the newspaper articles. *The Mapiya Event Linked to Quantum Mechanics Experiment?* “This is interesting.”

Chevelle read over his shoulder, and Eric wished nothing else but that she’d lean in closer. “After nearly a decade of research and experiment,” she said as she read, “rumor has it that Quantum Physicist Motega Wilson was close to proving by experiment his thesis on Quantum Entanglement, a discovery that could have proved monumental in all areas of society. The reporter checked on the government grant that funded his project but all reports were classified.”

“I wonder if they ever opened those files,” Eric said. “Maybe one of those books...”

“Yeah, sure,” Chevy said with a grin. “So, guess who invited me to the Summer Dance this Saturday?”

Eric shrugged and feigned interest. “Jack, from that rock band? What’s their name? Dirty Toenail?”

She shook her head excitedly. “Blayze Clay!” Another reader glanced over at them from behind a computer monitor.

“The quarterback?” he said quietly, trying to hush her.

“Yep! So, what do you say we get out of here and you can take me over to the mall so I can get something to wear?”

Eric hesitated. It would mean getting to spend more time with her, but time spent buying a dress for another guy. “Sure,” he said with a nod. “Let me just print out a couple articles here.”

So they went shopping at the mall. Afterward, he dropped Chevy back at her house and went home.

Eric pulled in and checked the time on his phone, squeezing his left hand just so to make the holographic phone screen visible. 7:30. He set the bike down and hurried inside as a yellow bus hovered past their street with a loud hum.

“Hey,” he said when he burst into the house. The entrance led right into the kitchen where his dad’s nurse, Beth, was making dinner.

“Hi, Eric,” she said, stirring a pot of sauce. “Did you get much done at the library?”

“Yeah,” he said. He walked past Beth and tossed his backpack on the table. “Found a few newspaper articles on The Mapiya Event.”

“Oh, you’re researching that?” She wrinkled her nose. “Why not something where you could learn something, like the Quantum Mechanics breakthrough of the 70’s?” 2070? Eric did the math in his head. Yeah, that would make Beth about 15 or so. The experiments vindicating Quantum Mechanics and bringing it closer in line with Einstein’s relativity came out about then. No wonder she would be interested in that.

“Sorry I’m home late. How’s dad been?”

She stopped stirring the sauce and stared into it. “He’s been getting worse.” Beth set the wooden spoon down and leaned on the stove. “He wasn’t so good today.” She glanced over at him. “You should go talk to him.”

Eric left the nurse as she checked the bread in the oven and stepped out into the living room. His dad, Gene, an old portly man in his 60’s now, just sat there like a bump staring at the television set. There was nothing on but a blur of digital static.

“Hey dad. How’re you feeling?”

Gene rolled his eyes over to Eric slowly, getting ever so slower as the encephalitis carried on. “So tired,” he breathed out. “Just tired.”

He rolled his head over and, with what seemed like extraordinary strength, brought his hand up, reaching out for his son. Eric stayed where he was. "Son, I'm proud of you."

Eric looked away to hide a tear in the corner of his eye. "Dad, don't start talking like that again." It was like his dad had given up; like he knew at any moment the infection eating away at his brain would win.

"Okay, okay," he agreed, bringing his hand back down to rest. "Just..."

"Look dad." Eric interrupted him and turned away. "I've got a lot of homework still to do tonight. Beth's almost done with dinner. Don't give her a hard time tonight when she puts you to bed, okay."

Eric felt a sting of regret, talking to his father like that. He grabbed his backpack and ran up to his room. He closed the door when his phone rang. He squeezed his hand to bring up the holographic interface to his phone to answer the call. "Hello?"

"You're not asleep yet, are you?" It was Chevelle.

"No. Just got upstairs. The nurse is making dinner."

"How's he doing?" She was asking about his dad. He ran his fingers through his hair.

"Not so good. I'm trying not to think about it," he said. He tried to keep the tears out of his voice. "I just wish my mom were here."

THE EVENT

"Are you sure you're okay with this?"

"It was my idea, silly," Chevelle said, slapping Eric's shoulder. Eric slid off his bike and looked across the swamp at the fence and the wasteland beyond. "Now, you sneak across while I go distract the guard."

I can't believe I'm actually doing this, he thought to himself.

The swamp ran right up alongside the road,

distinguished by its tall cattails. A few cattails had burst open, the fluffy seeds floating across the road in the wind. A single stretch of road connected the two parts of town. North of that road the town remained intact after 2012. Everything south was involved in The Event.

He gave Chevelle some time to walk out to the guard station. The FBI had locked down South Mapiya after The Event, he had read in the newspaper clippings he printed out. *Should have brought those with me.* The clippings and the macrodisks were back at home.

To this day South Mapiya was fenced off with barbed wire, though they had lowered the security to a single guard. Officially it was still restricted, but not much effort was put into keeping people out. From time to time over the years there had been protests or requests gone out to the government to build some sort of memorial on the grounds, but they always quietly but firmly quelled any such behavior. Like Area 51, South Mapiya was now surrounded in government secrecy and conspiracy theory. Unlike Area 51, security was slim.

Eric put a foot out tentatively, then step forward into the swamp. The mud gooped up over his foot, but he wore his waterproof winter boots. Carefully, he stepped across the swamp, tugging hard with each step to pull his foot from the mud. He could hear Chevelle flirting with the guard now. Why try to keep people out, anyway, if there was nothing there? Well, officially there was nothing there, but then, why cordon it off if it wasn't still of some interest to the government?

Perhaps something was there that they just haven't found yet. Eric tossed his jacket up over the barbed wire on top of the fence and glanced back at Chevelle and the guard once more. Just great. Now she was kissing him. Well, a distraction was a distraction, he supposed, though he wished that could be him kissing Chevelle right then. He quickly climbed up the fence, over his jacket, and dropped down on the other side.

Now, to actually find something in this mess. One of the books at the library had tried to chronicle the last known activities of everyone in South Mapiya when it disappeared. It mentioned a Motega Wilson and Alina Bol who were preparing their science experiment in Quantum Mechanics. Finding something about that would certainly be interesting for his report.

Eric trekked across the bare ground. He passed an old car, from when they used to make them out of metal and used rubber tires. The car was melted and twisted into a grotesque shape, fused to the ground. He continued on. A few places there still stood, wrapped in on itself, the tall iron structures that held power lines back then. Here and there grass and trees were trying to come back amidst the ash.

According to the map, which he cursed himself again for leaving at home, the building was somewhere in this area, straight south. He glanced back to the north. No sign that anyone pursued him. And what would he do if they had? He was picking around in an area that was placed off limits by the FBI, which was now called the Internal Investigation Agency. That meant the Federal government. He was just a senior in High School, average nobody.

Eric gazed west. It looked like most of the school was still standing, amazingly. Back then there had been two High School campuses for Mapiya. North Campus on the north end of town for grades 11 and 12, and South Campus down here for grades 9 and 10.

Sure, technically this was half of his town, South Mapiya, but ever since it disappeared almost 90 years ago it was under investigation by the government. Not that they ever found anything, or at least not anything they'd tell normal citizens. It wasn't too long before they stopped looking, anyway; they told everyone else that it had been an accident, an explosion, and maybe that's all it was. Well, that's why he was here, wasn't it? To see if

there was something to be found.

Eric kicked off a decently large rock and stepped down with a solid *Clang!* He looked down at his foot. There was steel under here. Bending over, he quickly tossed aside a few more rocks to see what he had found. A steel door with a plaque that read “Motega Wilson”. That would fit, if the lab was here.

Motega Wilson worked with his assistant, Alina, on a government grant. The public records didn’t say much more than that. Motega had previously published papers on Quantum Mechanics. In particular, Quantum Entanglement, the phenomena where two particles could become entangled so that a change in one instantly caused a change in the other, no matter how far apart they were. So it made sense that his lab was right about here, from what the book said. Eric lifted the door up, tossed it aside, and started grabbing other chunks of concrete and brick to push or throw away.

Eric didn’t understand it completely himself, but it was just this kind of strange science that could cause a town to disappear like this, he figured. Motega and Alina both disappeared in The Event. His chest started tingling with anticipation. He felt so close.

He lifted and overturned a large piece of brick wall that lay down flat and Eric stumbled back, eyes gaping wide. The wall had been covering a stairwell. Feeling a bit too giddy, he rushed down the stairs. Something was here. Something whole! The stairs showed little sign of being caught in an explosion. And who knows whether the government found it yet?

When he reached the bottom of the stairs he saw the place was a mess. The stairs led to a short corridor that ended in a pile of rubble. One door at the base of the stairs stood intact.

Every noise was louder now. He noticed every thump of his heart and the wind blowing by outside. Somewhere above he heard a bird peck among the barren rocks.

The door opened to a small room. It was dark down here. With no windows open to the outside the only light filtered in from up the stairs around the corner. Across from the door a desk faced him. To his right, another door. And to his left, behind an open door, stood a machine.

The device was about as wide as himself, shorter by a foot. Encased in glass on top of the device sat a couple of green gel packs. There were a couple of small dials, but the largest feature was a bright red switch. And... Eric gasped. *It's still on!* All these years the device was on, self-powered, probably atomic fueled, or perhaps it needed only a small amount of energy. But what was it doing? What would happen if he just...

Eric flipped the switch off. The device sighed as it powered down. Nothing else seemed to change. He was ready to shrug it off and go home when he heard a shuffle of feet behind him.

“Who are you?”

Eric spun around. Behind him stood a tall, Native American man wearing a white smock. A woman with thick, black hair at the desk jumped out of her seat, and another woman stood to his left.

“I...” Eric was at a loss for words. He didn’t have time to chat, though, for a loud noise hissed outside as a rush of wind tunneled down the stairwell. Eric rushed out the door and bounded up the stairs.

The first thing he noticed was that the rubble was gone. The building above was restored. He pushed his way outside, letting the door bang against the wall behind him. The city was back! Everything was back, like a normal, early 21st Century town. It was cold, though. Very cold. And the street was covered in a fresh blanket of snow. In the middle of July...?

Clouds rushed into the sky above and swirled together, forming the beginning of a tornado. A girl sat in the middle of the street on a motorcycle. He couldn’t

believe what he saw. It was the old kind of bike, with rubber tires and a gas-burning engine, humming like new. The girl just sat there in shock, watching as a tornado formed above her head.

“Hey!” he called out, but she didn’t look at him. Eric ran out with a huff, taking only a moment to see the tornado stretch farther to the ground. He grabbed her by the arm and tore her off the bike. The action broke her out of shock and she ran with him, back to the doorway.

Feeling somewhat safer with something over their heads, he stopped and looked back at the tornado. A man pushed past them roughly, holding a phone to his ear and wearing a gun holster across his chest. Standing in the middle of the street he finally noticed the tornado and brought his hands down, staring up in awe. The tornado twisted to the north before finally touching down.

“Can I use your bike?” Eric asked the girl, and wondered if he would even let her say no.

“What?”

“I’m parked up north, past the bridge. I need to...” He looked up at the tornado again as it started ripping into buildings, throwing debris in the air. Hopefully that wasn’t his block. “I need to follow that.”

“Sure, come on.” They ran out to her motorcycle, picked it up off the ground, and she handed him a spare helmet. “Just promise not to fall in love with me.”

Eric blushed, caught off guard. “Isn’t that what girls might say when they like a guy?”

She shrugged. “What can I say? You’re cute.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

What Happens After

YEAR: 2099
AFTER THE EVENT

Eric jumped off the bike as soon as Heaven came to a stop. They had passed right by Chevelle at the guard station and drove on into North Mapiya. Eric directed Heaven to his house.

But there was nothing there anymore. The tornado had ripped the house from its foundation. He stood there in shock. All that remained was the concrete front step leading into the house, and an upside down car to the right of where the entrance should be.

Chevelle's house next door was still there, maybe a few shingles blown into the yard, but everything looked in its place. Even the old maple in the front yard withstood the storm. "Was anyone in there?" Heaven asked, coming up beside him.

Eric turned his face away to hide the tears on his cheeks. He wiped them off with his shirt. "My dad... He can't be gone," he muttered to himself. "I saw him just this morning."

The roaring siren of a cop car from the south brought him back. An old squad car, complete with tires and the roar of a gas-burning engine, peeled around the corner and came to a stop behind Heaven's bike. *What is going on here?* Eric wondered. Where were these old vehicles coming from? And the town...

Soon after another cop car came around the corner

from the north. This kind he was familiar with; it hovered about a foot off the ground, casting a low blue light on the street. When the car came to a stop it drifted gradually to the ground.

“By the way, what’s your name?”

“Heaven,” she answered. “Heaven Hope. And yes, my parents were lame.”

Eric glanced back at his house. It filled him with fear and disbelief again. *This can’t be happening.* Here and there in the house — though it couldn’t really be called *in* the house anymore, could it? — studs still stuck up, sheared off at an angle. He could see down into each room in the basement. *South Mapiya back. Gas cars with rubber tires...*

“What year is it?” he asked Heaven.

“What *year* is it?”

A man got out of each car and gazed over the wreckage apprehensively, both Eric’s house and down the block. Looking at either of them, you could tell they were both law enforcement, but there was such a difference in dress and style. The one from the hover car was decked out in black and blue, fairly tight fitting clothing, ready for action. The other looked more relaxed, wearing a tan shirt buttoned half way up.

Eric’s was the first house flattened. Farther down the block, other houses showed serious damage, as well; one had the front of the house, just the front, torn off completely, so you could look inside like a Barbie doll house. A few blocks down, where houses turned into town homes, the tornado hadn’t even touched.

“When I came into town,” Heaven said. “It was December 3rd, 2012.”

Eric did the math in his head. That was just about 87 years in the past, and exactly when South Mapiya first disappeared. “This is not right,” he said, glancing sideways at Heaven. “You’re not supposed to be here.”

Soon a fire truck and a couple of ambulances rushed

onto the street. As people stepped out of the vehicles the policemen, both of them Sheriffs, it looked like, marched over and started barking orders. Eric and Heaven could hear them fighting from his driveway.

“Who do you think you are?” the first Sheriff, the one from the hover car, asked.

“I’m Sheriff Kevin Hunter, and I’m in charge around here,” the other Sheriff insisted. “Now I appreciate you being nearby and so quick to respond, but let me handle this.”

“I don’t believe this,” the first Sheriff said. “I don’t know where you and your dinosaur-wheels over there came from, but my great grandfather died almost 90 years ago. This is my town and I’ll be giving the orders.”

“Great grandfather?”

The policeman nodded. “Sheriff Joshua Hunter, servicing the city of Mapiya.”

A shrill scream pierced the air from behind and both Sheriffs snapped to attention. Eric turned around. “Beth!” His dad’s nurse, face and arms all scratched and bleeding, crawled out from behind the neighbor’s house. Eric ran over to her. “Are you all right?” She raised an arm and pointed over Eric’s shoulder. Her lower lip quivered before shrieking again.

Eric twisted his neck to look up, following Beth’s finger to a body hanging lifeless up in the maple tree. *Dad?!* “Dad!” He ran over to the tree and grabbed onto some bark, looking for a branch or handhold to climb up to his dad. *This just can’t be happening.* “Someone help me over here!”

He stepped aside for a pair of firemen. They quickly set up a ladder. One of them walked up and carefully hoisted Eric’s dad in his arms. From the ambulance two medics rolled a stretcher over and helped the fireman set the body down carefully. “How is he?” Eric said anxiously, running up to the medics. His stomach trembled looking at the body and his eyes glazed over.

“Is he all right?” *He has to be!*

One of the medics searched the neck for a pulse, but soon confirmed his fears. Eric bent over as the medics rolled the body away and retched onto the grass, vaguely thankful he had skipped lunch. He felt Heaven come up beside him and rub her hand on his back. Standing up, she wrapped him in a hug. “It’s all right,” she said soothingly. “It’ll be all right.”

“That was some freak storm,” one of the firemen remarked as they took the ladder away.

“Please make sure everyone else is all right,” Joshua said. “Get someone to help that lady.”

Eric let go of Heaven and walked up to the two Sheriffs. “I don’t know if this is going to make much sense,” the old fashioned Sheriff, Kevin, said. “But just a few minutes ago, before the tornado, I was the only Sheriff—” his eyes flicked between Joshua and Eric “—and it was night in the middle of winter.”

“I think I know what’s going on here,” Eric offered hesitantly. He glanced at each of them in turn — Joshua, then Kevin, then over to Heaven for reassurance. She nodded, prodding him on. “In fact, I think it’s my fault.”

“What just happened?”

Motega ignored Alina and Cecilia, who staring at the machine, at the device that he created. He tried running through the possibilities in his head. This must have had something to do with the experiment — people don’t just appear out of thin air — but he hadn’t the faintest clue as to how. Quantum Entanglement worked on the microscopic level and had everything to do with communication, not teleportation.

Alina said something to him again, but he missed it. “What?”

“What are we going to do?” she asked again.

“We’ll take care of it,” he said. *Dravin*. There was no telling what he would do about this. “The two of you go see what Dravin is doing. Stay with him, and don’t let him back down here.”

Alina and Cecilia left and Motega stepped back up to the machine. “What have I done?” he said, though the room was now empty.

“That kid.” There was something about that kid, something that was different; he couldn’t quite place it. He replayed the scene in his mind. He had adjusted the dials to the precise values he calculated. He and Alina had gone over and over these calculations for the past two weeks, making sure everything was precisely accounted for. *How do you account for teenagers teleporting into your lab?* “His clothes.”

“What?”

Motega spun around on instinct, but recognized the voice in time. “Alina, what are you doing here?”

“Cecilia is with Dravin,” she said. “His cell phone isn’t working so he’s off trying to contact local law enforcement.”

“I need you to watch him,” he said.

“You know him, don’t you? From your past?” Motega turned back to the machine and rested his head on the door frame. *What went wrong?* “Motega, talk to me.”

“The boy’s clothes,” Motega said again, facing Alina.

“What about them?”

“Did you notice how they were... different? It’s no style I recognized.” He pictured the kid in his head again, every detail. He had looked as surprised as they were, but there was no hesitation when he decided to leave, that much he remembered clearly. The kid had known where he was, the door, even the stairs right around the corner. “He didn’t teleport here. He was already here.”

“Motega, what are you talking about? You’re not

making any sense.”

“His hand,” Motega said. He could picture it clearly. “He had little metal strips on his hand. Alina, I don’t think that boy was from our time.”

“Would you listen to yourself? Motega,” she said, taking his hands in hers. “Stay with me, Motega.” She hesitated and glanced to the right.

“There’s something else, isn’t there?” he said. “Alina, did you see something up there?”

She shook her head. “No, no. It’s nothing.”

There was more to this puzzle, he could tell. But what could the device do outside of this room? “Alina, what aren’t you telling me?”

“It’s not just the kid,” she said. Her eyes darted back and forth as she thought about it again. Motega recognized that look. She was afraid. “Everything else has changed, too.”

“Everything?”

“Well, not everything.” She looked at the floor. “The buildings are all there. The trees, the roads, but... Motega, it’s day time out there. And it’s summer; the air is so warm.”

That’s more than even teleportation. He looked back at the device, Dravin’s words echoing in his head. *Think of the military aspects, Motega. A bomb could be delivered... our operatives wouldn’t have to be anywhere near it to set it off. The possibilities are endless.* He closed his eyes.

“Are you all right?”

His eyes snapped open. He knew what he had to do. “I’ve got to go out,” he said, moving to the door. “Could you go over the quadratic functions again? I think the answer is in the size of the field.”

“Yeah, sure, but...”

“And whatever you do, don’t let Dravin back in here.”

I already told you,” Eric said.

Kevin, the 2012 Sheriff, leaned in closer. “Then tell us again.”

“Yeah,” Joshua said, folding his arms. “Why don’t you start with where you broke in to a restricted area?”

“I was doing research for a school project.” Eric looked at both of the Sheriffs. Calling it research wasn’t good enough for them. “Okay, I was goofing around.”

“How did you get in there, anyway?” Joshua said.

Heaven moved in. “Does it matter?”

Eric frowned. This wasn’t working. He looked to Heaven. “Maybe you should tell them your story.”

Heaven nodded. “I came into town this evening.” She pointed over to her motorcycle. “On that.”

“This evening?” Joshua said, incredulous. “It’s only 3:40.”

“Yes,” she said again. “This evening it was December 3rd, 2012.”

“That’s... well, that’s just not possible,” Joshua said, dropping his arm to his sides. Despite protest, his mouth gaped, clearly trying to rectify her story with events. “Maybe... you bumped your head in the storm.”

“It was the same for me,” Kevin said. “Just a minute ago it was nighttime, in the winter, and I was investigating a break in at South Campus.”

“South Campus?” Joshua stared at both of them like they had just come from the psych ward. Mapiya, at least the Mapiya of 2099, had only one High School campus.

“It’s true,” Eric said, confirming the impossible. “And it’s my fault.” He glanced at Heaven again, large blue eyes like saucers staring back. “This morning, the town you entered, South Mapiya, didn’t exist.”

“What do you mean?” she said, eyebrow raised.

“That half of the town didn’t exist for the last 87

years,” he repeated. “It was a wasteland.” He hung his head and looked to Joshua, the modern Sheriff. “I... I broke into South Mapiya.”

“Broke in?”

“Yes. A friend distracted the guard and I climbed the fence. It was nothing bad, nothing dangerous,” he said in his defense, but his conscience struck at his heart like a knife. *And now my dad is dead.* “Just some research for a school project,” he said, trying to push the thought away. “But I found something.”

All three of them were staring in disbelief now, no other objections left to be made. Behind them the emergency teams were searching through the debris for survivors of the tornado, but the three here were enthralled. It crossed Eric’s mind how ridiculous it must be, talking about this as people were dealing with life and death situations down the block, as his dad lay dead, but the enormity of it all hadn’t yet hit him.

“I found a device in a lab. It was still active.” He grinned a bit, sheepishly. “It had a big, well, glowing red button.”

“So you pressed it,” Joshua said, crossing his arms again.

Eric nodded. “Wouldn’t you? After that, everything changed. There were people there. Heaven, here, was one of them. And all the buildings came back. Even the air was... cold.” *Everything had come back, a ghost town suddenly alive.*

“That makes some sense, actually,” Kevin said.

“It does?”

“The tornado,” he said, pointing and looking up at the sky. “Look, it’s warm here now. It must be, what, mid-summer? Where I came from... *when* I came from, it was December. The temperature this morning...” He caught himself, readjusting to the fact that ‘this morning’ was almost 90 years ago. “When I woke up it was below zero, Fahrenheit. If we took that mass of cold air and placed it

here, in the 70's or 80's in summer, we'd have an instant tornado from that mix."

"So it's true," Eric said, hardly believing it himself. "What do we do now?"

"Well, there's at least five families here without homes, from the looks of it, no doubt a number injured," Joshua said, gesturing to the medics in the street. "We need to take care of the immediate disaster."

"I think it's worse than that," Kevin suggested. "We have half a town, that's probably around... 5,000 people, who will probably be without power, without water, and with no clue about what's going on. And some of them probably had homes in North Mapiya, homes that are no longer theirs."

"My duty is to the people of *this* town first," Joshua said.

"With all due respect, Sheriff, but that town," he pointed off to the south, "your town, needs your help, too."

"You're their Sheriff. Why don't you take care of it?"

"All right, fair enough," Kevin said, scratching the stubble of his beard. "We can use the school there, South Campus, as a temporary shelter. We can set up cots in the cafeteria and the gymnasium. I'll find people to gather up blankets and pillows, whatever we can find. We could use some help with food and water and any power you can provide."

Joshua nodded. "I can see about getting some teams to hook you up."

"What can we do?" Eric said.

"Go home, son. Let the officials take care of it." With that, each of the Sheriffs left. Joshua walked off down the street to get the status of the emergency personnel. Kevin went back to his car and drove off back to the south.

Eric turned back to his home, or rather lack thereof. "So what do I do now?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

Digging Deeper

“Troubles?” Alina said as she and Cecilia emerged from the building. Dravin stood in the middle of the road with his cell phone to his ear. It wasn’t working, so he messed with the screen on the smart phone for a bit and tried again, until he was frustrated enough that he threw it on the ground, cracking the screen.

Dravin walked over to Alina in a rush. “Give me your phone,” he said, hands out.

“And you’ll what? Call the National Guard?”

“There’s been a serious breach in security here, so just give me your phone.”

Alina grabbed her phone and flipped it open. No cell signal and no internet. *That’s odd.* She always got signal here. “Mine’s not working either.”

“Bah,” Dravin said, waving his hand. “Never mind.” He stalked off in the direction of the alley behind the building.

“Follow him. Stay with him,” Alina told Cecilia.

“Alone?”

“I’ve got to go see what Motege is doing, see if we can figure out what’s going on here. But Dravin is dangerous.” How, she wasn’t sure yet, but she could tell this was personal for him, and she didn’t want to find out when it was too late.

“I’m coming with you.” Dravin jerked up as he opened

the door to his car to see the lab tech marching over to him.

“I don’t have time for this,” Dravin said, curling his lip.

“You’ll make time.” She looked over the car at him. “Nice Mercedes. Now let me in, if you want the QED, and if you want us to continue cooperating with you.”

Dravin sat down tentatively, practically growling as he unlocked the door for her. He took off, turning north up the main road that connected North and South Mapiya. “It worked, didn’t it?” he said. He drove slowly, watching the buildings as they passed. There were people milling about, especially around the gas station down the street, but it didn’t look like anyone had power.

“What are you after, Dravin?” Cecilia asked.

“Excuse me?”

“Power, prestige, money? Why are you so concerned about this experiment?”

“I’m just following orders, um...” Dravin said, trying to remember her name.

“Cecilia.”

“Right, Cecilia.” He stopped at an intersection. The stoplights were flashing. The whole town must be out of power. “I work for the Federal government and they want to use the technology you’re creating.”

He continued on, coming to the road into North Mapiya. He took note of the odd fence surrounding the town and the guard station controlling the road, though now destroyed from the tornado.

“What the...?” he muttered. Farther into the city he saw a car hum by, hovering a foot off the ground. A hover car, of all things. “What did that thing do?”

Cecilia shook her head, just as amazed. “I don’t know,” she said. A car in a garage down the road started to life, lifting off the ground. It turned in place and flew on down the road. *Back to the future? Or some kind of alternate reality?*

Dravin saw a police car turn in front of them and drive, or hover... fly? It went north, away from them. Down the street the tornado had done some damage here, tearing apart a handful of houses. Fire trucks and ambulances, all without tires, were parked down that road, men scampering around to clean up after the disaster. Dravin followed the police car.

Before long it pulled into a parking lot. The police station and City Hall of Mapiya were joined in one building. Dravin pulled in right beside the squad car.

"Excuse me," he called to the police officer getting out of the car. Dravin checked the markings on the squad car. Sheriff. "Excuse me, Sheriff. Just the man I wanted to see."

"Joshua Hunter," the Sheriff said and held a hand out to Dravin.

Dravin took his hand. "Joshua, I'm Dravin Davidson from the FBI," he said, flipping his badge out. Cecilia came around the car to join them. "My phone isn't working. I need your help to get into contact with the Bureau."

"I'm afraid I can't help you with that," the Sheriff said, digging his thumbs behind his belt.

"Well, you're going to have to, if you want to keep your job," Dravin threatened.

"You don't understand, son."

"Agent Davidson," Dravin corrected him.

Joshua scratched his chin and looked off to the side. "Agent Davidson. The Bureau hasn't existed for, oh, about 45 years now," he said, catching Dravin's gaze.

Dravin grabbed the Sheriff by the collar. "What are you trying to pull? What's going on here?"

"Mr. Davidson, take a look at my clothes," the Sheriff said, holding his hands out. "Surely you saw my car. Look around you. This isn't the world you once knew. You were caught in South Mapiya when it was suspended in time for 87 years."

Dravin let go of Joshua's collar. The man was right, but what he was saying... "That's impossible." *87 years? The FBI gone?*

"And yet, here you are."

"What do you mean the Bureau doesn't exist? The US wouldn't just do away with it," Dravin said, his eyes darting around, trying to catch all the differences around them. The cars, these clothes. The City Hall didn't look different, or at least not too different. There had to be another explanation.

"During the Oil War, or World War III," the Sheriff explained, "the United States ceased to exist. It joined forces with Canada and Mexico to form the North American Coalition." He glanced at Cecilia. "There's an agency like the FBI, the Internal Investigation Agency, IIA. But no one even knows you still exist, let alone cares that you used to work for the FBI."

Dravin grinned. "Well, they will. Now, I'm going to need you to get me in contact with the agency. And get me a phone."

The Sheriff crossed his arms. "And why is that?"

"I think I can explain that," Cecilia said with a glare at Dravin.

"Sure, talk away," Dravin said. "*After* you make that call."

Kevin burst into the police station, ignoring the dozen or so people crowding the lobby. Everyone was talking at once. The Deputy was busy trying to calm them down and hear from them in an orderly manner. In 2012, the police station had been in South Mapiya. Actually, with the downtown split as it was, Kevin figured they now had several duplicate buildings: police station, post office — they always had two High School campuses, so that

didn't count.

Kevin strode past them all to his desk and picked up the phone. No dial tone. He hit the phone several times and listened. Still nothing. "Wentworth," he called out to the Deputy. Kevin cursed silently to himself; Wentworth would be his only Deputy still around. The others, along with a majority of the residents, lived in the north. "Wentworth," he called out again, louder this time, to be heard above the crowd. "Hey, quiet everyone!"

They stopped and turned to the Sheriff, who breathed a sigh of relief at the silence. "Yes, Sheriff?"

"We need to use South Campus as a temporary shelter. Get the word out." He was explaining quickly, maybe too quickly, but with recent events he wanted to follow up on it quickly. "Have anyone who had houses in North Mapiya to meet there, in the auditorium. We should be receiving some help from the police in the north."

"Wait, what are you talking about?" a woman from the group asked. "What do you mean *had* houses in the north?"

"I didn't explain that part?" Kevin said.

"No."

He looked at the group and took stock. Fine upstanding citizens, all of them. Could they handle the truth of what just happened without starting a panic? He saw that barb wire fence now surrounding the town. The sky went from dark to light, the weather from cold to warm, and a tornado passed over the city. That's what everyone knew. Would they react better, these dozen or so, knowing what really happened before everyone else? What was the normal way to react to the news that you and your town had been suspended in time for 87 years?

"Just go to the school auditorium. We'll explain everything there. Gather up friends, neighbors, coworkers — anyone who was with you here in South Mapiya — and meet us there."

Kevin waited for everyone to file out and turned to Wentworth. “Sheriff, what’s going on?”

He stared at the Deputy, calm and serious. “You’re not going to believe it.”

Motega strolled down the street at a level pace, trying to appear casual. He looked over his shoulder for the third time. No one was around for the moment. The next building on his right was the city armory, an old two-level brick building.

It was a holdover from the 80’s, when the Cold War was going strong and the commies could attack at any time. Today it was mostly dormant, but still held by the military. Motega had walked past it plenty of times in the past couple months, on his way to Caribou for his morning hot chocolate. It still held weapons.

Motega trotted up a long set of stairs to the raised entrance. He took a look at the door; it had an electronic locking system. The building was old, but they kept the security up to date. The light was out on the key card reader, though. The electricity was still out. He gave the door a good hard tug but it wouldn’t budge. He jerked it hard a few times, just for good measure. Nothing.

Jogging back down the stairs he exhaled in frustration. *There has to be another way in*, he thought, so with another glance down the street — still no one around — he took a walk around the armory, looking for another entrance. In the back he found a steel door, the kind with the lock in the crossbar system, wedged open. *Someone’s been here*, he figured. *Since the experiment, or maybe just before it. The Event that turned night into day and winter into summer.*

Motega slid into the armory. He needed only one thing.

After his stop at the police station, Kevin drove farther east to Shem Sweeny's house. It belonged to the father of Jack Sweeny, the boy who had his locker broken into back in 2012.

Kevin sucked in some air and surveyed the lot. The house was small, one bedroom, and a dirty blue with broken white shudders. It couldn't have been more than 600 square feet or so and the porch caved in on the right. The sight struck Kevin as sad; Shem was capable of so much more than this. An American flag flapped proudly in the wind, hung from the rim of the roof, but even it, too, was showing significant signs of wear.

The place felt a bit strange, but he couldn't place it. It wasn't horrible maintenance or the vacant expression of the house staring back at him. It was like... Kevin shook his head. It just felt strange. But then, the whole city felt a bit strange after what happened.

Shemuel Sweeny, Jack's dad, had several cars parked farther back in the yard, behind the house, collecting rust and taking up space. A stack of old tires near them was still wet from the snow melting. The yard was littered with good deals or free tickets like that, half-finished projects that, at the time, were sure to have brought Shem that extra cash needed to make ends meet, in a someday that never came.

Kevin walked up to the front door, avoiding the rotten pieces of the first porch step, and knocked hard three times. There was no response from inside. Kevin listened hard. Maybe he could hear someone scurry around from room to room. He wasn't sure. "Shem," he called out. "It's Sheriff Hunter. I just want to talk with your son for a minute."

The door snapped open and Shem wedged himself in

the crack. His clothes looked about as bad as his house, torn and stained. “He... Hi Sheriff,” he said, stammering. “What can I do for you?”

“What’s going on in there?” Kevin asked, trying to peak behind him, but Shem was working hard to keep the door closed enough to block off any view of the inside.

Shem squeezed through the doorway and pulled the door shut behind him. “Nothing, nothing. Just a little project for me and my boy.”

He wouldn’t have considered himself a very good Sheriff if he didn’t know immediately that Shem was lying. “Can I come inside?”

Pulling his long hair out of his face and tucking it behind his ear, Shem shook his head. “I’d rather not,” he said. “It’s an awful mess. I’m sorry. You understand.”

Unfortunately, even when you knew someone was lying, it was hard to tell why. And his suspicion wasn’t enough to get him a warrant, that is, if they still needed a warrant in the future, or on the other hand, if they were allowed search and seizure at all. He was starting to wonder whether the other Sheriff was right, Joshua — his great grandson. Maybe he didn’t have the ability to be Sheriff anymore, so cut off from his time and his laws.

“Sure. Shem, last night...” he said. No, that was wrong. “About an hour ago there was a break in at the school.”

“An hour ago?”

“Yeah, it’s a long story,” Kevin said, trying to figure out how he would explain. “But about an hour ago it was the night of December 3rd, 2012. Now it’s July 8th, 2099.” He put his hands up. “Don’t ask me how it works, I don’t know myself. I’m sure there’s some fancy science explanation, but it’s true.”

“I believe you. I was, well, when it got real bright and warm,” Shem said. He glanced back at his house as if itching to get back inside. “I just, I figured there was some explanation. I figured I’d just wait and see what

happened.”

“Well, just before it happened—” Kevin stopped short at the sound of a crash from inside the house, like ceramic breaking, and he leaned to try to see behind Shem, maybe a glance through the tall skinny window on the side of the door. “Is someone in there?”

Shem shook his head and swallowed hard, leaning to block Kevin from seeing inside. “Cat.”

“Well, Shem, there was a break in at the school,” Kevin said, continuing on. “Your son’s locker was broken into. I’d like to talk to him, if you don’t mind.”

“He’s not here,” Shem said, and Kevin was sure that was the truth.

“Really?”

Shem shook his head again. “Sorry, Sheriff,” he said, as if making a point of using his official title. “I haven’t seen him.”

“Well, when you do, could you let me know? I’d like to see if he could tell me what he had in that locker, what could have been stolen. That sort of thing.”

“I’ll be sure to have him contact you,” Shem promised. “Is there anything else? I’d really like to get back to what I was working on.”

“You really don’t know where your son is, Shem? Or, where he was an hour ago, when all this happened?”

“I’m sorry, Sheriff,” Shem said with a shrug. “You know how teenage boys are. He’s independent now, all over the place.”

You mean you’ve neglected to keep tabs on him, Kevin thought, thinking back to his son and how he imagined he’d keep control when he was a teenager, though that was probably unfair. He had no idea what it was like to raise a teenager, *and now I never will.* Both his wife and his son were in the north when he was suspended in time with the rest of South Mapiya.

“Okay, Shem. Oh, and call me Kevin, not Sheriff. We were friends once, and besides, I’m not sure that’s my

title any longer.”

Shem nodded. “Will do.”

“Take care of yourself.”

“I will. Thanks Sheriff, er... Kevin.”

Shem waited for Kevin to turn and walk back to his car before he opened the door and slipped back inside. Kevin stopped at his car and looked back, his hand on the door handle. Something struck him as strange about this place, about that whole conversation. He was about to dismiss it again — he was just disturbed about the whole series of events last night, that is, this afternoon — but one more look wouldn't hurt, right?

Kevin walked along the outside of the house and around towards the back. Everything still looked the same, he thought, until he noticed a large satellite dish installed on the roof in the back, looking nice and new. It seemed out of place. With how everything else looked around the house, old and run down, here was a spectacular new satellite dish.

He dismissed the thought just as quickly. People have been known, for a long time, to place entertainment above everything else in their life. For Shem, here, it was just a nice form of escapism.

CHAPTER NINE

Invitation

Chevelle thanked the guard for the ride and stepped out of the car to survey her street. For such a small and brief tornado it had done a lot of damage: trees uprooted, houses torn apart, cars tossed aside, and debris strewn across the road. Her house was still standing, that was good, but Eric's house was gone; as if the tornado just decided which houses were on the menu, who it wanted to make miserable today.

Several medics dotted the neighborhood. One lady sat on a stretcher, her head wrapped in gauze and bandages. At the end of the block a couple firemen were digging through a pile of two-by-fours to get to a man underneath. There was no warning with this tornado. No chance to get safe from its ferocity.

She spotted Eric and that blond from the bike standing in front of the foundation of his house. She started walking over to them. Chevelle had already figured out why the tornado appeared, and so quickly. One of the benefits of science class, she supposed. There were five classes of tornado indicating severity, F1 being the lowest. This tornado couldn't have been more than an F1 or an F2. It didn't have enough time to form.

The buildings in South Mapiya were the clue. Everyone in Mapiya knew the basic facts around the disappearance of half their town, even though it happened so long ago. The town disappeared in the winter, in December. If those buildings came back, then the air mass probably came back with them. Quickly mix cold and warm air and you have the makings of a tornado.

Chevelle stormed up to Eric. “You left me back there. You just left me.”

“I’m sorry,” Eric said, putting his hands up. “I had to get back here. I had to see.”

“And who is this?” she said, pointing to the blond.

“This is Heaven.”

Heaven walked up to Eric and hugged his arm casually. “I don’t know who you are,” she said. “But he just lost his dad.”

Chevelle stepped back, aghast. “Eric, I—” She wanted to step up and give him a hug, tell him she was sorry and everything would be okay, even if it didn’t seem like it right now. She wanted to be supportive like a best friend should, but it seemed almost pointless with his new friend, Goldilocks, hanging on to his arm. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, looking at the foundation of his house anew.

“It’s okay,” he said. She could tell from his voice that it was not okay, but she didn’t know what to say it. *How can I make this better for you, Eric?* “Heaven, this is my best friend, Chevelle.”

“Nice to meet you,” Heaven said, holding out a hand.

Chevelle nodded, but ignored the hand. Instead she stared at Eric’s house. It was just gone. Across the foundation she could see into the back yard. The tree fort they had built together when they were younger had been plucked out of the tree.

“Yeah,” she muttered. Not the response she meant, but this whole thing was just overwhelming with the tornado, the town, even that bike Eric had been riding. This girl must have been from 2012.

“And your nurse? What was her name, Beth?”

“She’s okay.” Eric glanced back at one of the ambulances. “She’s pretty banged up, but she’ll be okay.”

“Well, you can stay with me,” Chevelle offered. “On the couch downstairs, probably.”

He chuckled. “You sure? What about your parents?”

Chevelle shrugged. "They'll be fine with it, considering." Both Eric and Chevelle's parents had forbid sleepovers around the time they entered puberty, not that she ever thought of him that way. They loved the friendship they had, growing up their whole lives together, but they didn't want to take any chances. "You can stay, too," she offered to Heaven. *Chevelle, do the right thing.* "You can use my bed."

"You sure you don't mind?"

Chevelle shook her head. "Think nothing of it. I'm sure you haven't had a good night's sleep in—"

"Oh, about 90 years or so, from what I hear," Heaven said, rolling her eyes with a grin.

"Right. You know, the Summer Dance at school is going to be this Saturday. You should come."

"Chevy, this is no time to worry about your dance and your stupid crush," Eric said, a bit harshly. "A school dance is not what this town needs right now, not what I need right now."

"It's exactly what you need," she insisted. "It's the perfect thing to take your mind off the tragedy of what just happened. You know, to lighten the heart with a bit of joy." *And so what if I get to have a night out with that cutie, Blayze?*

"Heh, I still don't even have a date, Chevy."

Chevelle looked over at Heaven. "Whatever. You can take her." She wouldn't think Heaven would win any scholarships, but she'd be nice for Eric to look at, at least. And, Chevelle would admit, she had gone out with boys for less.

Eric looked at Heaven for a second, then shook his head with a blush and little nervous smile. "Whatever, Chevy. Anyways, I should probably go get my bike now. Heaven, would you mind giving me one last lift?"

Heaven nodded and followed Eric's lead back to her bike, a sporty if over-sized machine with a long orange flare. Eric tossed her duffel bag over his shoulders and

got on the bike behind her, holding her at the waist for support. Seeing them, Chevelle almost felt a tinge of regret at having suggested he take her out, but she waved the thought away. She had to go tell her parents, and get the house ready for visitors.

Eric slid off the bike as soon as Heaven shut it off and he handed her bag back. “Thanks,” he said. “For everything.”

She shrugged it off. “I can’t imagine doing any less for a cute boy like you.” Eric smiled, looked away, and his cheeks turned red, which was just what she was going for. “So tell me,” she said. She slipped off the bike, too, and followed Eric to his. “How does it work?”

“My bike?” He climbed on top and pulled a key chain from his pocket. At least, it looked like a key chain, but instead of keys it mostly had little colored sticks about the length of her pinky finger. “One of these chips is the key. I keep it in my pocket and there’s a sensor in the bike. It knows when I’m riding it so when I press this button,” he pointed to a big round black button just in front of the handle bars, “it just starts right up.”

“But—” Her eyes went to the side as she tried to figure out how to say it without pointing out the obvious. “Um, it hovers.”

Eric laughed. “Oh, that.”

“Yeah, just that,” she said with a smile. “Simple, right?”

“It’s not that it’s simple,” he said, looking up at the sky now thinning out from the storm. “Well, how does anything work? Let’s see, in your time they had light bulbs and TVs, oh, actually your motorcycle is a good example. How does that work?”

She shrugged and wrinkled her nose. “It’s just a

motor. Sparks ignite gas that pushes pistons that turns the motor and, well, it goes.”

“Right. And most people probably didn’t know more than that, even when they were common use.” Were *common use*, she thought. *So long ago*. “It’s the same here.

“What powers most things today runs on a nuclear principle. Housed in a box about, so big,” Eric said, holding his hands apart as wide as his chest, “something to do with the radioactive decay of certain particles provide energy and ultimately electricity to power things, and well, make them go.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?” she wondered.

Eric shook his head. “Not as bad as back in your time. If you broke the housing on one of the power cells and, like, slept near it for a while, you might get a bit sick, but nothing that’ll kill you.” He laughed and her heart jumped a little. “At least, I hope not. That’s one thing that hasn’t changed. Diseases and disorders are still just as prevalent these days, maybe even worse. One thing gets cured, two other disorders replace it.”

After a chuckle, he became quiet and looked down at his bike, getting serious now. “Heaven, it’s not a bad idea, you know, coming with me to the dance.” He glanced back up at her and she could tell he was trying to read her response.

“Eric, I... I don’t know what to say.”

He nodded. “You know, it’s okay if you don’t want to. Just a thought.”

“It’s not that, Eric.” She sighed. How could she make it clear? Not more than 24 hours ago she was on the run, escaping from her foster family, from the system that sent her from one bad foster parent to another. She even stole the motorcycle he admired so much, not to mention the money she kept hidden in her bag. She wiped away a tear from the corner of her eye. “Eric, you don’t want me. I—I’m just damaged goods.”

He reached out and tilted her chin up so she could look him in the eye. “Don’t I get to decide what I want?” he said. That just made it harder, him being so kind and chivalrous. But he had this perfect life in the suburbs — she sniffed, and laughed a little — and a great best friend. “Don’t commit to the dance, then. How about just one date? Tomorrow night.”

“You’re not giving up, are you?”

“Is that a yes?” he asked with a smile.

She nodded. “Sure, one date.”

Kevin was driving back to the police station from Sweeny’s house when he noticed a man walking slowly on the side of the road, looking over his shoulder. The Sheriff pulled up alongside him and slowed down to the pace of the man’s walk. “Moteга, I presume?” he called from his car.

Moteга stopped, checked his pocket briefly, and stepped up to the car, bending over to look inside. “I’m sorry, Sheriff. Do you know me?”

Kevin nodded. “A man contacted me yesterday, a Dravin Davidson from the FBI, and informed me about your science experiment. Said he was coming into town to check up on it as a bit of a heads up, in case he needed local help, he said.” Odd enough that an agent would ask for his help, but even stranger that he thought Moteга would be any kind of a threat. “So I looked into it.”

“I probably don’t have to explain to you how uncomfortable that makes me,” Moteга said. “So how can I help you?”

“Get in the car. I’ll give you a ride to your office. I think it’s time you explained what’s going on around here.”

CHAPTER TEN

Explanation

“Find anything yet?” Motega marched into the lab with the Sheriff in tow.

“Not exac—” Alina started to say before she noticed the Sheriff.

“Alina, this is Sheriff Kevin Hunter. Kevin, Alina.” Motega motioned to the computer. “Can I drive?”

Alina stood up and let Motega sit at the computer. After a few clicks the graphs, charts and calculations for the experiment went away. He brought up a diagram, a demonstration of the experiment. “This is the QED,” he said. “The real one is behind that door.”

“QED?”

Alina nodded. “That stands for Quantum Entanglement Device.”

“And this... this QED is what pulled us forward 87 years?”

“No,” Motega said with a terse shake of the head.

“But that boy from the future, Eric, he said he found this machine, the only thing still standing in South Mapiya, and pressed a big red button—” The Sheriff raised his hands, as if giving up with a shrug. “And pulled the whole town into the future.”

Motega shook his head again. “I think this experiment caused it. After all, the town *did* appear right when that kid hit the button, but we weren’t pulled forward in time. We were suspended for 87 years.”

“Suspended?”

“Quantum Entanglement works at the atomic level,” Alina explained, reaching over Motega’s shoulder to

point at the computer. “The two packs in the diagram here are entangled with each other. Basically, what it means is that if I measure the spin of atomic particles in one pack, I know the entangled particles in the other pack have the exact opposite spin.”

Kevin nodded and glanced back at the closed door where they said the machine was. “I’m not following. What does entangled mean?”

“Quantum Entanglement is when the state of two particles is identical but opposite. Always.” Motega sighed and leaned back in the chair, trying to figure out how to explain it to someone without a science background. “Say I could cut a die in half such that we had two complete, six-sided dice in an entangled state. I give one die to you and you travel to Tokyo. I keep the other die with me. To all appearances, these are two completely different dice, each with their own set of sides numbered one through six.

“Except that in this example, if I roll my die here in Mapiya and it came up with a one, your die in Tokyo would display a six. If you rolled a five, my die would say two. Always. No delay and no exception. This is because they are entangled,” Motega’s hands shook, starting to get excited now, “to the point that we can communicate because we are certain of this behavior.”

“Well, I have a cell phone, Mr. Wilson,” Kevin said. “Or I did before this accident rendered it useless. Why don’t you just give me a call in Tokyo?”

“Frankly, it’s just too slow,” Alina said, stepping in.

“Slow?”

“Your phone has to turn your voice into digital data. It then sends that data, over the air, to a cell tower. The tower transmits it to a satellite, which may have to send it to another tower or satellite, and eventually it’s sent down to our phone.” Alina glanced around, as if looking for an audience, but Kevin was it. “All of that travel can take several seconds, and it relies on your having a solid

connection to your cell phone's network.”

Motega took over again, the two of them working together for so long they went hand in hand. “With Quantum Entanglement, it doesn't matter how far away you are. The reaction is instantaneous and undetectable. Imagine taking a device with this ability to Mars, or farther. Instead of having to wait minutes for a round trip communication with Earth, and being reliant on direct line of sight, we could communicate at any distance immediately. It's the kind of thing that will make space travel, even interstellar travel, palatable, let alone possible.”

“I think I'm starting to get it,” Kevin said. “But how does this suspend a town in time?”

“I calibrated the machine to entangle the particles in two gel packs on top of the machine,” Motega said, trying again. “They're linked; no matter how far apart we take them, the link is lasting and instantaneous.”

“But, I didn't take into effect a secondary field that extends just outside of the machine. I don't know how it got there.” Motega grabbed the mouse and clicked around, examining another diagram. “The second field is like a double rainbow, outside of but reflective of the first.”

“So, South Mapiya was engulfed in a Quantum Entanglement field?”

“Yeah,” Motega said with a nod. “How's that for a tagline?”

“Sounds like something out of a science fiction movie.”

“It's a little different than the first, though,” Alina said. “Somehow every particle in the town was entangled with another particle.” She looked at Motega, her eyes betraying a mixture of excitement and fear. “Do you think the entanglement went through another dimension?”

“You could be right.”

Kevin stood up straight and ran his fingers through his hair. “Now this is really getting out there.”

“Well, believe it. We’re living in it.”

The Sheriff started pacing. “Okay, so, another dimension. We’re talking about something like parallel earths or other worlds?”

Motega shook his head. “That’s a common misconception to make the sci-fi stories work.” He sighed, looking down at the ground, wondering how to now explain this, too. “There are those in Quantum Mechanics research that propose that there are many universes, maybe even parallel universes. It’s more of a result of needing them to make the math work than actually interacting with them.

“We see the world in three dimensions,” he said. “Four if you count time as a dimension. The study of Quantum Mechanics is revealing that there are many more dimensions, perhaps up to 11. Maybe more, who knows? But they exist here, in this very world that we see, not some alternate universe. These other dimensions are just so small that we can’t perceive them, kind of curled up in on each other.”

“You lost me again,” Kevin said, his turn to get exasperated. “Sorry, I’m sorry. I’m trying really hard to follow along here, but how can a dimension be curled? How can we have more dimensions? If I’m— Agh!” He placed his hand on the wall and rubbed his temples. “If I’m flying in a helicopter I can go up and down, left or right, and backwards or forwards. Three dimensions. 3D.”

“Don’t beat yourself up about it,” Motega said. “It’s nearly impossible to conceptualize, let alone understand. Here—” He pulled out a drawer and found a pen. “Let’s say you’re looking at this pen from half a mile away and the pen is a mile long. What would you see?”

“At that distance I suppose I’d see a straight line.”

“Right,” Motega said, holding up a finger. “One

dimension. If an ant was crawling on that long pen you'd have to give only one coordinate to find its location. And if this was the only thing we knew you'd swear that there was only one dimension."

"But the pen exists in three dimensions," Kevin said, nodding. Motega could see the dots connecting in his head.

"Right. If you zoom in close enough, and maybe drew a line around the pen at regular intervals, it'd start to become apparent that there was a second circular dimension curled up alongside the first." Motega set the pen down. "It's impossible to visualize these smaller dimensions, but they are there."

"Okay, so, this device was turned on," Kevin said, going over it again to make sense of it. "And some particles from somewhere else were entangled with the particles from South Mapiya. And we were, what, wrapped up into one of these smaller dimensions?"

"Kind of. At least, each atomic particle was, possibly," Motega offered. "And when that kid hit the button, the particles reversed. We returned to the normal world of the perceivable three dimensions and," Motega waved his hand, "whatever else was here was wrapped up into that teeny, curled, 11th dimension."

"We were suspended in time for almost 90 years." Kevin sucked in air and held it. "This could be a problem," he said.

"Yeah, we're a town out of time."

"No, I mean—" He looked at Motega, shaking his hand a bit anxiously now. "Could it happen again?"

"That is the question, isn't it?"

Kevin glanced at his watch. "It's almost nine o'clock," he said with a chuckle. "That must mean we're close to six o'clock now; this is going to be a long day. I've got to reset this." He fiddled with the watch a bit. "Let's keep in touch. I don't know what we'll do with our phones no longer working with the new technology, but

there's a police office in South Mapiya. I'll probably still be found there for the time being.

"Oh, and if you need a place to stay, the school in South Mapiya — it's just a little to the west — is being set up as a temporary shelter for any left homeless from this."

"Thanks, Sheriff," Motega said. "But we were staying at a hotel here at the south end of town. I'm hoping they'll let us keep using the rooms for awhile."

"Okay. Well, it's there if you need it. I'll probably be staying there. Take care."

"Oh and Sheriff, you might want to check out the old armory down the street," Motega suggested. "I thought I noticed the back door open as I walked by."

"Sure. I'll add that to the list. Thanks."

Motega waited for Kevin to leave before standing up and letting Alina sit back down. "So," he said, searching for some hint from her. "Did you find anything?"

"Not exactly." She pulled up the graphs she had been using at the time of the experiment and Motega looked on over her shoulder. They both knew what the graphs were showing. On the left was a graph showing the projected field over time, on the right the calculated field. The line on the left graph rose exponentially until it reach a diameter of about a foot, enough to engulf the case above the machine holding the gel packs. "Look at what happened here on the right," she pointed out. "The field increases until it splits here."

"The Double Rainbow effect, I was right."

"Yeah, but the second field increases exponentially until it approaches but doesn't reach 500 billion feet." Her eyes glazed over as she was calculating in her head. "That's about 100 million miles."

"So we could have entangled with any particles from here to the sun or the edge of the solar system."

Alina nodded. "But that's not the worst, Motega. This couldn't have just happened. Not with our calculations;

not the way we designed and built that machine.”

“You don’t mean—?” Motega said, not wanting to say it out loud. If it was impossible, if it wasn’t a design flaw...

“Someone sabotaged it. Do you think Dravin could have broken in here?”

Motega stared at the screen, racking his brain for some other explanation. There must have been some mistake, something they overlooked. Perhaps something so basic that they hadn’t even considered it yet. Finally, he slowly nodded. “Yes,” he said. “If he wanted to, I’m sure he could have found a way.”

“Motega, what do we do?”

He looked Alina in the eye, his mouth pulled tight. “We have to stop him from getting access to this machine.” But it wouldn’t be that easy. His right hand subconsciously tapped on the small bulge in his jacket. Dravin was devious, he knew. He’d be doing everything to get back into the FBI right now to get control over this project. “Whatever the cost, we have to stop him.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Goodnight

Eric returned to Chevelle's house shortly after his conversation with Heaven at his bike. He set his backpack on the floor and dropped onto the couch. For a few moments he just sat there silently, just being there. The freak tornado taking out his house would be bad enough, even losing his dad, but all of this came about by bringing half the city back from the past. Was it his fault? Was it a disaster that destroyed the houses on his block and took his dad's life? Or was it a wonderful miracle that he brought thousands back from the dead?

There wasn't an answer; the room wouldn't give him one, no matter how long he waited. He held up his left hand and squeezed in his fingers a bit for the brackets he wore to trigger a holographic image of a phone in his hand. He took his right hand and drew a finger through the image to make a selection and the hologram of the phone became the image of a remote control for the TV. He switched on the TV and scanned through the channels until he could find something particularly action-packed to take his mind off things.

The television display started out as a flat projection. It was a bit annoying; he didn't know why Chevy's family liked to watch them like that. He punched his finger at the holoremove, switching the TV to an expanded holographic 3D mode, the way life was meant to be viewed.

"Hey Eric." He glanced back to see Chevy coming down the stairs in a T-Shirt and pajamas, her hair still wet from the shower.

“Hey, where is everyone?” Eric tried not to think of Chevelle in the shower, or being alone together, and definitely not her just wearing pajamas. He had a date with someone, finally, and he liked it. He could stop mooning over Chevy. They would be just good friends, like they’ve always been.

“My parents went to the movies. Heaven is upstairs, in my bed,” she said, walking over to the kitchen. She grabbed a box of vanilla wafers from above the fridge and started snacking. “She had been traveling all day, and with the time difference it’s like twelve o’clock her time, so she said she’s wiped and she’s checking in early.”

Chevy meandered over to the couch and sat down beside him, putting her feet up on the coffee table. She offered him the bag of wafers so he took one. She grabbed another. His heart was pumping so hard in his chest and his arms felt weak, but he tried to ignore it. He wanted nothing more than to lean in closer to Chevy, to put his arm around her. The picture of her head on his shoulder made his head spin.

He took a deep breath and held it, trying to relax. While he wanted nothing more than to be with her, she was watching the TV holograms act out a prison escape. Romance was the farthest thing from her mind. He let the air out of his lungs in a long sigh. She was with Blayze this week. Next week, who knows? But not him. He was the boy next door; Chevy thought of him like a brother.

It was best to think of something about her that annoyed him, like the last movie they saw together, and how she talked through most of the movie, mocking it. Chevelle was into serious films, or those sci-fi and fantasy flicks, but he was interested in that movie. Of course, he hadn’t said anything; he had just played along to keep Chevy smiling.

“Eric, you know, I’ve been wondering,” Chevy said. And there it was again, always ready to ruin a good show with talking. “You remember that fort we built together?”

Eric nodded. He was proud of it then, but he wouldn't want to do it again; it was too much work. For his kids, he figured, he'd go with one of the pre-built, modular forts they sold. Now it was gone, plucked right out of the tree by the tornado. He wondered what Chevelle wanted to say, but she didn't go any further with it for a while. She was silent again until the scene cut to a commercial. As a setting from his phone, the TV switched to mute automatically.

Chevelle looked down into her bag of wafers, her face lowered in a solemn and mournful expression. "I'm really sorry about your dad," she said. "I wish there was more I could do."

"I know you do," Eric said. "Really, you've done enough, letting me and Heaven stay with your family. It's just—" Eric remembered then, last night as he had gone to bed. "Chevelle, I—" His voice caught in his throat and his eyes and cheeks hurt, trying to hold back tears. "The last thing I said to him, I can't—"

"You can't blame yourself," she said, putting a hand on his shoulder. "Don't think like that."

"You don't understand. He was being a good father, trying to tell me how proud he was of me. It's like he knew he was dying, from the encephalitis."

"I'm so sorry." She was trying to be comforting, but she couldn't know how horrible he felt, how ashamed. The first tear rolled down his cheek and he couldn't stop the rest from coming.

"I just dismissed him, just like that. Like I had better things to do than spend one last night with him." *Because I wanted to talk to you again*, he thought but didn't dare say. *Because of this stupid teenage crush*. "I treated him like a child. I told him not to give the nurse a hard time when she put him to bed. Those were my last words to him. What kind of a son am I?"

She pulled him in, placed his head on her shoulder, and just let him cry. He sobbed, maybe for minutes, until

he finally felt like he could hold it back. He sniffed back the tears and pulled away. She handed him a box of tissues. After blowing his nose and wiping his cheeks he looked at her shoulder and a laugh sputtered through the pain.

“I got your shoulder all wet. Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“You’re a good a friend,” he said, and that’s all this was. She let him cry because she was a friend, not a lover. “You know, sometimes I don’t think we realize how good it is to be close friends like we are. Not many people have that.”

And that’s all we’ll ever be, he realized. Well, maybe that was the best. There were others, like Heaven. And if not her, he would fall in love with someone else. Chevelle would always be a good friend, and that really was something special.

The Minneapolis International Airport was a rush of activity. Dravin watched for a moment, Cecilia at his side, as everyone else ran around them.

The airport of the future seemed to have changed only on the surface from new technology. Holographic projections directed people where to go. The security gates were several columns of tall glass panes, the interlaced electronics barely discernible. A security guard sat at each lane examining the data collected by the glass as people walked through.

The technology changed, a little, but the airport continued to be the airport. Busy people anxiously waiting in line to check in their bags, or anxiously waiting in line to get past security and into the terminal. Dravin wondered briefly whether he should be surprised or relieved that things hadn’t changed more.

“Come on,” Dravin said. He walked over to a stand and set his briefcase down. A holointerface was projected above the surface of the stand. Dravin examined the metal strips on his hand, the phone that Mapiya’s Sheriff set him up with. Cecilia had one of her own, as well. It also worked as identification; his 2012 passport and license wouldn’t be accepted here, let alone his badge.

He flexed his hand and the soft blue holophone appeared. He played with it some more. Stretching his hand made the phone’s image disappear, then curling the fingers like he was holding something brought it back. When he held the phone out to the airport’s interface at the stand the projection changed to acknowledge him and register him for the flight.

“What are you trying to accomplish, anyway?” Cecilia asked. She looked around the airport, eyes darting from person to person. Dravin wondered what she looking for.

“That’s not your concern,” he said. “Now come check in.”

She stopped, her gaze resting on a security guard walking towards them. She snapped a glare at Dravin. “Why don’t we just end this right here, then?” she said, spinning around and marching off to the guard.

Dravin grabbed her arm. His grip held her tight like a vice. “*Let go of me,*” she demanded.

“Sure,” he said, curling up the corner of his mouth in a sly grin. The guard noticed them now and started approaching. “I’ll let you go turn me in. In fact, why don’t we give up and go back to Mapiya? We can sit down with Motega and Alina and tell them everything. *Everything.* What do you say?”

He let go of her arm and she didn’t move, just sliced him through with a vicious stare. The guard came up beside them, his right hand at the gun on his hip. “Is everything okay here?” he asked.

Dravin smiled and nodded to the man. “Quite all

right,” he said. “Thank you so much for your concern, officer.”

The guard just shifted his stance, still wary. “Ma’am?” Cecilia held Dravin in her stare. *What are you going to do?* Dravin was asking with his eyes. “Ma’am?”

“Yes,” she said finally. “I’m fine, sorry officer. Just a misunderstanding.”

“Okay.” The guard relaxed and let go of his weapon. “Just let me know if you need anything.”

“Thanks again, officer,” Dravin said. They both watched as the guard walked away. “Good choice,” he told Cecilia. “Now if you’re coming with me, go check in. Next stop, Washington.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Morning After

The next morning Chevelle was almost amazed by how routine school continued to be. Still, there was a certain buzz among the students. Talk floated from classroom to classroom speculating on what happened. The story had made the newspaper this morning, and probably last night's news; they had forgotten to watch. But when the bell rang the kids streamed into the classroom, just like every other school day. The bell rang again and classrooms emptied, students bouncing from locker to locker, some still talking about The Mapiya Event and the tornado, while others just talked about the dance this weekend.

Chevelle stood at her locker in a daze. South Mapiya was noticed, even talked about, but it barely affected their lives. It was a curiosity. And she had someone from 2012 living at her house, sleeping in her room.

Noticing Jodie Kowall, head cheerleader, walking her way, she turned to her locker and waved her phone over the lock. Detecting that it was her, the lock's light flipped green and the locker opened. "So, rumor has it that you have one of them at your house," Jodie said, leaning up against the locker next to her.

"One of *them*?"

"You know, one of the Twenty Twelvers," she said grinning. "One of the South Mapiyans. You have one of them *in your house*?"

Chevelle sighed. She would have asked what was with her attitude, but it was always like this with her

kind. She pulled her tablet from her locker. “What do you want, Jodie?”

“Are you going to be there tomorrow?” she said, standing straight and dropping the smile. “Or will you be too busy making out with your new boyfriend?”

Chevy chuckled inside herself. That’s what this was about. She was moving in on Jodie’s turf by going out with the quarterback? “Maybe we will,” she said, taunting Jodie as she slammed her locker shut. “That’s a great idea. Blayze and I will just sneak off under the bleachers leaving you and your kind to set up for the dance yourself.”

Jodie just tilted her head. “Are you going to be there or not?”

“I’ll be there.” *Get over yourself*, she wished she could say.

“Ugh, whatever.”

Chevelle let Jodie march off in a huff. She just shook her head. Some people were so full of themselves. Chevelle brought up her phone and quickly checked her calendar to see if there was anything else she needed for her next class. It looked like she was set, but she added a reminder to tell her fourth period teacher again that she needed to be excused tomorrow to help set up for the party.

“There you are.” Chevelle nearly jumped at Blayze’s voice. “Woah, are you all right?”

“Sorry,” she said with a smile. “Just wasn’t expecting you. It’s a good surprise, though. Good to see you.”

“Yeah,” he said, looking so hot in his red and gold letter jacket and his nearly shaved head. “I’ve been looking all over for you this morning.”

“Well, I haven’t been hiding,” she said.

She contemplated for a moment just reaching up and making out with him right here, but decided it would be better to wait until Jodie was around, just to make her jealous.

“I wanted to see how you were doing,” he said. “I heard the tornado touched down on your street?”

“Yeah, it just missed my house.” She glanced back. Jodie was long gone, unfortunately. “It hit Eric’s house, though. Took it right off the foundation. And he, well, he lost his dad yesterday.”

“That’s terrible. Tell him if there’s anything I can do—”

“I will.” She tossed her backpack over her shoulders and glanced around for Eric. Now that he brought it up, she was wondering again where Eric had been all morning.

“So, you looking forward to the dance?” Blayze said, somewhat casually resting his shoulder against the lockers and leaning closer to Chevelle.

She half-giggled and nodded. “Yeah, I’m excited about it. Excited to go with you. Thanks again for asking.” She tried to hide a grimace, hoping that wasn’t too strong.

“To be honest, I’m kind of surprised you said yes,” he said.

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, I thought you’d already be going with Eric. You guys are, like, inseparable.”

She laughed. “No way! We’ve been friends since kindergarten, that’s all. Ugh, he’s like a brother,” she said, which wasn’t entirely true, but the last thing she wanted was her date, or anyone, thinking she liked Eric.

“Hey, whatever Chevy girl. I’ve seen the way he looks at you.”

Chevelle shook her head. “Just forget about it,” she said, trying to put a smile in her voice and on her face. “There’s nothing going on between us.” And she wasn’t about to tell him that Eric was staying over at her house now.

“Sure, listen, I’ve gotta go. I’ll pick you up at your place around eight?” The dance started at 7:30, but it was

good to be fashionably late.

“Sounds good. See ya.”

“Bye.”

She watched him go, trying not to think about what he said, yet at the same time wondering if there was any truth to it. It’s not as if she hadn’t thought about it before, her and Eric. It just didn’t feel right. Eric was as good a friend as one could have. Why mess that up by playing around with feelings?

As if her thoughts conjured him up, she noticed Eric just then walking towards her. She checked her phone for the time; she really had to start heading towards her next class.

“Hey,” he said, keeping his head down.

“Hey,” she said. “Walk me to my next class?” He nodded, so they started walking down the corridor. “Where were you this morning? When I got up for school you were gone.”

He just shrugged. “I had to get out. Drive around for a bit.”

“Thinking about your dad?” she said, trying to walk the balance between concerned and unnecessarily bringing up sad thoughts.

“I don’t know, just about everything,” he said. “It’s my fault, you know? All of it. The tornado, the town. Heaven, and my goodness, thousands of others are homeless now.”

“You couldn’t have known. And you *didn’t* make them homeless, you brought them back from the dead.”

“Yes, and now because of it my dad is dead and his nurse is at the hospital.” She didn’t know what to say to that. How do you comfort someone from something like that?

“It’s all right, Chevy. You don’t have to worry. It was like this after my mom died, too, though I was a lot younger then.” He chuckled to himself, which sounded a bit grim, given the circumstances. “It’s kind of odd, you

know? Getting to know yourself. One side of my mind rationally telling me how I'm going to feel tomorrow."

"Eric." She stopped — they were at her class now — and put a hand on his arm. "You know that, whenever you need to talk, I'm here for you."

"Yeah, I know. Thanks," he said. "By the way, how was Heaven? She still at your house?"

Chevy nodded. "She was sleeping in when I left. I imagine yesterday was even bigger for her than it was for us, losing not only family but a whole world to the past." The bell rang.

"I have to be getting to my class, too," he said as she stepped back. "Heaven and I are going out tonight, so we may be back to the house a bit late."

With that he turned and left, and she went into her classroom. She plopped down at her desk realizing in wonderment that she felt maybe a bit of jealousy about Eric and his date. She looked at the classroom door as if she would see Eric still standing there. What if there was something to what Blayze had said? Not wanting to risk losing their friendship, what if she was risking losing something else?

When Heaven awoke there was nobody else in the house, another reminder that she was an outsider, not that she needed another reminder. Her whole life she had been an outsider, never quite fitting in at the foster homes, even the decent ones. And no one ever came for her.

It felt strange walking through someone's house like this, she thought. Surreal. She found herself wandering from room to room, relishing the silence and the freedom. There was a room across the hall from Chevelle's with a desk, a computer, and some bookshelves — the father's den.

Even so far in the future apparently books hadn't gone away completely. The computer, though, was a mostly flat rectangle and a thin keyboard. The rectangle thing was like the television; it would project the monitor in the air above the desk. So, while some things had changed little, if at all, other things were vastly different.

Heaven lingered in the room, looking it over. She always wondered what it would have been like if someone did come for her. Maybe it was all a lie when the state told her that her parents were dead and no surviving relatives could be found. Maybe they actually had been there somewhere, in a place like this.

And this den wasn't a den, it was her little brother's room. He was three years younger than her, his bed pushed up against the window there, and a baseball poster on the wall right above a stuffed Yoda doll. She would protect him. She wouldn't let any of the things that happened to her in home after home ever happen to him.

Heaven continued through the house, working up the dream in her mind. Downstairs in the living room she saw her family, laughing together and playing board games. Up the hallway was her parent's room. Two parents, still alive.

They had spent the last 15 years trying to find her again. Maybe she had been kidnapped, like that story of the girl who discovered who she was by finding her face on a milk carton. She was kidnapped when she was two and her kidnappers were the ones who died in a car accident. It was a big tragic story, but then they found her again and they welcomed her back as part of the family. Everything would be okay.

She opened her mother's jewelry case and picked out pieces to play with. It was a lovely dream, one that kept her going no matter what happened. But that's all it was, wasn't it? A dream. She had no parents and this wasn't her house, a fact emphasized everywhere she went. The calendar in the digital display on the wall read 2099.

Even if there was any chance in her dream being reality, it was gone. Even if she had parents, they were long dead by now. The uncle she hoped to find in the Black Hills: dead.

Snapping back to reality, Heaven examined the jewelry on her fingers, the necklace she wore. This didn't belong to her mother or her family. These were strangers and she could just as easily walk away from them and never see them again. They weren't like her. They had each other; they had money; they had a normal life. They wouldn't miss a few diamonds and pearls.

But looking at them, how beautiful that ring sparkled with so many little diamonds, she couldn't do it. Heaven put the jewelry away and rushed out of the room, her heart pounding. She couldn't do it to them, not now, not after they reached out and helped her so freely. A tear came to her eye as she thought about what she almost did to them, to people who maybe didn't care about her, but they were at least nice to her. What kind of person did that make her?

She didn't even need the money, either, Heaven realized. The duffel bag she brought with her, stuffed underneath Chevelle's bed upstairs, held more than enough money from the casino. Heaven smiled. That gave her an idea.

A loud knocking on her hotel room door woke Alina in the middle of the night. Groggily, she pushed the heavy comforter aside and slid out of bed. All the lights were on and the TV was playing the old movie *Back to the Future*, which she found quite odd, especially since the power was out after The Event the day before. A full moon seemed to shine just outside her window.

The knocking came again, jolting her senses. A loud

Bang! Bang! Bang! She rushed over to the door, for a moment forgetting her thin night gown and frizzled hair, and swung it open. Motega stood there, hand raised about to knock again. When she opened the door he smiled and dropped his hand. Dressed in a bold black tuxedo, his long hair smooth and shining, Motega looked absolutely astonishing, which instantly made her embarrassed, especially with her hair being such a mess.

“Uh, Motega,” she said, stumbling over herself. “Why are you here?”

“I am here for you,” he said, gliding towards her. “I’ve wanted to do this for a long time.” He leaned in and she closed her eyes, waiting for him to kiss her.

A loud knocking on her hotel room door woke Alina. She sprung up in bed and her head spun for a moment until she realized she had been dreaming. She put a hand to her chest, trying to catch her breath. The knock came again.

The light near the doorway was on, so that much was true. They must have restored power to the city. She opened the door to see Motega and another man talking. Also true from the dream, she was only in her night gown and her hair was a mess. Wishing she had thought about that before opening the door, she quickly pulled it shut again.

“Alina?” Motega called.

“Sorry, not proper,” she said. “I, um, was tired. Thought this was the bathroom door.”

“Anyways,” the other man said. Motega had called him Joshua before she embarrassed herself. “There’s one for you and one for Alina.”

She waited, her ear to the door. “How do they work?”

“There’s instructions inside. I know it must seem strange to you, but it really is a phone. I’m still using a flat screen phone, see. It just has the display on glass; strong, you can’t break them, but I think I’ll be upgrading soon. The holographic models like yours just came out in

the last couple years.”

“Okay, thanks Sheriff,” Motega said. “Why did you buy these for us?”

“I got approval from the state. We can’t do it for everyone, but a few of the more important people in town we wanted registered and available. You’ll find it’s also for identification.”

“All right.” Motega paused, probably looking at the phone again. Alina wondered how a holographic phone would work; it seemed like magic. “Thanks. How did you find us at the hotel, by the way?”

“I went online,” the other man, Joshua, said. It sounded like he was smiling.

“Excuse me?”

“There’s a web site that tries to trace where a dozen or so people in town were at the time of The Event. Because of your experiment, you and Alina were a couple of them. They had the hotel, so I just checked with the staff here. Nice of them to let you stay here for free.”

“Yeah, for now. Our bank accounts no longer exist, but what else is the hotel going to do? I imagine it will take some time to sort everything out. Well, thanks again.”

“Sure,” Joshua said, and after a pause spoke again. “Oh, and before I go. There’s a summer dance at Mapiya High School, well, North Mapiya High, now, I guess. A teacher and his wife left town. The tornado took out his house and he was going to take the opportunity to move closer to his parents. They haven’t left yet, but he mentioned he wasn’t going to make it to the dance. That makes us two chaperones short. Would you and Alina care to come?”

Please say yes. Please say yes. Please say yes.

“So, the Sheriff takes care of the guest list at a school party in the future?”

“Heh, no, not usually. But the principle asked if I knew any couples from South Mapiya who could come.

He thought it'd be interesting."

"Well, Alina and I aren't really... a couple," Motega said, and Alina wasn't sure how to read that. Did that mean he wanted to be a couple? Or was he turned off at the idea? "I'll have to ask Alina, but I'm sure that will be okay." That had to be a good sign, certainly.

"Okay, great. I'll see you later."

"Take care," Motega said. Alina listened to Joshua walk away.

A moment later Motega knocked on her door. "Alina, the Sheriff stopped by and gave us—"

"Yeah, phones, got it" Alina said, cracking her door open. There's no way she'd let Motega see her like this. He slid the package through the crack. She grabbed it, pulled the door shut and twisted around, leaning back up against the door.

"When you're ready, I'll be at the lab," he said.

"Okay, thanks. Bye," she said, wanting nothing more than for him to leave. When she heard him step away and shut his door she slid to the floor and buried her head in her hands.

This is not going well, she thought to herself, wishing Cecilia was there to tell her what to do. She had to change the game, get Motega to notice her. She rolled her eyes and looked up at the ceiling. It sounded stupid, even in her head. She gets propelled 90 years into the future with half a city and her biggest concern was how a man felt about her? She scolded herself for being so childish.

Change the game, she thought again, a smile creeping across her face. The Sheriff mentioned a dance?

935 Pennsylvania Avenue. Dravin looked up at the building. Cecilia waited beside him. Two thick cement columns helped hold up the top couple of levels in a

square section of the building offset from the rest. Above that they had added on since 2012, about ten floors of steel and glass. Though they went by IIA now, Internal Investigation Agency, they kept their headquarters in the same FBI building he knew.

The lobby was quite a bit different from what he remembered, though, a large circle of polished marble. At the center of the circle the IIA logo was etched into the marble. Near the entrance on the walls were memorials, a few touching on the America he knew, but several now praised the great NAC. That still felt so wrong to him. North American Coalition. Along the back of the lobby there were two rows of secured elevators and a number of receptionists.

“First, we try the straight forward approach,” he told Cecilia.

“What is your game in all this?” Cecilia asked in a hushed voice as she followed him towards the receptionist. “And don’t tell me it is for duty or your country or any of that crap. Your duty disappeared with your country and your orders no longer apply.”

“And what do you care? You’re just my watchdog, isn’t that right?”

“I just,” she said, hesitating. “I might help you. I just don’t want to see anyone get hurt.”

“Motege and the experiment are mine,” he said matter-of-factly. “I’m not out to get you or your friend Alina.”

The receptionist perked up when they came near, a tall brunette. “How can I help you?”

“I need to see the Director,” Dravin said. “Or whoever it is that’s in charge these days.”

Dravin kept his eyes and ears open as he talked. This approach didn’t really have a chance of working. You don’t walk in off the street and get to speak to the head of an agency like this. “I’m sorry, sir. I can’t do that,” she said.

Against the wall a couple of agents discussed one of the memorials. One of the security guards let another person, probably an agent, into the secured elevator area to the left. Two men, older, one quite portly, entered through the main doors. "Is there something else I can help you with?" the receptionist asked. "What are you here for?"

"I'm here to speak to the Director," he insisted.

The two men that just entered began arguing, the larger one flushed, very upset.

"Why do you think you can just walk in and get to speak to the head of the IIA?" the receptionist asked, starting to get annoyed with him.

He dropped his badge on the counter. "Does this mean anything to you?"

Dravin kept his ears peeled, trying hard to hear what the two men were saying. Something about someone needing to take the blame. The tall one called the fat one 'Deputy Director' which, if it was anything like the FBI he was used to, was the second in command.

"Yes, sir. It means you are a collector of very old souvenirs. This is for the FBI. And even if it was an IIA badge, all badges these days are electronic, built into your phone." That was smart, he thought. An electronic badge, if it was secure enough, couldn't be copied and could be revoked wirelessly at any time. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

Cecilia slammed both hands on the desk. "Stop him," she pleaded the receptionist with wild eyes. "Please."

"Thanks. Sorry to bother you," he said, grabbing Cecilia's wrist. He turned and when she didn't move to follow he gave her a hard pull until she stumbled after him.

Dravin deliberately walked near the Deputy Director on his way out. The other man pointed a finger at him and said something about cities appearing. Then they noticed Dravin and lowered their voices. *So they know*

about Mapiya. Realizing, finally, that they were in the public lobby, the Deputy Director walked off to the elevators in a hurry. The other man followed and continued to argue.

That was his ticket in. He glanced back. The receptionist was on the phone, still eying them as they walked away. He tugged Cecilia's wrist again and quickened the pace.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Investigations

Heaven left the duffel bag where it was under Chevelle's bed and took just a few bundles of money from it. Never having shopped in the future, she didn't know how much to take, so she took three bundles. Three thousand dollars. There was no telling how expensive dresses were in 2099, what with inflation and all.

The mall was pretty easy to find, eventually. She just kept driving around in North Mapiya until she caught a sign pointing the way. When she found it the gas indicator on the bike indicated a quarter tank left, and she had no way of filling it.

Mapiya Mall was just outside of the city to the north, actually in between Mapiya and Lakeville, another suburb of St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota's Twin Cities.

It's true, Chevelle and Eric weren't her family, but what if they could be? What if she stayed in Mapiya. This city could be her destination; it was as good a place as any, wasn't it? And there were people, well, a person here who liked her, or maybe he could start to.

That thought drove her on as she went from store to store in the mall, the money stuffed in her front pockets. One store, in particular, looked glamorous. Vis-a-Vis.

Even as her feet were itching to run back to her motorcycle and just move on, keep driving, maybe go to the Black Hills after all — or somewhere else, anywhere else — she stayed in Mapiya and went dress shopping. To find the dress that would make a boy fall in love with her.

It was a fantasy. She knew that, or tried to tell herself, even as her mind raced from thought to thought. She lost one fantasy irretrievably, no matter how crazy it had been in the first place. Her heart was aching to have something else to reach out to for fear she would otherwise go insane. So she went to Vis-a-Vis and bought a dress.

She strode in, already picturing in her mind what she was looking for. An employee greeted her, offered to help, and directed her to an empty stall. The employee explained how most of the store, now, was filled with holographic dressing rooms. Make a selection and you would be instantly wearing it.

As she was looking over the dresses another shopper came in. The employee directed her to the stall next to Heaven. She was a tall pretty lady with frizzy black hair. One red dress with a V-neck particularly grabbed her attention so she made a selection. A brief moment later and her body was overlaid with a projection of the dress.

“Who’s the lucky guy?” the woman asked.

“Excuse me?”

She held out her hand with a grin. “Alina, 2012.”

“Ha.” Heaven accepted the handshake. “Heaven, also 2012.”

“A dress like that you buy for a guy you’re trying to impress,” Alina noted. “He must be someone special.”

“Yeah, maybe. He’s cute,” she said with a chuckle. “I don’t know. He’s 2099.” She said it like two numbers, twenty ninety nine.

“So you just met him?”

“Mmm hmm. It seems kind of fast, doesn’t it? But he’s nice. Kind of like the flip side of me.” *Or exact opposite, having money, a parent, friends...* “I’d be lucky to have him,” she said in a low voice, almost a whisper.

I’d be crazy to run away, wouldn’t I?

Heaven decided to keep the red dress. Using the computer, she indicated her selection. The employee who greeted her earlier came back with the long red dress

draped across her arm, just Heaven's size. She led Heaven with it up to the cashier. Placing the dress on the counter it automatically registered the price and the cashier read it back to her. 2,320 dollars.

Heaven fished the money out of her pockets. Two stacks for 2,000 dollars and she counted out 400 dollars from the third stack.

The cashier shook her head and pushed the money back to Heaven. "I'm afraid I can't accept that, miss," she said.

"Why not?" Heaven asked, acting offended but hoping there were no alarms going off saying this was stolen money.

"Miss, we just don't accept cash," the cashier explained. "Nobody does. I thought it had all been destroyed, anyway. If you want, you can give me your name and ID number and I can just look up your credit line. No trouble."

Heaven shook her head. "No. Don't worry about it," she said, quickly stuffing the money back in her pockets. "Sorry."

Like that, she was back to having nothing, and no dress to impress a guy, either.

"Thank goodness you people still use radios," Kevin said as he stormed across the library. He ducked under the yellow police tape and walked to back where Joshua, the Sheriff and his great grandson, stood with another officer.

"Excuse me," Joshua objected. "What do you think you are doing? This is an active crime scene."

"And I'm still a Sheriff," Kevin shot back. "Now what do you have here? Oh my—" He wanted to look away, but he *was* a Sheriff and his training had him examining the scene. The bodies were mostly hidden

behind the last row of books.

“Well, good that you’re here, I guess,” Joshua said. “I was going to call you anyways. Speaking of which, here.” He handed Kevin a package. “It’s a phone, instructions inside. Deputy, take pictures so we can get this cleaned up.”

The other officer walked off, leaving Joshua and Kevin alone to examine the bodies. “It looks like a murder-suicide,” Joshua said. “And it looks like they belong to you.”

“You sure about that?” Kevin said, tilting his head and kneeling down.

“Yes. They’re not in our registry, and judging by how they’re dressed, they came from 2012.”

“No, I know they’re from 2012,” Kevin said. “I meant about the murder-suicide.”

“He’s holding the knife,” Joshua snapped back. “And with what just happened, losing your entire time, everything you knew was gone, I don’t think it will be the last.

“Does that look like a knife that an officer of the school board would casually carry around town?” Kevin pointed out. It looked more like military grade. “In a suicide, he probably wouldn’t have stabbed himself like that. And murder-suicide is normally a more private affair. I can’t imagine he would take her here to kill her.”

“You know them, don’t you?”

Kevin nodded. “Yeah, Daniel Martin and Kelly Reid. They were on the school board.” He sighed, finally standing up and turning the other away. “I think they were having an affair.”

“And you can’t imagine, with all that’s happened, why he might do that?”

He shot a fierce glare at Joshua. “No, I can’t,” he said. “They were at the school the night of The Event when someone broke in. They said they could identify the perp. If anything, I think he’s the one that did this.”

“You have any idea who that might be? Anyone else from 2012 that might have come to the library?”

Kevin glanced back to the bodies again, as if the scene would change. His world was out of control, with the city suspended in time, the tornado, decent people murdered in a public library. But worst of all, his family was gone, dead for decades. To stop investigating would just make him dwell on that.

Kevin shook his head. “Anyone would want to come here, trying to find out what’s happened since 2012. They were the only the witnesses to the break in, though.”

“That does sound like motive,” Joshua said. He looked up and waved the Deputy over. “Take pictures. Bag and tag the evidence and get these bodies out of here. Let’s make this place respectable again.”

“We haven’t even begun investigating,” Kevin said, appalled. “Aren’t you going to leave this as an active crime scene?”

“We don’t have unlimited resources, even in the far reaches of the future, whatever you may think,” Joshua said, face flushed. “This is still a relatively small city and St. Paul or Minneapolis doesn’t have the time to dedicate their forensics lab to a murder investigation that could very well be a simple suicide case. I’m sorry, Kevin, but my job here is to get the mess cleaned up and the library back in business.”

“You’ll at least get fingerprints from the murder weapon,” he said, nearly making it a command.

“Yes, we’ll get fingerprints, and cross reference on AFIS,” Joshua said, then added under his breath, “for all the good it will do.”

The parking tower at the IIA was beginning to get busy as the day came to a close and those working banker

hours left their desks. The first floor of the parking tower was reserved for others higher up in the chain of command, like the Director and the Deputy Director. Dravin and Cecilia sat in a rental car across the street. He lifted binoculars up, not for the first time, to examine the doors from the IIA building to the parking garage. It wasn't open enough for just anyone to enter from the street. A thin, but strong, wire mesh surrounded the parking tower, and the entrance and exit was controlled by a guard. But that wouldn't stop Dravin.

He had identified the Deputy Director, a portly older man, in the lobby of the IIA building, a lucky break for him. It meant he could proceed much faster than he had imagined. The Deputy Director left once in the middle of the day, allowing Dravin to identify his car. Dravin put the binoculars down. Now he just needed to wait for the man to leave for the day.

"I can't believe I came with you," Cecilia said, folding her arms. Having her with had been more than a little annoying, as well, rarely giving him peace and quiet. After her last attempt to stop him he had taken away her holophone; nothing was going to stop him. "This is pointless. You think you're going to storm the parking garage of an agency like the FBI? And what? That's supposed to gain you brownie points?"

"Does it make you feel better, hearing your own voice?"

"Oh, please. I'm not the one in this car obsessed with myself," she shot back.

He brought the binoculars back up. "You never learned the value of patience, my dear." There was movement at the door. Someone was coming out.

Cecilia sighed and rolled her eyes. "What does it matter? This is all my fault, anyways."

It was the Deputy Director. Dravin watched as the man walked to his car, got in, and drove around to the exit. He put the binoculars down and shifted the car into

gear, feeling it rise up off the ground. “And that, my dear,” he said, turning the car around to follow the Deputy Director, “is something you’re going to have to learn to live with, isn’t it?”

Dravin followed the other car for about ten minutes before it became apparent that they weren’t driving anywhere in particular. “He knows,” Dravin said. The man they were following had been in the IIA for many years; it didn’t take long to know how to tell when someone was following you. Hence he was driving apparently aimlessly so that anyone else, if they weren’t specifically tailing him, would be gone. But Dravin continued following him.

Eventually the Deputy Director came to a stop and Dravin pulled in behind him. Cars passed them by, but there weren’t many people walking on the sidewalk here. “This is it,” Dravin said. He pulled a file from the briefcase under his legs. Cecilia made to get out of the car when Dravin snapped a pair of handcuffs around her wrist and in the same motion strapped her to the steering wheel.

“Hey! What are you doing?” Cecilia demanded.

“Can’t have you getting in the way now. Wait here.” Dravin got out. Cecilia screamed after him, but he ignored her.

The Deputy Director was already out, by the driver side door of his car, facing Dravin with a pistol held level with his belly. “You don’t need that,” Dravin assured him.

“I’ll decide that,” the man said in a gruff voice. He waved the pistol a bit, motioning Dravin off the street. “In the alley.”

Dravin did as the man said, casually stepping off the street, arms kept in front of him. When they were a step inside the alley he turned to face the Deputy Director. Dravin stood over him by a foot. Given the other man’s age and fit, if it weren’t for the gun he could quickly and

easily take him down, Dravin judged, but that wasn't why he was here.

"Why are you following me?" he demanded of Dravin.

Dravin moved to reach into his suit coat's breast pocket but stopped when the man grunted. "I'm just going to show you my badge," Dravin said.

"It's on your hand," the Deputy Director said.

"You know what happened with Mapiya, Minnesota yesterday," Dravin said. It wasn't a question. "I'm an FBI agent from 2012." He slowly reached inside his pocket and pulled out his badge, tossing it to the Deputy Director.

He caught it with his left hand, holding the gun on Dravin still with his right. He looked at the badge and grunted, dropping it to the ground at Dravin's feet. "Easily stolen or crafted. Agents from your time, if you're really from 2012, also carried an ID."

Dravin grinned, only slightly surprised that the man called him on that. Dravin reached for his back pocket, again slowly so as not to startle the man with the gun, and pulled out his wallet. He flipped it open, revealing the ID, and tossed it to the Deputy Director. He took a moment to examine it, the dropped it by the badge.

"All right, it looks authentic enough, though I'm no expert." He nodded, looking at Dravin's chest. "Drop your weapons, and we can talk."

Quickly complying, Dravin reached to his shoulder holster with two fingers and pulled out the 9mm there, dropping it on the ground in front of him. He did the same with the gun at his waist. "The one on your ankle, too," the Deputy Director said, pointing with his pistol. Dravin bent over and pulled out the small emergency gun strapped to his ankle.

The man visibly relaxed but didn't lower his gun. "Okay, we can talk now. What do you have to say?"

"The Mapiya Event of 2012," Dravin said. "The city

disappeared, and now it's back, exactly like it was."

"We know that already."

Dravin held up the file he brought. "But you don't know why."

The Deputy Director held out his hand for Dravin to give him the file, but Dravin held it back. "What do you want?" he asked, relenting.

"I need to talk to the Director," Dravin demanded.

"Give me the file," the man said, "and *I'll* bring it to the Director." Dravin shook his head. "Then I'll shoot you and take the file," he said, showing more frustration.

"You won't do that," Dravin said, his grin growing wider, if that was possible. "I was in charge of oversight on the project in 2012. The man that made the device that caused this, I worked with him in college. I know how it works. You need me."

"I'll be the judge of that," he said, once again reaching for the file. Dravin handed it over. "If this turns out," he said, stuffing it inside his suit coat, "how do I find you?"

"I'm registered now," Dravin said, holding up his left hand to show the Deputy Director the distinctive metal bands of his phone. "Dravin Davidson. My name's in that file, too. Call me. The sooner, the better. Time is a factor here."

"Back up," the man commanded. Dravin took a few steps back. "Don't move until I drive away."

The Deputy Director walked to his car backwards, keeping Dravin in his sight and the aim of his gun. When he reached his car he tossed the gun and the file on the passenger seat and took off.

With the other man gone, Dravin collected his weapons, badge, and 2012 ID from the ground and got back in the car. Cecilia glared. "You piece of—"

"I wouldn't finish that sentence if I were you," Dravin warned. He took out the key and unlocked the handcuff on the steering wheel, then twisted around to snap it on

her right hand.

“Let me out of these,” Cecilia screamed in protest again.

“Something tells me I can’t trust you anymore.”

“Whatever,” she said, reaching with her cuffed hands for the door lock. When she pressed the button, Dravin quickly relocked the doors and hit the driver override.

“How do you want this to go?” Dravin asked, quite calmly. Cecilia bared her teeth and reached out for his neck. Dravin never let her get close enough, swinging his right elbow to connect with her temple. She collapsed in place, unconscious. Dravin hefted her up off the middle console and leaned her against the passenger window. “Now look what you made me do.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Date

“And look at these calculations right here. It’s like the accelerometer is out of alignment.” Motega and Alina were working late in the lab, scrunched together at Alina’s desk. They took turns at the computer, Motega driving for now. “You think it could have been calibrated wrong?”

Alina stared at the computer, pulling her face back with her hands. “Oh, I don’t know, Motega. Even if that’s the case, how do you explain the inner dimensional folding effect? There’s just so much data to go through here.”

They had been working nearly non-stop since they got started in the morning. The machine had been built to need very little power and to last a long time, with its own atomic battery backup. For 87 years it had been collecting data, mostly at an aggregate level, so there wasn’t a lot of need for storage space. The two Terabyte hard drive they used was more than enough.

Motega could see Alina was starting to succumb to fatigue. He looked closer; her eyes looked droopy and sunken. “Alina, where’s your glasses?”

He caught a flash of a smile before she hid it. “I got contacts the day of The Event,” she said, blinking her eyes. “What do you think?”

Motega smiled and nodded. “You look nice.”

“I think I’m going to have to call it quits for tonight,” she said. “Can we pick up again tomorrow morning? I feel like I haven’t slept in a week.”

“Sure, no problem. I’m getting tired myself. Go ahead

and go back to the motel. I'll shut down and lock up here."

"Okay," she said, standing up and collecting her things in her purse. She took her phone off the desk — just three metal bands, it was so strange — and slipped it on her fingers. "I'm concerned about Cecilia, too. I tried calling earlier. Couldn't get ahold of her."

"Have you heard from her at all since yesterday?"

Alina shook her head. "I talked to the Sheriff, the one from 2099, Joshua. He said Dravin and Cecilia had come to him demanding a working phone. He gave each of them a phone like he gave us, got them registered, and a line of credit going. It's strange Cecilia wouldn't call."

"Maybe she can't," Motega suggested, immediately regretting giving Alina another reason to be concerned.

"I wonder where they are," Alina said.

"Knowing Dravin, probably doing everything he can to get his power back."

"Well, I'm going back to my room and try calling her again. Good night."

"G'night."

The door closed behind her and he returned to his computer readouts. He felt like the answer was just there, at his fingertips. The QED was still transferring data to the machine and its set of hard drives. It wouldn't be done for another day.

The door to the Quantum Entanglement Device itself stood propped open. The device ridiculed him in its silent majesty, refusing to give up its secret. *How did you do it?* he thought, looking at the machine. *And can you send us back?* He already knew the answer to the second question, yet still he wished it was possible.

The machine had suspended their molecules in an inner, curved dimension where they were apparently also safe from aging. Of course, the molecules of one's body themselves didn't wear out. The buildings wouldn't erode if they just sat there. It's the interaction between the

different elements that made things age, an interaction that was prevented when they were protected by entangling and switching places with molecules from... somewhere else.

Motega shut down the computer, stood up, and walked up to the machine, his hand drifting to the big red button. *What if...?* The machine taunted him, begging him to press the button. There was no going back, but if he could rig the device to switch off after a certain length of time, what if they could travel even farther, to the most distant future?

He forced his hand back to his side. Even if it were possible, it would be wrong. This whole thing, his whole screw up, was wrong. He stepped out of the little room and slammed the door to the device.

Motega walked over to his office, picked up his briefcase, and placed it on the desk. He hesitated, his fingers at the clasps of the case. With a deep breath, he opened the brief case, reached inside, and picked it up: his backup plan.

He turned the concussion grenade over in his hands. *I should do it*, he thought. *Destroy the device right here.*

He trekked back across the room and opened the door to the QED again. Squeezing the trigger carefully, Motega pulled out the pin. He waited. The grenade wouldn't blow up until he let go of the trigger, of course. He pictured how he would do it in his head. Toss the grenade in, shut the door, and run out of the building. Would he have enough time? What if he didn't make it? What about Alina?

Motega replaced the pin in the grenade and let go of the trigger. *Not yet*, he thought, once again looking at the device. They still had so much to investigate. Figure out what happened, then he could destroy the device.

He returned to his office and placed the grenade back in his briefcase. He shut it, snapped the clasps closed, and spun the dials to mix up the code.

Not today.

It was dark over the cemetery, while the rest of the world seemed to be glowing. Kevin hesitated at the tall iron gate, the word Mapiya in big iron letters over the arch. In some ways the world seemed different, and it could never go back to the way it was, but here at a graveyard Kevin knew that much was still the same. Men still died and were forgotten, eventually, by all but the great gnarled trees that watched over their grave.

A long path went through the graveyard in a circle, ending up back at the beginning. Kevin walked the path, eyeing the stones. The plots were mapped out by family. Tucked away somewhere back in the corner, it felt like, Kevin finally found his family. They were all laid out there together, starting with his wife and his son. He knelt in front of them, fighting back tears as he moved his hand across the name of his wife.

He hadn't planned on crying. They had been dead a long time. The time for mourning passed decades ago. But it wasn't that long for him.

As his walls broke down and he gave in to the sadness, a shadow moved to the right. He brought his guard back up, wiped the tears from his face. Joshua walked up and stood behind the graves.

"It's something else, you know?" Kevin said. "Kneeling beside the grave of your wife and son, both gone for decades, but I remember them alive, well, and happy just yesterday."

"I'm sorry for your loss," Joshua said. The words were hollow and standard. You say them to anyone who just lost a loved one, but there was something sincere to how Joshua said them.

"How did you find me?" Kevin said, looking up.

“Same technology they had in your time,” Joshua said. “Your phone has a GPS. I’m in law enforcement. It’s trackable.” Kevin nodded. Of course. “I’ve spent my share of time in this cemetery, as well. I’ve stood there a number of times.” He walked down the row a few grave stones. “But most of my time was here.” To Joshua’s side the rest of the row was empty, future plots for the Hunter clan.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Kevin said, and he meant it. There was nothing special about his place here, he realized. Kevin stood up.

“Look, I know you’re just trying to do your job,” Joshua said. “Just trying to help out. But what you did today, showing up at the library like that, was unacceptable.” Joshua let that sink in. Kevin didn’t reply. “You’re not the Sheriff anymore. I’m going to see what I can do for you — you are family, after all — but there’s a lot going on right now. I need you to stay out of the way.”

Kevin nodded. As frustrating as it was, he was Sheriff once, so he knew where Joshua was coming from. Still, he shot a glare at the Sheriff. “Don’t worry. I’ll stay out of your hair. You won’t see me again.”

He turned and walked away. The words were as cutting as he meant them to be, but he walked with a shadow of regret, though he didn’t turn back.

“Come on, this way,” Eric said. Heaven grabbed his hand, slid off his bike, and followed him across the road. The sun had set about an hour ago and it was getting dark, only a sliver of the moon to light the way.

They crossed someone’s lawn. The house was dark and Eric led her around the side. “Are you sure this is okay,” she said excitedly.

"It's okay, I know them," Eric said.

The house was two stories, the back side overlooking the lake just west of North Mapiya. The first floor had a large double-paned glass door in the back stepping out onto a concrete patio. A cast iron fire pit sat in the middle of the patio surrounded by high back Adirondack chairs.

The yard sloped down toward the lake. Halfway down, to one side, they had cut into the hill to provide a flat surface for a large trampoline. Down at the edge of the lake they had two wooden docks. Eric took them across the longer one. The family here had one speed boat and one larger fishing and entertainment boat; you could probably call it a yacht at that size, Eric figured.

"What's that term?" Heaven said, gaping at the boats. "How the other half lives?"

"Yeah, they've certainly got money."

"I think I'm going to be sick," Heaven said with a hand to her belly. "But that would be because of those tacos, not this."

"Heh, that bad huh?"

Heaven nodded. "They were a little slick going down."

"You can sit down over here." He brought her to the end of the dock. Two more Adirondack chairs looked out over the lake. Heaven sat down and Eric fetched a couple of bottles from a nearby chest. "Chase it down with one of these," he said, handing her one of the bottles. "Next time we can try the Chinese place."

"Soda?" she said. "Sorry, you call it pop up here, don't you?"

"Up here? Where are you from? I didn't notice much of an accent in your voice." Eric sat down in the chair to her right.

Heaven took a long swig of the soda and nearly spit it out. "Ugh, this is kind of nasty."

Eric raised an eyebrow, then nodded, popping open his bottle, as well. "I suppose they've probably changed

the formula since 2012,” he said, taking a sip himself. “You’ll get used to it.”

Heaven took another sip. She wasn’t so sure. She set the soda down on the arm of the chair. “Missouri,” she said.

“Need a tissue?”

“No, you asked where I was from,” she said, slapping him. “I’m from Missouri.”

“And no accent?”

Heaven shrugged. “Grew up with TV as a babysitter, I guess. The TV has changed quite a bit, I noticed.”

“Yeah, it’s built in the table now,” he said, taking another swig and finishing off his soda. “Let’s see. Beginning of the Century, 3D was beginning to get popular. You ever see any 3D movies?” Heaven shook her head. “They weren’t really three dimensional. Just images overlaid on top of each other and offset to trick your eyes.

“I think you had some limited holographic technology back then. I can’t remember. These are true projections of actual three dimensional images.”

“Like, you could make objects?” Heaven said, confused.

“Still just light and color, but you can look at holographic projections from any angle. It actually takes up real space. Like my phone here.” He squeezed his left hand together to make his phone appear. “Our television is built on the same technology, but it didn’t start to be mass produced until the 50’s, and then only at the theaters.”

“The 50’s?” Heaven echoed. It sounded odd to hear her future referred to like that. “To me ‘the 50’s’ means 1950s. That’s so weird.”

Eric chuckled. “I guess I hadn’t thought of it like that.”

“South Mapiya, where I met you. What did it look like in your time?”

Eric blew out a puff of air. “Nothing. No, not nothing, I guess. A wasteland, like it had been in a nuclear blast, but without an explosion.”

“What does that mean?” Heaven wondered.

Eric shook his head. “I’ve thought about that, too.” But he didn’t have an answer for her.

She laid her head back on the chair and gazed up at the sky. The sparkling points of light glittered in their reflections on the water. “The stars still look the same,” she said. “That’s one thing that’s pretty constant, I guess. There’s less than I remembered, though.”

Eric looked up with her. “We’re pretty close to the cities,” he said. “And the suburbs continue to be built up. More light pollution near the cities these days, I suppose.”

“There’s no going back, is there?”

“Not if what I read in the paper this morning is right,” he said. “The reporter talked to one of the scientists working on the experiment that I found. According to him it was a one way trip forward. You weren’t even traveling, more like, *suspended* in time.”

Eric looked down at his soda. “Though it would be nice to go back, wouldn’t it?” he said in a sad tone.

“Don’t know that there’s much for me to go back to,” Heaven said. *Maybe exploring the future can even bring some spice to my dreary life.*

“I was just wishing this machine did have a way back,” he said. “Maybe I could jump back a few years, treat my dad better. He had encephalitis and he got confused sometimes, fatigued more often, but I still can’t believe he’s just gone.”

“You can’t think that,” Heaven said, getting a bit irritated with him now.

Eric took in a deep breath and let out a long sigh. “I know, I know. Keep your head up. Remember the good times. All that crap. But *I’m an orphan* now. Do you have any idea what that feels like?”

“Oh, please,” Heaven said harshly. She stalked off to the end of the deck, wishing there was something she could hit. *Do you have any idea what that feels like?* She wanted to scream. She turned and faced Eric. “You.. you don’t even know,” she yelled at him.

“What?”

One part of her mind kind of felt sorry for him and knew she shouldn’t be yelling at him, but she just wanted to let it all out, all the frustration, the pain. “You haven’t been paying any attention to me, have you?” she said, knowing with that rational thought that that wasn’t entirely true. “At least you *had* parents. At least you had a mother for most of your life and a father until yesterday.”

She started pacing. It felt good to yell, now that she was doing it. “I haven’t had parents my whole life,” she said. She started to notice tears on her cheeks and she realized the real problem. “No one ever came for me.” She sat down, going from anger to shock as fast as the anger came. “All my life, family after family came. They never picked me.” She paused, remembering the faces of the parents that would come to the orphanage, looking on the girls playing in the yard from the safety of a window on the second floor.

“I’m so sorry,” Eric said. “I didn’t mean to—”

Heaven barely heard him. “It’s like we were in a zoo,” she said, choking up. “Watching us. Is she pretty enough? Does she play well with the other girls? I was always alone and when they looked at me they just shook their head.” She looked at Eric, embarrassed at letting go like this, but also searching, begging for someone, anyone, to share her pain.

Eric worked his mouth. He seemed not to know what to say. *What do you say to someone as messed up as me?* “I can’t change any of that for you,” he said with a nervous laugh, tears welling up in his eyes, as well. “Obviously. But I can be your friend. I promise that I will

always be here for you.”

“Thanks,” she said, sniffing back her tears and reaching out to hold his hand. *He knew exactly what to say.* It struck her as a bit unrealistic, childish even, to make a promise like that to someone he just met yesterday, and in the most extraordinary of circumstances, but she ignored it. “That’s the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me. Really.”

“Well, I mean it,” he said. He added a smile. “And we will never go back to that taco place, either. I can also promise you that.”

That made her laugh and broke the tension. “I’ll hold you to that. Oh, man, look at me, I am such a mess,” she said, trying to wipe the tears off her cheek. “I’m sorry. None of this is your fault.”

“It’s okay. You can talk about it, or anything, anytime.”

She laid her head back again, closing her eyes, a crooked smile spreading across her face as she began talking:

“I have a mother,
and she’s very sweet.
During the fun times,
she always tickles my feet.

“When I’m down,
or drowning in self-doubt,
all I have to do is call her name,
and she will let me out.

“We have been there for each other,
always through thick and thin.
When there is a secret that I didn’t know,
she would let me in.

“She will never leave my heart,
no matter what she does.
She’s my one and only,
she’s my one true love.”

Heaven stopped talking and opened her eyes. “I thought you said you didn’t have a mother,” Eric said.

“I don’t,” she said. “That was a poem written by Ailie Pearson. I memorized it. It makes me feel like, I don’t know. It seems silly to say. When I close my eyes and recite it, it makes me feel like I really have a mom. She’s just right there and I can almost picture her.”

She let go of Eric’s hand and reached into her pocket to pull out a crumpled 4x6 photograph. “I don’t know why, but I don’t have a picture of my parents. But I do have this.” She handed the picture to Eric, a man standing in front of Mount Rushmore. “I think he’s my Uncle. I’m not sure. I was on my way to the Black Hills to find him.” He gave the picture back and she put it away. “It seems silly, now that I say it out loud. And it’s not like that’s possible, anymore. If he was there, he is long dead now.”

“Having a dream isn’t silly, Heaven,” Eric assured her.

“So what’s your dream? Football?”

“Nah. That’s just for fun. I used to think I knew. Now I’m not so sure. Maybe I’m just scared of taking a risk.”

“It’s worth the risk,” she said. “Whatever it is. Look at me. I’m 17 and I ran away from my foster home,” *stole a motorcycle, cheated at cards*, “and came across the country searching for a dream. That’s freedom, and it’s the only thing I have left.”

“Hmm, and look where it got you.”

She shrugged, glancing at him with a sly smile. “I don’t know. It doesn’t seem so bad here.”

A light flashed on behind them. They looked over their shoulders to see the silhouette of a man bathed in light back at the house. “Oh crap,” Eric said, now in a

hushed tone. “We’ve got to go.” He quickly grabbed the soda bottles, tossed them in the lake, and grabbed Heaven’s hand, leading her back down the dock.

“I thought you said you knew these people.”

“I do. I didn’t think they were home. They don’t want me on their property.”

The silhouette shifted in the doorway; he could see them. “Get out of here,” he yelled. “I’m calling the cops.”

When they hit solid ground Eric broke into a run, Heaven pushing to keep up. They were long gone before the home owner even picked up the phone. Eric drove them back on his bike to Chevelle’s house.

When he brought the bike to a stop and they got off, she wrapped Eric in a tight hug. “Thanks for everything,” she said. She let go and smiled up at him. “And yes.”

“Yes?”

“I will go to the dance with you.” He smiled back.

The door to Chevelle’s house opened and a man and a woman dressed in black suits stepped out. The man held out a badge, shining brightly in its blue holographic light. “IIA,” he said. “I’m Agent Barnes and this is Agent Marshall. Inside. Now. Both of you.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Taking Control

Eric and Heaven followed the IIA agents into the house. Chevelle's parents were sitting with Chevelle on the living room sofa. "What's going on?" Eric looked first to her parents, then to Chevelle, though she avoided his gaze.

"Maybe you should sit down," Chevelle's father said. "This is serious."

The female agent, Marshall, held a picture up to the man, Barnes, its white back to Eric and the rest. They looked at the picture, then to Heaven. "Yeah, that looks like her."

Eric kept talking at the same time. "I can tell it's serious, but what right do they have?"

"It's not about rights," Barnes said forcefully. He nodded to his partner. "All right, take her. We'll bring her to the station." At the same time she took out a pair of handcuffs and grabbed Heaven's wrist.

"Hey," Heaven screamed, pulling and tugging to try to get away. "Let me go."

"How about we all just take a minute and talk about this," Chevelle's dad said, standing up.

But Eric didn't wait. "Let her go," he cried, putting out his hands to push at Agent Marshall.

Before he could get her off balance, though, Barnes grabbed his arm from behind, twisted him around and slammed him against the wall, holding his arm crooked behind his back. "I'm going to let that go, because I understand," he said. "But next move and I take you in, too. Can I let you go?"

He nodded. The agent let him go and he straightened out his shirt. Marshall finished snapping the handcuffs on Heaven. “Why are you doing this?”

Agent Barnes stepped over to the coffee table and pulled Heaven’s duffel bag across the floor. He unzipped it farther to reveal the piles of cash inside. “In 2012 your girlfriend used a fake ID to cheat at cards,” he explained and looked up at Heaven. “She’s been wanted for 87 years. I can’t believe we finally have the opportunity to catch her.”

Eric caught Heaven’s eyes. Disbelief spread across his face. “Is it true?”

Heaven hung her head and Eric watch in silence as she let them walk her out of the house. When the door shut behind them Chevelle’s dad put a hand on Eric’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, son.”

Eric shrugged off his hand and followed them out of the house. As he stepped outside Agent Barnes sat in the car on the side of the street and slammed the door. A moment later the car hovered up and drove off.

Behind Eric the door to the house opened again and Chevelle walked up beside him. “Eric, this sucks,” Chevelle said.

He looked at her for a second. “Yeah, it does. I’ve got to go help her.”

Eric gave his bike a good rev and spun around in the driveway to chase after the IIA agents’ car. They went up north into downtown and turned into the police station. By the time he parked and shut down the two agents, with Heaven in tow, were halfway up the steps to the entrance.

Agent Barnes looked over his shoulder and called back to Eric. “What did I tell you, kid? Stay out of our way.”

As they entered the police station another car pulled into the lot. Eric waited until the Sheriff pulled in beside him. When the Sheriff’s car lowered to the ground, Eric

got off his bike and walked over. "Sheriff," he said as Joshua stepped out. "You have to help me."

"What's going on?" Joshua said. He started walking to the station and Eric followed.

"Two IIA agents showed up at my friend's house," Eric explained. "I've been staying there since South Mapiya came back, and the tornado."

"Get to the point, son," Joshua said.

"They took Heaven."

"What?" the Sheriff exclaimed, probably wondering how they could take the heavens. They stepped inside and Eric followed the Sheriff to the back, where they kept a few spare cells for temporary holdings.

"Heaven is the girl from 2012 that was with me when I met you on my street. They took her," he said, pointing down the hallway. He could see them now, talking with the Deputy and putting Heaven in her own cell. Heaven saw him, too, and called out to him as the cell door slammed shut. "They claim she cheated at cards to rob a casino in 2012, but she's innocent. Even if she wasn't, they can't do this. Sheriff, you can't take away her freedom. It's all she has left."

"I don't know anything about that," Joshua said. He looked up at the agents. "But I won't have you two arresting people without cause in my city. Deputy, get the girl out of that cell."

"This isn't your call, Sheriff," Agent Barnes said.

"You bet it is," he shot back. "What's the statute of limitations on counting cards to steal from a casino, anyway? Not that it matters. If she committed any crimes, they happened in a different country. She'd have to be deported and tried in her own country. Now which one of you wants to tell me which way it is to the United States of America?"

Agent Marshall looked up at Barnes and he bared his teeth. "This isn't over Sheriff."

"Oh yes it is," Joshua said, matching him glare for

glare. "Now get out of my station."

The two IIA agents began walking towards the exit. "We'll be in town for a little while, Sheriff, looking over some things. Stay out of our way."

"I'll be watching," Joshua promised as they left. He looked to Eric and Heaven. "You two better get home, now."

"Thank you, Sheriff," Eric said. "I owe you one."

"You owe me nothing. I'm just doing my job. Now get out of here."

As soon as they were outside Heaven grabbed him in a tight hug. "Thanks for coming for me," she said. "I'm sorry about all this."

Was that a tear he saw on her cheek? "Don't worry about it," he said.

"Oh, and my dress," she moaned. "I was trying to buy it with that money. Now I'll have nothing to wear to the dance."

Eric smiled. "I like you just the way you are, Heaven."

"Well, you're wrong about one thing."

"What's that?"

"Freedom is not the only thing I have anymore, is it?" she said, smiling wide. "Now I have you, too." She leaned up on her tiptoes and gave him a quick kiss. "Thanks again."

As expected, Dravin received a phone call a few hours after his discussion with the Deputy Director. He had his ticket in, an invitation to speak with the Director of the IIA. An agent met him in the lobby of the IIA building, near the elevators to the left of the grand room. Still in handcuffs, Cecilia walked a step ahead of Dravin; she was now officially in his custody.

“Agent Davidson, I presume,” the IIA agent greeted him. He nodded, holding up his hand so the phone displayed a holographic image of his ID. “Right this way.” This one was no-nonsense. He clearly didn’t enjoy this late night assignment, didn’t even bother giving them his name, and likely was told nothing other than to escort Dravin to the Director.

The agent had Dravin and Cecilia enter the elevator first, then stepped behind them, always with one eye on them and both hands free. Dravin noticed immediately that the elevator had no buttons. Smart phones had become so prevalent, even being worn as decoration on the hand, that the agent just flicked open his phone with a squeeze of the fingers and selected a floor. Dravin noted the number, 20. By his estimation, all the way to the top.

The agent escorting them was standard issue, straight-laced and duty conscious. The man’s expression didn’t change since he saw them in the lobby. Cecilia held a solemn expression, sunken and beaten. A large bruise had already begun to form on the side of her head where he smacked her.

The elevator opened to a large upper room, the Director’s personal office. To the right a door led, presumably, to the rest of the floor, and this elevator was just his own private entrance. Dravin scoffed at the idea and wondered what else had changed. Was it a matter of fact that all officers of higher station in government service would be treated in such a lavish style? The Director’s office was larger than the President’s Oval Office in the White House. *Unless that, too, has changed*, Dravin thought with a smirk.

They walked passed a trio of sofas and a large semi-circular desk to a pair of tall window doors that slid open as they approached. The agent stepped out on the balcony and waited, patiently and without pressing, until Dravin nudged Cecilia and stepped onto the balcony behind her, as well.

“Director Rohon Church wishes to speak to you privately,” the agent said, extending his hand to indicate a pair of metal seats by a large round glass table. “He’ll be with you in a moment.”

Dravin did as directed and he and Cecilia took a seat. The plush leather seat across from them, then, would be the Director’s. As they sat, the agent disappeared back into the building.

The Director didn’t keep them waiting long. Just a minute later the glass doors to the office slid open to admit a tall, white man with a long face, black hair slicked back. Dravin smiled. “Armani is still around in 2099, then,” he said in greeting.

“And still the height of fashion,” Rohon said with a slight British accent. He walked over to Dravin and dropped a file on the table in front of him, *his* file on the QED and The Event. “Can I get you something to drink? Scotch or brandy?”

“Thanks, but I’m on duty,” Dravin said.

Rohon laughed at the claim. “You’ve lost your time and your country, but you are ever the American soldier, aren’t you?” He walked over to a cabinet at the other end of the balcony and drew out a boxy glass bottle. “I hope you don’t mind if I have some, then.”

“Of course not,” Dravin said, knowing it would matter whether he minded or not.

“So who’s this? Your partner?” Rohon asked as he poured a short glass and put the bottle of scotch away. “That’s one nasty bruise, what happened to you?”

Dravin grabbed Cecilia’s wrists and lifted them up for Rohon to see the handcuffs. “She’s in my custody,” Dravin said. He flashed a sideways grin to Cecilia. “My prisoner.”

Cecilia chose that moment to cry out. “He gave me this bruise. He’s holding me against my will,” she said.

“Well, of course he is, dear,” Rohon said, almost laughing. “That’s what prisoner means.”

“He sabotaged the device,” Cecilia claimed. “It was him.”

“Even if that were true, I wouldn’t believe a word you said.”

Dravin dropped Cecilia’s wrist and she sat back to sulk. “If you don’t mind my asking, Rohon, you trust me now? You must know I’m carrying weapons, yet we’re out here all alone.”

“Agent Davidson,” Rohon started, then looked up. “May I call you Dravin?” He nodded. “Good. Well, Dravin, to be perfectly frank, no, I don’t yet trust you. You’re an agent of the American government. For all I know, you’re a true patriot that would commit all sorts of vile acts to try to make this country like it used to be, including murdering the Director of the IIA for a reason I can’t fathom.”

“And my weapons?” Dravin asked again, knowing there must be something more.

Rohon took the large leather seat, crossed his legs, and took a sip of scotch. “I do trust about a dozen men that currently have you and your friend here in the cross hairs who would gladly shoot both of you dead before you could even raise your weapon.”

Dravin glanced up, then over at nearby buildings, as if he could spot the snipers, but of course he wouldn’t be able to, especially so late at night. He focused back on Rohon. “You know how important this is, then.”

“I have to admit, I didn’t know much before this morning when I got the news that a suburb in Minnesota suddenly reappeared after the world thought it was destroyed for three quarters of a century. Even then, we couldn’t find many official records until you came to us this evening with your file.”

“What did you think happened?” Dravin wondered.

Rohon looked at the last pool of scotch, balancing the glass between his fingers. “I don’t think you can truly understand the gravity of the situation, Dravin. Mapiya is

a name of myth and legend, and has been for the last 87 years. The weight of time bears down on us, my friend.

“Think of Roswell and Area 51, the images those invoke in you of aliens, UFOs as flying spaceships, and government conspiracy and cover up. Here we actually do have a government cover up, a town that has been under government lock down for 7 dozen years that by all appearances was destroyed, wiped off the map. Do you have any idea what people think happened there?”

Dravin shook his head. “I can’t imagine.” Really, he couldn’t. He had tried, but it was just too close, and for him it had only been a day.

Rohon downed the last of his scotch, stood up and leaned against the balcony railing, looking out at the city lights. “Where should I start?” he said, scratching his chin. “A test of a new American weapon went awry. This weapon can instantly, silently, and invisibly scorch any spot on Earth. That’s one of my favorites. There are plenty of variations. Some say it was a secret satellite, others a nuclear bomb protected by some kind of barrier; take your pick on what kind: cloaking technology, force field, alternate universe. It nearly started World War III when other nations thought America had this kind of technology.

“Other theorists link it to aliens. They needed humans for study, or breeding, or colonization of other planets, whatever you fancy. So they just plucked a sample town. The scorched earth was a side effect of their teleportation technology. At first some thought they were taking a sampling of humans to protect our race from a complete annihilation of the planet. And the truth was, no one really knew, not even those in the FBI that knew about Mister, what was it—” he checked the file again “—Motege Wilson’s experiment.”

Dravin’s eyes lit up. “That’s why you didn’t press the button, isn’t it?” That had been bothering him. If a kid from Mapiya could find the device, his superiors who

knew he was there certainly would have looked for it. So why hadn't they pressed the button for all this time to bring them back? "You were afraid of what would happen."

Rohon smiled. "Well, wouldn't you be?" he said, taking his seat again and leaning forward. "Yes, they knew about the device. When you gave us your file we used it to finally be able to locate some information in our archives. That city completely gone, no survivors, in some mysterious fashion, it wasn't by design. So what would happen if we pressed the button again? The next time we could lose St. Paul and Minneapolis, or all of Minnesota. Would you take that risk?"

"I guess not, sir."

"So we buried it, or left it buried, until America crumbled in the Oil Wars and joined forces with Canada and Mexico. The world changed that year, and I was barely old enough to know it. Much was lost. The data on your QED may yet be hidden in some archived database. We found more files this evening, cataloged in an obscure manner. For the last 50 years we didn't even really know what we were protecting there, or maybe it would have been under heavier guard." He chuckled. "And to think that some teenager did the unthinkable and pressed the button, bringing all of you back."

Rohon ended and silence reigned in the brisk night air. Far below they could hear the sounds of traffic, people still bustling about their busy lives. Finally, Rohon leaned back and put one arm over the back of the chair. "Well, I've talked quite a bit here, now we come to the fun part. Why are you here?"

Dravin crossed his arms. "You're going to assign me to the case."

"Why would I do that?" Rohon asked. He grinned, as if Dravin was joking with him. "We already have your file, and that led us to the rest of the information that you had on the device all the way back to before 2012."

“And now you have me,” Dravin said. “You want me working on this.” Rohon didn’t respond, patiently waiting for Dravin to add something more substantial. “I’m involved in this personally. I’m something of a scientist myself, or I was. I know the principles involved. On top of that, I’m a darn good agent.”

“I’ve got half a dozen scientists with 80 more years of modern science and two IIA agents already in Mapiya, better trained than you.”

“But none of them have ever lived in 2012,” Dravin added. “And none of them had Motega as a roommate in college. Like I said, I’m involved in this personally. The Quantum Entanglement Device was even my idea, originally, which Motega then stole. Then I was the agent assigned oversight over his government funded project.”

“That’s exactly the kind of baggage that makes me hesitate,” Rohon said, slower to object this time.

“It’s exactly what makes me the right man for this job.”

Rohon didn’t move. His eyes crossed over Dravin and he could feel Rohon examining him. He was thinking over the proposal. Finally he stood up and extended a hand to Dravin. “Welcome to the IIA.” Dravin stood up to accept the handshake. “Let’s get one thing straight up front: I don’t need you. You’re coming on board because you could be an asset, but your risk could very easily outweigh your benefit. Don’t make me change my mind. I’m placing you under Agent Barnes. He’s already heading up investigation in town.”

“I want command of this case,” Dravin insisted.

“But you’ll take what I give you. You are under Agent Barnes’ command, at least at first.”

Dravin nodded his consent. He at least was getting in where he needed to be. He glanced back at Cecilia. “Can you take care of this one? I’ll need her out of the way for a while.”

Rohon grinned. “As far as the North American

Coalition is concerned, she doesn't even exist.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Day Three

“Hey, Chev,” Eric called from the bottom of the stairs. “I’m ready to go.” It had been their habit for some time, and even with recent events he didn’t see reason to break it. Often he gave Chevelle a ride to school on his motorcycle. Eric fought back a chuckle, finding it funny that even though it no longer had wheels and the motor was more of a generator, they had never changed the name from motorcycle. Another name for it, hoverbike, was still off since it no longer had a pair of wheels it could hardly be called a bike.

“Just a minute,” Chevelle called back. Eric was starting to doubt the invitation now. This would be the first time since his date with Heaven that they would really have a chance to talk. She’d inevitably have all sorts of questions for him about the date and what Heaven was like with him. All sorts of questions that he’d really rather avoid right now.

Heaven came bounding down the stairs, just about rolling him over. She was dressed and showered already, in some of Chevelle’s clothes, he noticed, a blue and white striped shirt with a brown vest-jacket.

“What are you doing up?” he asked, fully expecting her to still be sleeping. There’s not a chance that *he’d* be up if he didn’t *have* to go to school.

“Nice,” she said, with a fake punch to the arm. “You mind if I come to school with you today?” she asked, blue eyes sparkling beneath her golden blond bangs.

“Um, is that okay with you, Chevelle?”

Eric looked up the stairs. Chevelle came around the

corner as she finished pulling her shirt down to her waist. "What's that?"

"Do you mind if I give Heaven a ride to school today?" Eric said. "You could ride the bus?"

Chevelle didn't answer right away, jaw open as she put on a pair of earrings. She didn't frown but she certainly didn't seem excited. "Yeah, sure, whatever," she said, walking away. "See you at school."

Eric grabbed his backpack and headed out the door. "You sure you don't want to go around town, see more of the future or something?"

Heaven shrugged. "I did enough of that yesterday. I'd rather spend the day with you."

After Dravin left, Director Rohon Church arranged for an agent to take care of Cecilia. When she was finally done being processed and brought to a cell to stay overnight, Cecilia was so exhausted that she quickly fell asleep. She awoke in the morning with a start, immediately at attention, the significance of the previous day filling her with urgency.

She stood up and walked to the edge of the cell, hanging on the bars. Cecilia still had on the same clothes she was wearing the day of the event two days earlier, and they were starting to feel grungy and icky on her. She wondered what she might look like to the guards, but that didn't stop her.

"Excuse me, is there anyone there?" she called out. The cell next to her was empty and there was no one in sight. Presumably a guard waited just down the hall. The cells were on one of the basement levels of the IIA building for temporary holding. "Hello? I just want to use the phone," she called out again. "Don't I still get a phone call?"

She had asked to use the phone the night before when the agent was processing her, getting her prison arrangements set up, she shuddered at the thought, but the agent would have none of it, whether by orders or just wanting to get home for the night. Cecilia called out again, anxious to get ahold of Alina. They had to know what was coming.

After calling out for yet a third time the guard did come down the hall to her cell. Her eyes were shot. The guard could probably tell she was on the verge of tears. “I just want one phone call,” she begged.

The guard, a taller lady with shoulder length auburn hair, glanced back the way she came. She was considering it. Finally, she dug a key from her pocket. “I have a partner down the hall,” she warned. “And beyond that you’d have to make it through a room full of IIA agents and by the time you made it up the elevator there’d be a dozen guns on you, you understand?”

Cecilia nodded. There was no way she would try to escape. “Just one call.”

The guard stuck the key in the lock and turned. “I’m not supposed to do this, but I do feel sorry for you.” She slid the cell door open. “There’s a phone in a side room down the hall.”

The guard waited for Cecilia to walk in front of her. Past a couple more cells, the guard told her to enter the first door on her right. Inside was a small, windowless room with a square table and a chair. A phone was built into the wall. This phone Cecilia recognized, a traditional wired phone with a handset. The guard motioned for her to sit in the chair.

“A hard line phone?” Cecilia said. “I thought all the phones in 2099 were wireless, holographic even.”

“Prisoners get to use this phone,” the guard explained. “Harder for you to be able to steal something and sneak it back in your cell.” The guard raised her hand and started up her own holophone to interface with the phone built

into the wall. “Who do you want to contact?”

“Alina Bol, B-O-L,” she said, spelling the name out.

In a few seconds the guard picked up the handset and handed it to Cecilia. “It’s ringing.”

Cecilia steeled herself for what she had to say. The phone rang. Her arms tensed from the anxiety.

“Hello?”

“Alina, this is Cecilia.”

“Where are you?” Alina said. “I was trying to get ahold of you all day yesterday.”

“Alina,” Cecilia said, hesitating. “I.. I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry? For what?” She noted the concern in Alina’s voice; she could tell Cecilia was stressed. “Cecilia, what’s going on?”

“Dravin. He is on his way back,” she warned. “I failed and I couldn’t get to you in time. He’s coming for Motega and the device.”

“No,” Alina said, but it wasn’t a wish that Cecilia was wrong, it was an actual denial of her statement. “No, Dravin is already here. Cecilia, I’ve got to go.”

Cecilia stopped holding back the tears. “Alina, I’m so sorry,” she said between sobs. “Tell Motega, I’m sorry. It’s all my fault. I’m so so sorry.”

“Cecilia, I really have to go,” Alina said, rushed now. “I’ll call you back in a bit.” The line went dead. There was no time to tell her that she wouldn’t be able to call her back. If it was as bad as she feared, they may never see each other again.

“Hello?” Alina held the holophone to her ear. She stood outside the doorway to the office building that housed their science experiment, the QED, and waited for Motega to arrive. She had left the hotel earlier this morning and Motega said he would join her in a bit, but

she wished he would hurry up.

“Alina, this is Cecilia,” she heard from the other end of the line. Cecilia’s voice sounded tinny and distant, but she was thankful she finally called.

“Where are you?” Alina said. “I was trying to get ahold of you all day yesterday.” She had begun to fear the worst, that Cecilia was hurt, in a ditch somewhere. Or worse, that Dravin had killed her, but Alina didn’t know where to turn. Eventually Motega assured her that Cecilia would show up. She just had to be patient.

“Alina,” Cecilia said. She was quiet for a moment. *What is it?* “I... I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry? For what?” Alina glanced back at the doorway. It was glass, so she could see inside, but there wasn’t any movement. Alina tapped her foot, wishing again for Motega to come. *What has you so spooked, Cecilia?* “Cecilia, what’s going on?”

“Dravin. He is on his way back,” Cecilia warned. “I failed and I couldn’t get to you in time. He’s coming for Motega and the device.”

Alina’s heart sunk. “No,” she said, matter-of-factly. Cecilia was wrong; Dravin wasn’t coming. “No, Dravin is already here.” Downstairs, with his new IIA friends, dismantling the device. She saw Motega coming towards her from around the corner. “Cecilia, I’ve got to go.”

“Alina, I’m so sorry,” Cecilia said, audibly crying. She sounded panicked and afraid. “Tell Motega, I’m sorry. It’s all my fault. I’m so so sorry.”

“Cecilia, I really have to go,” she said, rushed now. Motega opened the door, nodding to Alina, about to go downstairs. “I’ll call you back in a bit.” She hung up the phone. “Motega, wait.”

“You finally got ahold of Cecilia?” he said. He had no idea what he was walking into.

“Yes,” Alina said. “But that’s not what’s important.”

“Alina, what’s wrong?”

“Dravin is back. He’s in the IIA now, this country’s

version of the FBI. They're downstairs, taking apart the device," she explained quickly.

"What?" he said, rushing inside, flushed with anger.

"No, wait Motega," Alina called after him, but he ignored her and raced down the stairs. Alina followed. When she reached the lab the work of the IIA agents had stopped. The machine was in several large pieces in front of her desk. Motega stood in the doorway, facing Dravin, the other two agents back behind her desk.

"What do you want, Dravin?" Motega said. He glanced briefly at his office, which was locked, and refocused on Dravin.

"I want the device," he said, turning to square off with Motega.

"No, Dravin, what do you really want? You're not just following orders anymore," he pointed out. "Why are you here?"

Dravin stepped forward and got right up in Motega's face. "The QED belongs to me," he said again.

"This is just old fashion revenge, then?"

"Bah," Dravin snorted with a wave of his hand. He turned away from Motega.

"Heh, that's it. I got you kicked out of the University, so you're trying to get back at me?"

"Don't flatter yourself."

"It's pathetic," Motega said sharply.

"It was mine in the first place," Dravin said, spinning around and raising his voice. "You took it from me. You ruined my life."

"I didn't do that," Motega countered. "You did."

"You turned them all against me. You think I wanted to join the FBI? I was a scientist, top of the class. Better than you," he said, jabbing his finger in Motega's face.

"You were a cheat," Motega shot back. "I didn't turn them against you. I exposed you. I showed them what you are."

Dravin scoffed again. "If anything you stole *my*

research.”

Motega shook his head. “A hundred years down the road and you don’t give up. You and I both know that’s not true.” Dravin gritted his teeth, but Motega continued, taunting him. “You’re a failure.”

Dravin swung out, classic right hook, but Motega ducked, letting the punch fly wide. He followed through with a jab to the stomach, knocking Dravin back and taking the wind out of him. The two agents with Dravin aimed their weapons at Motega, but Dravin waved them down. “No,” he said. “This is my fight.”

He turned back to Motega, carefully looking to contain his rage and focus on taking Motega down. “You want this?” he said, and Motega smiled. Dravin jabbed at him twice toward the chest. Both times Motega blocked. Then he caught one in the face and staggered back.

As Dravin swung out with his left to Motega’s head again, Motega charged, grabbing Dravin around the chest and pushing him back to the wall. Dravin shifted his feet and turned Motega’s momentum against him, flipping him to the floor. He planted his knees on either side of Motega’s waist, pinning him to the floor, and swung out again at his face.

Motega had nowhere to escape. Twice more Dravin’s fists connected until Motega was finally able to bring his arms up to block, but Dravin wouldn’t stop trying.

“That’s enough,” Alina said, finally stepping in. She grabbed Dravin’s suit collar from behind and jerked him back.

One of the other agents, the man, grabbed Alina’s arms and pulled her off of Dravin. “That’s okay,” Dravin said. “Let her go.” He stood up and took a step back from Motega. “Now get out. We’re done here. The QED is now property of the North American Coalition.”

Motega got up and wiped some blood off his mouth and forehead. As Dravin turned back around, Motega grabbed his suit coat by the lapels and shoved him against

the wall. “Don’t think this is over,” he growled.

Dravin bared his teeth. “Let go of me.”

Motega released and Dravin brushed his suit off. Motega turned his back to Dravin and walked out. “Let’s go, Alina.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Reflections

YEAR: 2006

Six years before the science experiment that brought about The Mapiya Event, Motega was at his computer in his dorm room, working away furiously, when Dravin entered. He sensed more than heard him, intent on his work as he was. Dravin went to the fridge and pulled out two beers, continuously talking. Something about a girl in one of his classes, a wild girl. There was an altercation after class. Motega didn't pay much attention.

"So it ended in a dare," Dravin said. "Let's just say I lost and now I have to pay for a round of drinks at the bar tonight." Dravin placed one of the beer bottles next to Motega, but he didn't even look at it. "Whaddya say? You coming?"

Dravin dropped back on his bed. "I'm not going out tonight," Motega said firmly. He rubbed his chin as he examined the results on his screen and his right cheek twitched nervously.

"Come on, Motega. You spend day and night on that thesis. You need a break," Dravin pleaded. He took a quick swig of his beer. "You need a night off."

"This is my life's work," Motega said, finally looking over at Dravin. *Will be my life's work.* "I just found out that someone has been siphoning off data from my research."

Dravin grew quiet, sipping his beer. "You're too paranoid," he said, getting up and plopping his empty

bottle next to Motega's unopened one. "Let's go. You really need to relax, unwind." He tugged at Motega's shoulder, but Motega jerked back.

"This is serious," Motega said sharply. "At best it's a prank, but this could be as bad as plagiarism."

"How do you even know?" Dravin said, opening Motega's beer bottle and taking a drink. "You're just imagining it."

"I began to suspect last week when I noticed some numbers had been changed in the database. So I installed tracing software on my computer to trace back who's been hacking in. Somehow they made it past my firewall."

Dravin laughed and shrugged it off again. "You're just being paranoid," he said again. "It's not healthy, Motega. You have to get out of this room once and a while. Experience life."

"It's almost finished," Motega said, so they waited. Dravin sipped on his beer, watching the screen over Motega's shoulder. Motega's jaw hung open when the results came up on the screen. "I don't understand this," he said. "It says it's coming from this room."

"It's tracking your own computer," Dravin said with a grin. "See, I told you. Paranoid."

"Just because I'm paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get me," Motega said, a line he had used a dozen times before. "Let me just check." He made a couple selections with his mouse and waited for the screen to load. "It's not my computer." He spun around on his chair to face Dravin. "It's coming from yours."

"What?" Dravin exclaimed, nearly pushing Motega back to examine his computer. "That's impossible." Motega tried to judge his reaction. He almost appeared sincere enough, but this tracing software was very accurate.

"Get off of there," Motega said, pushing him back. With a couple clicks of the mouse, Motega started

downloading the data. He waited a few seconds, then pulled the flash drive from the computer. “This goes to the dean,” he said, holding the drive before Dravin for a second.

“Come on, just think about it for a second, please,” Dravin begged, confirming Motega’s suspicions.

“You’re a cheat. You stole my research and was going to pass it off as your own, and all for a stupid thesis.” Motega closed the lid of his laptop and strode out of the room, Dravin following behind.

“It was my idea in the first place, Motega,” Dravin said, trying a different tactic. “If anything, you stole it from me.”

Motega shook his head and continued walking. “You said I could. You said you weren’t even interested in it. This,” he said, holding up the drive again for a moment, “is blatant theft and plagiarism.”

“How about I make it up to you?” Dravin suggested. “How about that? I’ll find something else for my thesis; it’s all yours. And you, my friend, will have the finest steak and lobster dinner you can imagine.”

Motega curled his lip in disgust. “You can’t bribe me.”

“Then what is it?” Dravin said, stepping in front of Motega to stop his progress. “Is this because of me and Cindy? Is that it? Old fashion revenge?”

Motega gritted his teeth and swung in with his fist, catching Dravin in the gut. Dravin doubled over, clutching his stomach and moaning in pain. “No, Dravin. That was for Cindy. This — this is ethical.”

YEAR: 2094

Eric, now twelve years old, pounded the last nail into the last step on their tree fort. In Eric’s backyard, Chevelle and Eric together had made the entire fort themselves, or at least that’s what he would tell his friends. He found the

ladder part was hard to use, though, so his dad bought larger boards for them, and longer nails, so he could redo it. "Perfect," he said, hands on his hips he looked up at it.

"Come on, let's try it out," Chevelle said, racing up the tree. Eric followed behind her.

Eric checked out the window, leaning out and looking down. The ground seemed so far away. He looked up along one of the thick branches supporting the fort. "Hey, check it out," he called to Chevelle.

"What? What is it?" she said, pulling him out of the window and sticking her head out.

"A bird's nest up that branch," he said. "Do you see it?"

"Yeah. No birds, though."

Chevelle pulled her head back in and, as she walked around the small space, Eric took a spot in the middle of the floor and sat cross-legged. "First, we're going to need some decoration," she said, waving her hands around as she described it. "A rug there on the floor, drapes over the window here, and some pictures."

"Lame," Eric said. "We need man stuff." That was a term he had been using more and more recently. Everything was "manly," or "man's work," or it needed to be "strong enough for a man."

"I helped build this fort, too. I get to make some of the decisions," Chevelle said, standing before him and planting her hands firmly on her hips.

He looked up and cocked his head sideways, looking at her chest. "Hey, do you have...?"

Chevelle puffed her chest out proudly. "What do you think?"

"They're too big," he complained. They were just twelve. His dad said he would start thinking about girls soon, but he had never thought of Chevelle in that way before.

Chevelle smiled and sat across from him, folding her legs out to the side. He never did understand how she was

able to sit like that. He tried it once and nearly broke his legs. “They just started coming in,” she explained, reaching into her shirt. “Mom took me bra shopping, but look.” She pulled out a wad of tissues and handed them to Eric. “They’re mostly tissue right now.”

It was so weird that this was happening to her now. His mustache hadn’t even started coming in yet. “What do you think we’ll be like in the future?” he asked. “You think we’ll still have this fort?”

She looked up at the plywood and two by fours around them. “I hope so. This took a lot of work.”

“We could make it again,” Eric said, though reflecting on what they put into it he certainly didn’t want to have to.

“Do you think we’ll both still be in Mapiya?” Chevelle wondered.

“Why wouldn’t we be?” They had both been neighbors for as long as they could remember it would be strange to think of living somewhere else. “Let’s make a pact,” he suggested.

“A pact?”

“Yeah, where we promise that we will always be friends and we’ll always stick together no matter what.”

Chevelle wrinkled her nose, thinking about it. “What do we have to do then?”

“Do?”

She nodded. “Yeah, they always do something, like in the movie or books. Spit and shake hands or something.”

Eric thought about that for a moment and put a finger on his chin. He didn’t know it would be more involved than just saying it. What was the easiest way they could do this? “Can we just pinkie swear?”

Chevelle smiled and held out her fist, pinkie pointed out. “Okay, pinkie swear. Friends forever.”

“Friends forever,” he repeated, wrapping his pinkie around hers. “Hey, you know what we should do?” he said, letting go. “I just had a great idea.”

“What?”

“We should break in to South Mapiya,” he said with a big smile on his face.

“No way,” she said, almost horrified. “We’d get in so much trouble.”

“Meh,” he muttered, shrugging off any danger. “It’d be a manly adventure.”

“Not on your life.” He let it go and they were silent for a moment. Chevelle looked down at her chest again, arching her back to try to make the small bumps more prominent. “Did you ever think, well— Did you ever think we’d get married some day?”

Eric shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe.” Such an odd question. Why would she be asking about that? He supposed it made sense, but he hadn’t thought of it before. He was a boy and she was a girl. Wasn’t that what happened? Now that the idea was there, he looked over at Chevelle. She was leaning towards him and kind of puckering her lips. What had gotten into her? He opened his mouth, about to ask her, when she leaned in close and placed her lips on his.

He pushed her back. “Ew! Gross!” He spat to the side and wiped the kiss of his lips. “You gave me girl cooties.” Chevelle started crying. He sat there, watching her scramble to the entrance and down to the ground, going so quickly she missed the last step and fell on her face. He didn’t get up for a few minutes, not knowing what to do and now worrying that he had hurt his friend somehow, until he finally decided that girls were weird.

YEAR: 2012

It was the day before the scheduled first test of their big experiment and Cecilia had stayed late at the lab. Motega and Alina had gone back to the hotel for the night, all of them working late on a Sunday, but Cecilia stayed behind to finish up some paperwork and use Alina’s computer.

She was just about to shut down and get to bed herself when a knock came at the door.

Cecilia wrinkled her brow and looked up. Normally she didn't mind working at the lab; it was dark, windowless, and strange building noises seemed to appear at the oddest times, but she usually felt safe enough to ignore it, even when alone. As the disconcerting knock came again a dread filled her, reminding her of the time she got lost after hitting some clubs in Minneapolis at night.

After a third knock, Cecilia grabbed a pen, the first item nearby she could think of to use as a weapon, and made her way to the door. She opened it slowly, expecting the worst, when a nice man in a three piece suit greeted her with a smile.

"Can I help you?" Cecilia said, still wary.

"Dravin Davidson, FBI," the man said, flashing a badge. "You must be Cecilia, just the person I was looking for. May I come in?"

Cecilia stepped back, opening the door for him. "How did you get in here? I thought the office was supposed to be locked up for the night?"

"It was," Dravin said, stepping past her. He walked over to the desk and turned back to face her. "May I speak frankly, Cecilia?" She nodded, not bothering to ask how this FBI agent knew her name. "This experiment you and your friends are working on is very dangerous and can't be allowed to proceed."

Cecilia narrowed her eyes, making it obvious she didn't trust him. "What have I to do with you, Agent Davidson?"

"I need to ask you to sabotage the device, just a little, so that tomorrow when they turn it on, nothing happens."

She shook her head. "There's no way I'm betraying my friends." Dravin reached into his coat and pulled a stack of hundred dollar bills from his pocket. He placed the stack carefully on the desk; the wrapper read \$1000.

Cecilia shook her head, though slower this time. “Who are you, really?”

“I’ve been assigned by the FBI to oversee this project,” he explained. “It is being funded by a government grant, so the government owns it. And now we need it not to work.” To punctuate his claim, he took out another stack of a thousand dollars from his jacket pocket and placed it on top of the other.

“And you, what? Examined my file and determined I would be the easiest to bribe?” she said. She shook her head a third time. “No, I’m not doing it.”

“I haven’t approached until now,” Dravin continued to explain, “preferring to watch from afar. I’ve had someone watch you, too. I know about the recent trouble your parents have had with the mortgage. It’s a shame that your father had to lose his job after 15 years with the company, and unemployed for a year now? About... five thousand should cover the missed payments, you think?”

He took out and placed three more bundles on top of the others. Cecilia walked over to the desk and picked one up, thumbing through the bills. “How could this be official business?” she said, feeling her resolve slipping away.

“The project is owned by the government,” Dravin assured her. “We’re pulling the plug. It’ll just be,” he shrugged, “easier on Motega this way.”

“And easier on you?”

Dravin nodded slowly. “Easier on everyone.”

“You’ve got yourself a deal.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Accident

YEAR: 2099

“So, what do you think?” Eric said as he and Heaven came out of the cafeteria. “You’ve been to two classes and lunch in the school of the future, but you’ve been quiet all morning.”

Eric led the way through the halls towards his next class as he spoke. Heaven shrugged. “I don’t know, you know? I’m just taking it all in. Everything’s so... so...”

“Different?”

“Yeah, but at the same time, so much the same,” she concluded.

“Probably the story of humanity. Even back to cavemen, we still draw on the walls, eat, and we’re fascinated by fire.”

Heaven laughed. “Listen to you, trying to sound all thoughtful and cultured.” She smiled and he caught her grin, a smile just for him. “I think the biggest thing I didn’t expect is everything looks so new. A hundred years into the future and I would have expected the school to be a little older by now.”

“Ah, yes,” Eric said with a nod. “The NAC puts a very big emphasis on education. This school has been renovated, all the desks are computers, and the teachers are much better, professionally speaking, than they were in your day, I imagine. They are paid very well.”

Eric caught sight of the door to his next classroom and, out of the corner of his vision, saw Blayze walking

up to them. "Is this your girlfriend?" he asked. "Your blast from the past?"

He glanced at Heaven. "I guess you could call her that. How'd you know?"

"Chevelle couldn't stop talking about you two this morning," he said. He gave Eric a jab to the shoulder. "You missed practice last night, what's up?"

"Oh, right," he said, with another glance at Heaven. "I'm sorry, I forgot all about it. It's just been crazy lately with the tornado, my dad, the whole 'city from the past' thing."

"Well, we've got a big game coming up next week. We go up against the White Bear Bears. You better be on top of your game," Blayze said, poking Eric in the chest with his finger.

Eric smiled. Quarterback and captain of the team, Blayze was just playing around. His way of inspiring his teammates. "You bet I will," he said. "I won't miss another practice."

"Anyways, catch ya later, Eric. Nice to meet you," he said with a nod to Heaven before walking off.

"Come on, Heaven." Eric pointed to the classroom. "This is my next class; you'll love it. History."

Class started pretty boring with a recap of yesterday's lesson. Given the reappearance of Mapiya, the teacher had decided to revisit that portion of their history. He was sure Heaven would find it fascinating, though, or maybe a bit strange. He let her use his desk to view the material in the flat top computer. To see history in detail of the future. He wondered what it would be like.

Before too long a man in gray, pin-striped suit stepped into the classroom and pulled the teacher aside. They talked in low tones at the doorway for a moment, then the teacher turned to the class and called for Eric, waving him to the front of the room.

"Just stay here," he told Heaven. "I'll be back."

Eric walked to the front of the room and stepped out

of the classroom with the man. The teacher pulled the door shut and went back to teaching the class.

“Eric, I’m your dad’s lawyer,” the man said. “Gilbert Smith. You can call me Gil.”

“This party is going to be fantastic,” Jodie said. The last lunch period was over. Jodie, Chevelle, and a few others were setting up the party. A makeshift stage was being set up at the far end; the DJ was getting his equipment together up there.

Chevelle picked up another balloon and fit it on the helium machine to blow it up as Jodie was stringing together some stars and moon figures. “What do you think?” Chevelle asked her. “Maybe we should change the theme. Something that says ‘Welcome Back, South Mapiya.’”

“We don’t have any time to change the theme,” Jodie scoffed at her. Chevelle tied off the balloon. Jodie had one thing going for her, and one thing only. She was a cheerleader. Not just *a* cheerleader, either, the head cheerleader. That’s why she got almost as many guys as Chevelle did, but not enough brains to do anything clever with them. “It’s already got a theme,” Jodie said, “and it’s a pretty good one. Turn of the Century. We’re going to party like it’s 2099.”

“How about we party like it’s 1999?” Chevelle said. “It keeps with the theme.”

“I doubt it, Chevelle. Kids from 2012 were like one year old in 1999.” Chevelle did the math in her head. The teenagers their age would have been four or five. Still too young to remember, she figured, but it showed Jodie’s math skills, at least. She took out another balloon.

Jodie set aside the line she was working on and started another one. Her decorations would be strung up

everywhere: hanging from the sign outside, from the ceiling in the cafeteria, anywhere and everywhere, really. With holographic technology, they were still stringing up decorations.

“All right, here’s a better idea,” Chevelle said. “How about the music? We could mix it up with some songs from the early 21st Century.”

“Sure, Chevelle,” Jodie said, rolling her eyes. But it was a good idea. Chevelle set down her balloons and walked over to the stage where the DJ was setting up his music stand. The only necessary piece of equipment there was his speakers and the computer, which he could even control from his holophone. The rest was just for show.

“How hard would it be,” she asked, “to get music from 2012 and before?”

“Hard?” he said, shaking his head. “Not hard.”

“Do you have time to mix it in with the music for the dance?”

“For you, Chevelle? Anything,” he said, leaning over the table to give her a kiss on the cheek. They dated for a while a couple years ago. Just a silly thing that didn’t go anywhere, but she kept an open relationship with most of her past boyfriends.

“You’re amazing. Thanks.”

She walked back to Chevelle and grabbed a ladder leaning up against the wall. “How about I start hanging those up?” she said, setting the ladder up.

“You still going to the dance with Blayze?” Jodie asked.

“Yeah,” she said. *And what’s it to ya?* “Could you hand me one of those?” She looked up at the ceiling, figuring out how she was going to tie it off, as she held a hand out to Jodie, waiting for one of the decorations she strung up.

As she was still looking up, Chevelle felt the ladder shake, unstable. In the next moment it occurred to her that she was falling. Fear shot up her back immediately

and she reached out to grab on to something, but there was nothing to stabilize her. She felt her leg hit first, and with a wrenching pain she thought she heard it snap. Then the rest of her body connected with the ground. Her head swung back hard. Lights and stars floated across her vision before everything faded to black.

The lawyer, Gil, brought Eric to a small nearby office. He pulled out a chair for Eric, then walked around the desk and sat on the other side. “Your teacher was kind enough to let me use this office,” Gil said. “I realize this is a bit unconventional, coming to you at school like this, but I’ve been quite busy, with the tornado and the sudden appearance of South Mapiya. You understand.”

Gil looked across the desk with sunken, sleepless eyes at Eric. He wasn’t just busy, he was tired. “It’s fine, Gil. Thanks.”

There was an hourglass on the teacher’s desk by Gil’s right hand. Eric focused on it as Gil talked. “As I said, I am— was your father’s lawyer. He had a will made up, and some money in a trust for his funeral. He thought that was important, given his condition.”

The hourglass was quite large, a nice centerpiece. The sand in the hourglass fell through the neck, swirling together as it drained from the top. Small pumps on the four corners sucked the sand from the bottom and poured it back into the top of the hourglass, continuing the cycle perpetually. Eric paid minimal attention to the things Gil was saying.

“So, first I’m going to need your signature on a few papers,” Gil said, touching the teacher’s desk a few times to transfer digital papers into the desk for Eric to examine. “Read it carefully. I’ll be happy to explain anything you have questions about.”

The hourglass was mesmerizing, time continually pouring into the endless future. As the sand wound together at the top and spiraled towards the neck, faster and faster the lower it went, Eric was reminded of the tornado, spinning up in the air, striking out toward his home, toward his father. He shuddered.

As he was about to turn to Gil and sign some papers, his hand buzzed. He activated the holophone and brought it to his ear. "Hello?"

"Eric, this is Chevelle's dad. You should come to the hospital right away. Chevelle's hurt."

Eric hung up. "I've got to go," he said, standing. "I'm so sorry to waste your time, Gil, but it's an emergency. A friend is in the hospital."

"I understand," Gil said.

He contemplated running back to the classroom to collect Heaven, but only briefly. Chevelle had been a close friend forever. If she was hurt, he had to be there.

"One more, please," Motega said, setting his glass back down on the bar a bit harder than he intended.

"Do you really need to be doing this to yourself right now?" the bartender asked, picking up the glass.

Motega nodded. "Believe me. I'm going to need to be at least slightly drunk for what I'm about to do."

"Okay," he said, getting another glass out. "Just so long as you don't intend to be driving out of here." Motega indicated he wanted more of what he had been drinking, so the bartender filled the glass up to the brim with a domestic beer, actually one home brewed here in Mapiya.

"How have you been holding up?" Motega asked. "You know, with the whole trip to the future."

The bartender took out a rag and began wiping down

the counter. “Busier here than usual, actually. Not what I would have expected, but I guess I understand it. I got registered, they have a place at the mall, which got me a phone and an instant credit line, but I haven’t taken much time off to see the sights, so to speak.”

“Definitely not what I intended,” he muttered to himself.

“What’s that?”

“Nothing,” Motega said, taking another swig of beer.

The bar was pretty empty in the middle of the day. One other man sat at the bar with him, scruffy looking with long bangs in front of his face, and another watching TV from a booth in the back. “Life’s a pithole, huh?” the man at the bar said. His face looked sunken and droopy, pretty pitiful, and he stared at nowhere in particular, his eyes only half focused. Motega wondered how many beers the man had, and if he should have a few more, as well.

“What’s your name?”

“Shemuel,” he said, raising his own overfilled mug to Motega. “But you can call me Shem. You?”

“Motega,” he answered. “Motega Wilson.”

“Wilson, yeah,” Shem said, nodding. For a brief moment some life entered in him as he tried to recall the name. “Aren’t you that scientist that brought us here?” he asked, ‘here’ being the far future, of course.

“Yeah, that’s me.”

“You didn’t do any of us any favors, man,” Shem said sullenly, taking a long drink from his mug.

“Play nice, Shem,” the bartender warned. “It’s not as if he tried to send the town into the future. Science is science.” Motega shook his head, not bothering to correct him. The reporters must have talked to one of the Sheriff’s the day the town came back. His name and experiment were in the papers but none of them got it right, and the few reporters that did actually come to hear it from him he hadn’t bothered to indulge. There was

always too much to do, too much data to go over. But that's all changed now.

Shem glanced over at Motega. "You ever just have those days where the world seems out of control?" he asked. "That the only way out seems to be to go a bit mad with it?"

"I know exactly what you mean," Motega said, taking another long draw from his mug.

"That's some sad self-destructive talk there, guys," the bartender said.

Shem balked. "Aw, it's just talk, Al. Leave us alone."

"All right, but I'm cutting you off now. Both of you. Last ones."

Shem downed the rest of his beer. "Probably for the best, anyways," he muttered to Motega. "Gonna be a long day tomorrow. Actually want to be sober for this one." He stood up and looked at his empty mug with a frown. "Well, mostly sober."

"Cheers, my friend," Motega said, raising his glass to Shem. "And remember, it's never as bad as it seems." He took a drink from the mug, punctuating his words. "Except for when it is," he added, and they both laughed in their half-drunken stupor.

"Goodbye, man," Shem said, walking towards the door. "Drink up!"

"Hey," Eric said, racing into the hospital room. Chevelle lay in bed, the head upright at a 45 degree angle and left leg up in a sling. "I got a call from your parents at school," he said. He rushed up to her and gave her a hug. "They said you were hurt. Are you all right?"

She returned the hug. "Yeah, I'll be fine. I didn't even know there was anything wrong at first; I didn't feel it. It is throbbing like nothing else now, though."

“Oh, I’m sorry,” he said, pulling away. “I didn’t hurt anything, did I?”

“No, you lug,” she said with a laugh. “It’s just my leg.”

He stared at her leg in the sling. “How did it happen?”

“I was putting up some decorations for the dance tomorrow when I fell off the ladder,” she said, straining to see. She wiggled her feet and grimaced. “Man, that hurts. Actually, I think Jodie did it.”

“The cheerleader?”

Chevelle nodded. “I think she’s jealous about Blayze.” The name hung in the air, but Eric found the name less irritating since he started going out with Heaven. “They’re putting a cast on it today. I’ll be out by tonight.” She laughed to herself. “Well, I won’t be dancing tomorrow.”

“I don’t know, maybe the slow songs,” he said with a grin. “All they do is hug and move their hips anyways.”

She laughed with him, though the merriment wasn’t there. “I suppose you’re right,” she said. “And for the fast songs they just bob their heads.”

“Do you think Blayze will mind?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know,” she said. Her heart wasn’t really in it anymore, like there was something else on her mind. Something other than boys? Imagine that. “How are you holding up?” she asked, not having to add that she was referring to his dad.

They were both melancholy about their predicaments. He just shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve been trying not to think about it, I guess. Heaven’s been a good distraction; we had fun last night, before the IIA came to bring the smack down.”

“Yeah, that was interesting,” she agreed, but let the subject fall flat.

“Your parents still okay with her staying over?”

“Yeah,” she said. “At this point they just want to do anything they can to help out. Everybody is going

through a lot, and you know you're like a son to them."

Their conversation died down again, as it tends to around the hospital bed. He wanted to be there to support her, concerned about her as a friend, but not knowing quite what to say. A couple of days ago he'd be standing here, maybe babbling away, just trying to hide his feelings so she didn't know he liked her. Now he thought about Heaven, and how he had left her back at the school to fend for herself when he heard that Chevelle was in the hospital.

He held up his hand and made his phone into a remote control. "The TV have anything good on?" he asked, switching it on. The televisions here hung from the ceiling, projecting the holograms down.

"I don't know. I haven't been in long enough to try watching."

Eric opened up the guide on his holoremove, found an action channel and quickly scanned through a short list of suggested movies. He selected one and moved it forward past the credits.

They watched in silence for a while before Chevelle spoke again, always ready to ruin a good show with talking. "Eric, you know, I've been thinking. You remember that fort we built together?"

Eric nodded. She had brought up the fort once before, the night of The Event two days ago. He wondered what Chevelle wanted to say, but she didn't go any further for a while. She hadn't said much the other day, either. She was silent again until the scene cut to a commercial. The timer in the corner counted down from a minute until the commercial would be over. The TV switched to mute.

Chevelle looked down at her hospital gown. "I need to tell you something," she said, sounding forlorn now. "You remember what we first did in the fort?"

"We put in decorations like you wanted," he said, confused at what she was getting at.

"No, that's... No." The TV turned back up as the

commercial ended. Eric flicked his phone to turn it off. “I know you’re with Heaven now,” she said, looking up at Eric. “And that’s not why I’m saying this. Really. I just, I don’t know. It’s something that Blayze has said about you.”

Eric shifted on his feet. “What did Blayze say about me?”

“Well, no. Not about you, really. About me.” She shrugged and tried to smile it off, but she was clearly nervous about telling him whatever it was she was trying to say.

“Chevy, you know you can tell me anything, right?”

“Right. Anything. Right.” She was silent for a moment more. “The first thing we did at the fort is... I kissed you, Eric. And I kind of wish you hadn’t been so mean to me.”

“Chevelle, I was twelve. What did you expect?” But she was saying more than that, wasn’t she? “Chevy, what are you saying?”

“Eric, I think I like you,” she said finally. “As... more than a friend.”

Eric shifted his feet, almost taking a step back. “What do you mean?” he said, defenses immediately going up. This is what he had wanted to hear for so long, but now that she was saying it it just made him angry.

“You know,” she said, rolling her eyes. It was obvious, but he wanted to make her say it. “Like, I don’t know.” She struggled to get the words out. “Like, maybe, a boyfriend?”

“How could you be doing this to me?” He felt like he was screaming at her. He glanced at the door but no one was looking in on them. He pursed his lips with a growl and stepped away.

“Eric, I just—”

“No. All this time I’ve been here for you,” he said. “Sitting back as you talk about other guys, like *every* other guy, watching you *kiss* all the other guys.”

“Eric, you mean that—” He realized he just told her that he liked her, too.

“Yeah, a couple of days ago I was pathetic,” he told her. “Just waiting for you to look my way. No, I’m not going to let you do this to me.” She was just jealous? The thought grated at him. She was all over Blayze on Tuesday, she’d be all over him at the dance tomorrow, but didn’t want him to ever find someone. Or he’d just be there as back up? He gritted his teeth.

And what if Heaven could be the one? Not that he believed in soul mates or destiny or anything, but.... He didn’t know. Thoughts raced through his head too quickly. He marched to the door, spun on his heel and walked back. “I’m with Heaven now. And as soon as she comes along, you tell me this?”

“I’m sorry, Eric,” she said, reaching a hand out to him. “I don’t want to lose you, but that’s not why I’m saying this.”

“No. You don’t get to do this to me,” he said, finally rushing out the door. He didn’t look behind to see the tears on her face.

Motega flipped off his lights and slowed down as the silver, and hovering, sedan he was following came near to the facility. Elko, named after the nearby town, had no security on the parking lot, just the doors, if it was anything like when he had seen back in 2012. He pulled in and parked, careful not to draw attention. He watched as the occupant of the other car, none other than Dravin Davidson, got out and walked quickly to the front doors.

Dravin stopped in front of the doors and checked his pockets, presumably for a key card to gain him access. Apparently not finding it, he raised his hand to his ear, the holophone shimmering into existence. After a short

conversation he lowered his hand and waited. A few minutes later a security guard opened the door. Dravin showed him his ID on his phone and followed him in.

Motega waited several moments after Dravin was gone. There was no sign of him returning, or anyone else. The facility was silent. He turned to his briefcase, left on the passenger seat. He flicked open the locks and lifted the lid. It seemed surreal, the grenade sitting there next to otherwise ordinary papers and files.

He rested his hand on the grenade and looked back up at the facility. It would be such an easy thing, he thought, to walk in, find the machine, and drop the grenade. He knew he wouldn't be walking out of that place alive, or at least not a free man.

Leaving the grenade inside, he closed the briefcase and grabbed the handle. He had been preparing himself for this for two days now, ready to sacrifice his research, and if necessary, himself, to keep the machine he created out of the hands of Dravin and the government.

The device was more dangerous than even Dravin had originally imagined after what it had done, suspending them in time. And he shivered when he thought of what he learned the town had looked like for the past 87 years, the site of a major explosion. What would Dravin do with this? What *could* he do?

Motega thought of Alina and let go of the handle. He remembered how she used to smile at him, how she was so nervous to tell her about being accepted for another job. He laughed silently. At the time he thought she was going to ask him out or tell him she was interested.

Tomorrow there was that dance at the Mapiya High School. He had promised the Sheriff of the future that he would go with Alina and be a chaperone. Alina probably found a dress by now, and what he wouldn't give to see her in one.

Motega put the car into gear and drove out of the parking lot and back onto the freeway. When he was far

enough away he flicked his lights back on. *It will be worth it to see Alina one last time at the dance, he figured. What must be done can be done afterward.*

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Saturday

7:00 AM

Kevin tossed and turned in his sleep all night, as he had the night before. Friday had been painful, trying to go against his nature and not investigate; to stay out of Joshua's way as he had asked. Saturday morning, he woke with a start.

In the craziness of the past few days, especially with the two murders at the library, Kevin had forgotten about what Motega had said back when he was explaining the science behind The Event. *You might want to check out the old armory down the street*, Motega had said. *I thought I noticed the back door open as I walked by.*

Open. What could an opportunistic thief have stolen from that armory? He reached for his holophone on the night stand and slipped it over his hand. "I so hope you got yourself a new phone," Kevin muttered to himself as he fumbled with the phone. He held his hand to his ear. "Call Alex Whisper." It was a pretty unique name, he figured. If he was registered, it should be easy to find.

The phone connected without any further prompting. It rang a couple times until he finally heard a tired hello from the other end. "Alex, are you awake?"

"I am now," Alex said, annoyed.

"Do you still work at the armory on Dennis Street?"

"Yeah, but it's a Saturday," he complained.

"Alex, it's important. Can I meet you there?"

"Now?"

Kevin nodded, though of course Alex couldn't see him. "We need to go through the inventory. There may have been a break in."

7:30 PM

Motega scanned the school cafeteria for Alina. She had called and told him that she would be going to the dance early; he should meet her there. The cafeteria was dark, the blinds down to keep out the setting sun. Lights of reds, blues, greens, and oranges flashed across an empty dance floor, their source hidden somewhere in the ceiling above. Strung across the ceiling and hanging from the walls were silver stars, moons, and other sparkling designs.

The party started at 7:30, so it wasn't much of a party yet. A few Motega would classify as nerds and geeks — the socially undesirables; himself counted among them — were already here. Just like in 2012, most of the kids would be arriving late, looking for that balance between being too late and not wanting to be the first one there.

Looking around the room, he could almost imagine he was at a school dance back in 2012, and then the DJ turned on the holograms. Behind the stage appeared a facsimile of the moon, spaceships darting across the face of it, or occasionally towards the cafeteria.

To the left and right of the dance floor a holographic set of people appeared. They looked like teenagers, dressed in soft, nearly immodest clothing in sharp neon colors. With a Turn of the Century theme, this must be what they imagined the kids of the future would look like. The holograms formed a small crowd around the stage, talking, drinking and cheering — an audience to the real kids who would soon be dancing there.

Motega looked for Alina and eventually found her against the windows, nodding her head to the music the DJ had playing in the background. She hadn't noticed

him yet; he took a moment to watch her. She was absolutely beautiful, stunning in a way he hadn't noticed before. The first thing he noticed was her hair. She had it cut short — must have done it this afternoon — and added low lights. Formerly big and frizzy, her hair was now thinned out, pulled straight, and set at different angles, her bangs side swept and askew. Nor was she wearing her big, black-rimmed glasses.

Finally she turned towards him and caught his stare. Her smile was the star of the show, he realized. Everything about her look was to accentuate the beauty of her smile. She wore a floor length red gown with a sharp V-neck.

“Hello, m'lady,” he said with a smile as he walked up to her.

“Hello, good sir,” she said, doing her imitation of a curtsy.

He took up station beside her, their backs to the windows. “I feel like them,” he said, nodding to the kids already here, seated, and playing with their holophones.

Alina nodded. “Waiting for the cool and popular kids to arrive.”

“It was nice of the Sheriff to invite us. Get a taste of the future.”

“I'm glad you said yes,” she said. “This should be fun.”

Motega stared across the room, thinking again of the experiment and the horrible things Dravin could manage to do with it. “I have found myself wondering lately why I did it at all.”

“What do you mean?”

“The experiment. The Quantum Entanglement Device.” He said the words slowly, tasting them on his tongue. It sounded exotic, even now, after working on it for so long. Maybe that was why. Quantum Mechanics was so hard, even for scientists who made it their life's work. “Was I looking for prestige? Fame and

recognition? Or maybe I just wanted to see if I could.”

“Any great invention can be turned to an evil purpose,” she said. “You can’t regret making it because of Dravin.”

“Can’t I?” He was even starting to regret bringing it up again, casting a pall on what should be a festive mood. “I should have seen it coming, what it could be used for.”

“A knife can be used to kill, but it can also be used for cutting bread. Was the man who made it evil?”

Motega saw her point, but he shook his head. “In our time, nuclear power plants provided electricity for many homes, but the technology was first used to wipe out millions. Do the benefits outweigh the cost?” Motega laughed sourly and smiled at Alina. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to be a downer. I’ll let us enjoy the rest of the evening. I promise.”

“What’s done it done,” Alina said, finishing off that train of thought. “You couldn’t foresee it and you have nothing to feel sorry for.”

“You look beautiful tonight, Alina. Absolutely gorgeous,” he said, refusing to talk about the experiment anymore.

“Thank you, Motega.” She bumped him with her hip. “You don’t look so bad yourself.”

8:00 PM

When Blayze pulled up to her house, Chevelle hobbled over to his car with her cast. She got in and shut the door, saying nothing; she just stared straight ahead. It wasn’t an angry mood, just silent and sullen. For all her flare and excitement for the dance, she didn’t much feel like going now. Blayze sucked in a deep breath, put the car in gear, and drove off.

Blayze drove slowly and neither of them spoke until they came to a stop in the school parking lot. “Is everything okay?” Blayze finally said. “Is it something I

did?"

"No, you're fine," Chevelle said in a kind of sad voice. "It's just—" *don't mention Eric's name* "—Life."

Blayze nodded. "I can get that."

"Thanks for picking me up," Chevelle said, pushing a smile. "I wasn't sure you'd still want to take me with this." The cast on a broken leg didn't exactly spell cool and fun, she thought.

"Well, we're here," Blayze said, trying to sound peppy to compensate for Chevelle's lack of enthusiasm. "May I escort you in?"

Chevelle wasn't sure whether to let Blayze's charm change her mood. She wanted nothing more than to rewind time and take back what she said to Eric. But going back in time wasn't possible, was it? The Event came to mind. What if she could just suspend time for a little while? She smiled at Blayze, this time letting the smile touch her eyes. "Sure," she said. "I'd like that."

They stepped out of the car and she slipped her arm around his elbow. "It's him again, isn't it?" Blayze said. He winced, immediately regretting it. "Sorry, I shouldn't have said anything."

Him? Chevelle gritted her teeth. He meant Eric. Was she that transparent? She opened her mouth to object, or to apologize again. She wasn't sure which, so she shut it. Others were already here; she saw another couple enter at the main doors. A bike like Eric's was parked up on the curb a few spaces over.

"How about this night isn't about him?" she said. Then, on a whim, she leaned up and kissed him full on the lips, and held it as Blayze kissed back. She just wished Eric was watching them, getting jealous. Then in the next moment she wished he was Eric. When they were done he pulled back with a wide grin. "Now that's something I never shared with Eric," she assured him.

Blayze smiled. "Tonight should be good."

Chevelle grinned back. "Well, not *that* good."

The entrance to the school was decked out with those stars, moons, and streamers. A long banner hung over the doors read: "Party Like It's 1999." So Jodie had used her idea after all, and no doubt claimed it as her own as soon as Chevelle had been carted off to the hospital.

Glitter rained over their heads from a sudden puff of a tiny cannon as they entered the cafeteria, forcing Chevelle to at first duck, though she had been expecting it. The lights were dimmed low. A few were beginning to test out the dance floor at the far end, the holographic audience cheering them on.

"You want to get our picture taken?" Blayze asked. To the right, as they entered, a professional photographer was set up with a camera tripod, standing lights, and holographic back drops.

"Not against that," Chevelle said with a laugh. The current backdrop was of New York City Times Square as the large ball for New Years, now operating on hover technology, of course, was in the middle of its drop to midnight.

"We can change the backdrop," the photographer said. "Please, stand over here. What would you like? Let's make it a special night for you and your man." *Her man*. Was he? The photographer put them in front of the camera.

"We've got Hawaii beach, before the 2038 oil spill, of course," he said with a grin. "Or several other places. Paris, Rome, the vineyards of Germany, perhaps? Or your normal backdrops with a color flare. Pretty much anything you can imagine."

"Got anything to go with my dress?"

"Certainly do," he said, thumbing through his phone. "How about this?" He made a selection and the backdrop turned to a dark blue flare.

"Perfect," she said. They faced the camera and she let Blayze put his arm around her.

"Closer together," the photographer prompted from

behind the camera. “More. Act like you like each other.” Blayze and Chevelle looked at each other with a smile. Thinking of Eric again, she wrapped her arms around his chest and put her head on his shoulder. “Better!”

The camera made the classic shutter sound, added to all digital cameras since the beginning of the century. “Perfect. You two make a good looking couple.”

The comment stabbed at her heart. She let go of Blayze and hid the trembling of her fingers by crossing her arms. *Why am I doing this to myself?* she thought. *Yesterday in my wildest dreams I wouldn't have thought of Eric like this, now I can't think of anything else. What is wrong with me?* Out loud she just said, “Come on. Let's find somewhere to sit.”

8:15 PM

Eric woke Saturday morning and for the first time wondered if it might be better if he were dead. He wasn't sure whether that made him suicidal, or just normal. His life was falling apart. His mom and dad, both dead; his house, destroyed; and now his best friend— He wondered whether Chevy would even talk to him again after yelling at her like he did. Would it feel better to cut off any feeling at all?

He wasn't serious, of course. But he lay there for a time, thinking about it. There was still the dance that night, which meant another night with Heaven. So he continued his day, went through the motions, and around eight that night Eric sat in his rented tuxedo on the sofa on the first floor at Chevelle's, waiting for Heaven to get ready upstairs. After Heaven's money was taken away by the government agents and Chevelle broke her leg, Chevelle's mom took Heaven shopping for a dress Friday night, a dress Heaven could really own, she promised. Chevelle went out with her quarterback boyfriend fifteen minutes ago, and still Eric waited.

When Heaven finally came down the stairs Eric jumped to his feet. He looked her over. Nothing had changed. She still wore her street clothes. Her curly golden blond hair flowed over her shoulders, just like always. "You still need to get ready?" Eric asked. "What's been taking so long."

Heaven's mouth turned up in a smirk. "You said you would like me just the way I am. Well, this is me."

Eric smiled and nodded. "You're right about that." He offered her the crook of his arm. "Are we ready then?" She slipped her arm through his and went with him to the dance.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Dance

10:00 PM

Midway through the party the DJ made an announcement. Alina perked up. “This is a special dance with special guests coming all the way from 2012,” he said. “Let’s give it up for our neighbors from 2012.” The announcement ended with some clapping and cheering. Alina looked around, wondering if there were many others besides her and Moteга from 2012.

“As the Summer Dance of 2099, this party has a meaningful theme. Turn of the Century. For most people that only comes once in a life time, but for some from 2012 this is their second turn of the century. To celebrate we will be sharing in a fun and embarrassing old-fashioned turnstile dance. So grab your partner and come on up to the dance floor for a nice slow song, but when you hear the song of the gong—” he sounded the gong for everyone to recognize it “— you have to turn to your right to dance with the person beside you.”

Alina quickly scanned the crowd for Moteга. The music was starting to play. He was talking with some teachers by the far wall; science teachers, no doubt. She wound through the crowd as most of the couples made their way to the dance floor. She grabbed Moteга by the hand. “Come on. We’re dancing,” she declared, and led him up to the floor.

“This place is fascinating,” Moteга said as they started to dance. “The progress they made on Quantum

Mechanics in the 2070's— Ha! About 30 years ago, but it's so advanced for us."

"Focus, Motega," Alina said. "We're not at a science convention; we're at a party, and we are dancing."

"Right, sorry. Have you been having fun?"

"Mostly." It's funny, she thought, how people talked during slow dances about anything, because they felt like something had to be said. "Are you having fun? Have you been able to relax at all?" She noticed when he was tensing, even when she didn't say anything.

"I have been trying," he said. "It feels nice, just to be here with you."

She smiled up at him, fantasies of love and marriage and little Motegas running around the house flashing through her mind. Her smile lightened, though, as she thought of Motega, all the time strapped to his desk, working. "I like being with you, too," she said with less feeling.

The gong sounded and they pulled apart, each turning to their right to find their next dance partner.

When the DJ announced the dance, Eric and Heaven sought each other out quickly and found themselves on the edge of the dance floor. Heaven leaned in close to Eric, enjoying the closeness of his arms around her. Briefly, she wondered how long it had been before she enjoyed a hug, let alone a dance, with someone who actually cared about her. She wasn't sure there was a time.

"Thank you," she said, looking up. It was called a dance, but they were more or less just swaying back and forth in time with the music.

"For what?"

She smiled, wider when she noticed him return the

smile. "For everything," she said. "Introducing me to 2099. Caring for me and just... being a friend. I'll never forget it."

"I'll remind you constantly," he said. He took his hand from her back and wiped a tear from her face. She caressed his other hand in hers, just savoring the touch. He didn't tell her how he stared at the ceiling that morning, wondering if it would be better if he ended it all, but his troubles seemed like nothing looking into her eyes. "I realize, now, that you've been through so much. It gives me the strength and courage to continue on. What I face seems so small in comparison."

"It feels like you've been distracted all night, though," she said. "Was there something going on? Your friend, Chevelle?"

Eric shook his head. "I don't know. A bit of everything, I guess."

"Is it worse than a broken leg?" Heaven asked, wondering if one examination they had found something even more devastating.

"No," he said again, but didn't add to it. A moment later he opened his mouth to say something when the gong sounded. They pulled apart and turned to the person on their right.

Heaven and Motege were paired up next. The music switched to a little faster song in a style she didn't recognize. *From 2099*, she figured.

She recognized Motege from the papers. "You're that guy that—"

"Yep," he said quickly. "I'm the guy that made 2012 disappear." Apparently this wasn't the first time he had been approached like this.

"Well, I don't know whether to thank you or hit you,"

she said, softening it with a smile. "I'm from 2012, too."

"Why would you thank me?" She didn't answer at first, thinking back to her life just a few days and a century ago. She realized she liked dancing with Motega; he was strong and knew how to lead, and incredibly old, she thought, nearly laughing out loud.

"My life wasn't one I wanted to visit again," she said. "This way, I don't know. It's like a clean break, you know?"

"That's an interesting way to put it," he said. He gave her a slight nod. "Glad to be of service."

"Your friend, the woman you work with. You like her, don't you?"

"Excuse me?"

"Sorry. I don't mean to impose," she added quickly.

"No, it's not that. Just, is it that obvious?"

Heaven shook her head. "Not to everyone, and probably not to her, but I noticed you two throughout the night. I've seen how you look at her."

"And how do I look at her?"

Heaven wrinkled her nose, trying to think of how to put it. "Like you wish you could spend more time with her, but can't for some reason."

Motega laughed and shook his head. "If you only knew."

The gong sounded again and the music changed. They turned and sought out their next dance partner.

The next woman in line for Eric was Chevelle. She could do little more than hobble with her cast on, but like he suggested back at the hospital, she could sway with the best of them. Eric took her hand in his and placed his other hand on her hip, but didn't pull her close.

"I won't bite, you know," she said. "You can at least

hold me a little closer. A whole person could fit between us.” He stepped closer, but still didn’t speak; he didn’t know what to say, even when she started crying. “Are we ever going to be friends again?”

The dreaded question that he hadn’t asked himself, did not dare ask. The entire reason why he didn’t tell her he was in love with her for at least three years, and she risks it all by telling him that she had feelings for him. *No*, he thought to himself. *I don’t see how we can get past this.* His throat choked as he imagined saying the words. *I don’t know if we can ever be friends again.*

“I don’t know,” he said when he finally would speak again. *Friends first.* “Maybe we just need some time apart, to figure out what this all means.” He couldn’t tell, from the twisted expression on her face, whether that made it better or worse, but she nodded.

They danced for a little longer, each of them silent and trying not to look the other in the eye. If they avoided eye contact, maybe they wouldn’t have to face their feelings just yet. Soon, but not soon enough it seemed, the gong sounded and the music changed and they searched out another partner.

When they switched partners again Eric found himself dancing with Alina. She recognized him immediately. “You’re the kid that brought us back, aren’t you?”

Eric admitted that he was and they quickly made their introductions. Maybe it was because she was older, or maybe because she was from a different time, but she danced differently than the others; it made him want to lead and watch his steps, not just sway back and forth.

“How are you enjoying the party?” she asked. Eric shrugged. It was kind of a shock, he realized, to be dancing with Heaven one moment and then Chevy the

next. And the way she looked up at him with those pleading eyes. "Come on," Alina encouraged him. "Who better to talk to about it than a complete stranger?"

He shook his head and glanced over to Chevelle, dancing with another of her old boyfriends. "It's just... I don't know. I've had a crush on my best friend for years and never told her as she goes off with her boyfriends. Now I find another girl and my best friend tells me that she, you know, likes me."

"A regular love triangle," Alina said. "Never fun, especially at your age."

Eric sighed. "It's like we're in this dance, but if I dance too far from her she pulls something like this to keep the leash short. I mean, she can't really have feelings for me."

"Why not?" The music shifted. Another song in the medley started playing, this time from early in the century, *Wonderful Tonight*.

"The way she looks at other guys, touches them. She's never like that with me." As angry as he was with Chevy yesterday, he was realizing that he still longed to hear those words from her, what she said at the hospital. Just tell him that she liked him, maybe that she loved him. It was too much to handle, especially now with everything else he's had to deal with, like his dad and the town's reappearance. He still wanted her to look at him that way, say those words and really mean it.

"Maybe that's *because* she loves you," Alina suggested.

"What?"

"The way she can be with other guys, it's just a game to her. But with you it's real, so she treats you differently. With others, if it doesn't work out, who cares? There's no risk. With you she needs to be careful. Don't get too close or she could lose everything."

Eric frowned. "Yeah, maybe," he said, looking at Chevy, then Heaven, as the song started to come to a

close. “Well, thank you for this dance, Alina, and thanks for the advice.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Realization

After the dance, Eric made his way over to the punch bowl. A man with long hair and a Native American resemblance was also there grabbing some punch. “Hey,” Eric said, picking up a cup and filling it up. He spoke loud, trying to get his voice to carry over the music. “I think I recognize you. You were one of the scientists conducting that experiment, right? The one that made South Mapiya disappear?”

“That’s right,” he said, extending a hand. “Motega. And you’re the kid that brought us back.”

Eric accepted the handshake. “Yeah, I’m Eric.”

“Good to finally meet you,” Motega said. “I’ve been meaning to look you up and say thanks.” A couple more kids came over to the table to get their own punch. “Let’s talk over here.”

Eric followed Motega over to a spot on the wall, near the entrance, where it was quieter. “You know, I’m glad I ran into you,” Eric said, taking a sip of his punch. He looked out at the dance floor as the song changed. Heaven was dancing with a woman he also recognized from the experiment, dancing to some song written over a hundred years ago. “Is that one yours?”

Motega smiled. “I hope so, yeah. She’s Alina, my assistant.”

“You know, there’s one thing that’s been bothering me.”

“What’s that?”

Eric caught Motega’s eye, making sure he had his full attention. “Why the rubble and the nuclear wasteland?”

“Rubble?” Motega said, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah, at the site of South Mapiya,” Eric said. “The whole city was scorched and wiped out like it had been hit by some explosion. I was picking through debris before I found the machine. It took South Mapiya’s place after The Event in 2012.”

“I had heard about that,” Motega said with a nod.

Eric sipped his punch. “So where did it come from?”

“I’m not sure where it could have come from,” Motega said. “The field on the ground encompassed South Mapiya, and it extends a bit into the fields and forest farther south. But the particles of the town were entangled with particles from, I don’t know, somewhere else.” He shrugged. “The size of the secondary field we recorded reached up to a hundred million miles. It could have come from anywhere between here and the sun or past Mars.”

“But it didn’t just come from anywhere,” Eric said. “They weren’t random particles.”

Motega looked down at his cup, then downed the last of the punch in one gulp. “No, they were not,” he agreed, wiping his mouth with his sleeve.

“They were fairly consistent. Like they came from one location,” Eric said. “In fact, I remember seeing Mapiya’s South Campus still standing.”

“An alternate universe?” Motega suggested. “The many worlds theory? One interpretation of the way the math in Quantum Mechanics works out suggests that there could be many different universes interacting with each other in different ways. There’s even an interesting experiment that might prove it.”

Just then Eric realized what it was and it took his breath away. Feeling like he was moving in slow motion, he set his cup down on a nearby table. He felt sick to his stomach. “Or it could have come from—” He didn’t want to say it, but his mind was racing for some other explanation and coming up short. “From the future.”

“From the— From the what?”

Eric turned and focused on Motega, arms out in front of him gesturing and knees bent a little, like he was ready to jump into action. “Well, it makes sense, doesn’t it? In science class we learned about Einstein’s Relativity.”

“Wait, Relativity and Quantum Mechanics don’t mix,” Motega objected. “Relativity breaks down when we start interacting at a very small size.”

“Maybe it *is* all connected,” Eric suggested. “The Sagona Principle was discovered about 30 years ago. That’s right, you wouldn’t know about that yet. It’s kind of a crossover between Quantum Mechanics and Relativity. It’s not a theory of everything, but they are connected.”

Eric paused, but Motega spurred him on. “Go on. I’m listening.”

“Relativity teaches us that how fast time travels for any particular person is completely relative to his situation. For example, the faster a person travels through space, the slower time passes for him,” Eric explained.

“And gravity,” Motega put in. “The greater the gravity, the slower time passes, relative to a lesser gravity field, at least.”

“Yeah, but just think about the travel. Essentially, we are *all* traveling at the speed of light. Usually the bulk of that travel is forward momentum through time, but if we fly off in a space ship some of our travel through time is actually displaced by travel through space.”

Motega nodded. “Okay, I get it.” But he didn’t get it quite yet. He must not, or else he’d be as excited, or scared rather, as Eric was. Eric glanced at the door, itching to run through it, get as far away from this place as possible.

“It takes light about eight minutes to travel from the sun to the earth. So if the secondary field could have entangled with particles anywhere from here to the sun....” Eric trailed off, sure that the implication was

clear.

“Then the other particles could have come from eight minutes in the future, as well,” Motega said, finishing his thought for him. “But that means that—”

“A nuclear bomb would have gone off just eight minutes after The Event,” Eric said. They stopped, letting the words hang in the air. Now that he said it, it sounded kind of crazy, but he could feel the adrenaline energizing his arms and legs. It was the best explanation he could come up with. It also meant the city could be wiped out at any time.

Out on the dance floor the song had finished and he noticed Heaven approaching them, but all his happy thoughts had vanished. “So what do we do about it?”

“Do about what?” Heaven said coming closer.

Motega snapped his fingers and stood up straight, a telltale sign that he had an idea. “The device made us all disappear and you brought us back, right? Maybe it could do it again.” Worry crossed his face. “But that would mean getting at it. Dravin came and had his government goons take it.”

“The device?” Heaven said, her eyes going wide. “Who’s Dravin?”

Eric ignored her. Motega’s plan wouldn’t work. “Wouldn’t turning it on again just make the space around it disappear?” he said. “What if the bomb has already been taken to the Twin Cities?”

“Guys, slow down, wait,” Heaven snapped, hands out. “Would someone *please* explain to me what’s going on?”

Motega pursed his lips and glanced at Eric; he looked like he still didn’t want to believe Eric, but he had to. “There may be a bomb in Mapiya. When South Mapiya disappeared 87 years ago it took on the appearance of the site of ground zero for a nuclear blast. Eric figured out that the most plausible explanation is that, when the town disappeared, it’s particles switched with particles from up

to eight minutes in the future. Which means a bomb was about to explode before the device was activated.”

Heaven’s jaw dropped as he talked. “So, if the town hadn’t been suspended in time, that nuclear bomb would have gone off,” she said in disbelief, “destroying Mapiya?”

Motega nodded. “And taking out half of Minneapolis.”

“So it could happen again,” she said, coming to the same conclusion they had.

“At any time,” Eric added.

“Anyways, it’s okay, Eric. It’ll work,” Motega said, returning to their plans. “The Quantum Entanglement would only happen once. Everyone and everything that was in South Mapiya in 2012 already is wrapped up with the South Mapiya you know, ground zero. Turning the device off just switched our states, bringing us out of suspension. Turning it back on should simply reverse the process.”

“You guys think that will stop the bomb?” Heaven said.

“The bomb had to have been in the device’s field. Turning the device back on should suspend it again.”

“Then what do I do?” Eric asked. *Run. Get on your bike and drive as far away as possible.*

“Get help,” Motega said. “I’m hoping someone will turn the device back off and bring us back again. No doubt they will sooner or later, now that the government has their hands on it and knows how it works. But hopefully this will buy us some time. Eric, you’re from this time, so you’ll still be around to get help. Find out how the bomb is detonated so you can stop it when we come back.”

Motega walked off to get Alina and Heaven stepped in front of Eric, standing between him and the exit. “I’m coming with you.”

“Heaven, you can’t,” Eric insisted. “You have to get

away from here. You have to be safe.” That just seemed to make her mad.

“I’m not going to go hide under a rock and be safe when I can help, Eric,” she said, now even more determined.

Eric glanced back at Motega. He and Alina were now making their way back to them, heading for the exit. Looking at Heaven he knew there was no way he could make her cede. She was too independent. He silently cursed as he muttered: “Fine, let’s go.”

Eric, Heaven, Motega, and Alina marched out of the school at a hurried pace, the muted music from inside now adding an eerie mood to the evening, now that they knew that at any moment Mapiya could explode. A police siren, quiet in the distance at first, became louder as they reached the parking lot until the blue and red lights shot through the dark as the squad car turned a corner and approached the school. The car had wheels, so it had to be Kevin, from 2012 Mapiya.

The siren shut off when the car pulled into the school parking lot. Kevin stepped out, visibly relieved to see them. “Motega, thank goodness,” he said. “So we’ve got the whole gang,” he added as he noticed everyone else.

“Hi, Sheriff,” Eric said.

“Motega, I’ve been trying to reach you. You haven’t been answering your phone.”

Motega looked at his hand, the metal bands from the new holophone not there. “I’m sorry, Sheriff. I must have left it back at the hotel room.”

“Well, we’re here now. Guys, we have a problem.”

“We know,” Heaven said.

“You do?”

Motega nodded to Kevin. “You go first.”

“I took your advice, Motega. This morning I called up a friend who works at the Armory. He went through the inventory. The place is old, unused, so it took some time. From the list they had, everything was there, but he found something not on the list. I checked it out for myself.” He paused, catching each of their eyes in turn to make sure they would all understand the gravity of what he was about to say. “There was a nuclear warhead stored at the armory.”

“How did it get there?” Alina asked, though that didn’t really matter at the moment.

Kevin shrugged. “They didn’t even know about it. Probably on its way to a military silo, but the paperwork got lost somewhere, maybe back during the Oil Wars. We could only tell because the crate was left behind. The warhead is gone.”

“Gone?” Heaven exclaimed.

Eric had stopped paying attention when he mentioned the warhead. “So that explains it,” he said with a nod.

Kevin wrinkled his nose in confusion. “Explains what?” The others looked at each other as if to find someone else to deliver the news. “What do you guys know?”

“We figured out what happened at The Event,” Motega said. “But I’ve got to go. Maybe you could fill him in, Eric.”

“Sure,” Eric said, Motega and Alina taking off for their car immediately.

“Please tell me this is not as bad as it sounds,” Kevin said, fearful eyes looking from Eric to Heaven and back again.

“The other particles that South Mapiya switched places with...” Eric started. “No one ever really knew what happened, but Sheriff, I was walking through the site of a nuclear ground zero. In 2012 there was no explosion, nothing, so it was always something of a mystery.” He knew he was avoiding saying it, so he

glanced to Heaven.

“It was from the future,” Heaven said.

“Wait, you mean, like, from 2100?” Kevin said, raising an eyebrow.

Eric shook his head. “No, from future of The Event in 2012. Like, eight minutes in the future.”

“So, if the town hadn’t been suspended in time, that nuclear warhead would have detonated?” Kevin said in shocked disbelief.

“We think so, yeah.”

“So why didn’t it go off now? Why didn’t it explode a couple minutes after you came back? Wouldn’t the warhead have come back, too?”

They looked at each other for a second. Heaven finally came up with a suggestion. “What if it wasn’t an accident? What if it didn’t just go off?”

“You mean, like someone set it off?” Eric said. He wasn’t sure that sounded much better.

“Right. And after The Event, when night turned to day and winter into summer, whoever it was thought twice about setting it off.”

“So how do we find it?” Kevin said, now seeming to understand there was an even greater urgency than he thought.

They stood there, silent. To stop it they had to find it, but where? What was the first step? Eric checked his phone and did a quick search for Mapiya on the internet. Nothing was coming up. “Darn.”

“What is it?” Heaven asked, grabbing on to his arm.

“It’s like the internet has been shut down for anything to do with Mapiya,” Eric said. “The government has a pretty tight control over portions of the internet.” And he didn’t know how to access the pirate channels. He put away his phone. He had an idea, but he wasn’t sure. “The library?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

First Steps

They all piled into the Sheriff's old gas and wheels car, Kevin and Heaven in the front. Eric grabbed the back seat. He pulled out his holophone as they were talking and dialed up Chevelle.

"What are you doing?" Heaven asked. Tensions were up, now that their task seemed so urgent.

"Calling Chevy," he said. "I've got to warn her." He hit call and held the phone to his ear.

"Why don't we get some help?" Heaven asked. She jumped on the task with them, unwilling to be left behind, but she was equally afraid of what lay ahead.

"You are all I've got," Kevin said, eyes on the road. He turned down main street. Eric signaled for him to turn left two blocks ahead.

"It's ringing," Eric said. "Why won't she pick up?"

"What about your deputies?"

Kevin shook his head. "Only Deputy Wentworth came to 2099. He left two days ago to be with family."

"And the Sheriff of 2099?" she suggested next. "What was his name? Joshua?"

Again, Kevin shook his head. "I'm not going to get any favors from Joshua. We don't have time to try to convince him, either." He sighed. "Or anyone else." The pressure was mounting on them all.

"Voicemail," Eric muttered. Chevy didn't pick up. He poked at the holophone to skip the automated message. "Chevy, I know this sounds crazy, but you've got to get out of town now. We're all in danger. I don't have time to explain, just trust me. Get your parents and go north. Go

to... to Duluth. Just get out of town.” He hesitated, unsure of how to end the call. *I love you*. He hung up the phone instead.

“There is no one else,” Kevin said to Heaven again. “You two are all I’ve got. And Eric I need if Motega’s plan works and we disappear.” Kevin turned on the street in front of the library. In the back was a parking lot, but Kevin parked on the street out front.

“Let’s just make sure we find that bomb,” Eric said.

“Slow down,” Alina said. The freeway exit had been close to the school and they were already out of Mapiya and headed south on 35E. Alina adjusted her dress and sat down. A nice dress from the future, there was a tiny attachment on the side that slid along the slit like a zipper, though it would hold and stay wherever she set it to. Alina opened the slit up about a foot from her hip so she’d be ready for anything, not stumbling over her dress if they had to run.

“There’s no time,” Motega said. He glanced over his shoulder back at Mapiya, as if he expected to see a mushroom cloud rise up behind him. The speed limit, Alina noticed, was a ‘sensible’ 90 miles per hour. Motega was already pushing past 100.

“You must know where you are going,” Alina pointed out.

“Dravin took the machine the other day,” Motega said. “The QED. He has it at Elko, a military research center about a half hour south of Mapiya.” Rain started to dot the windshield so he flicked the wipers on low. “At least, it was a half hour, back in 2012. Now, at these speeds, about half that.”

“You’ve really thought this through, haven’t you?” Alina said. She tried to suppress an angry outburst; this

was not the romantic evening she had in mind. “What are you going to do when we get there, just walk right in? Did you give it any thought?”

Motega pulled out a key card from his jacket pocket and handed it to Alina. “I stole it from Dravin when we got in that fight yesterday. Not even a week into 2099 and he’s in the IIA, and a high security clearance from what I’ve heard.”

“Why?”

“Our experiment,” Motega said. “It was a century ahead of its time.” Motega paused as he wound his way around a car in front of him. A freeway sign indicated they were fast approaching Elko, the city the facility was named after. “To this day, nothing like it has been developed, and now that they’ve seen what it really can do? I can’t even imagine what the military thinks they can do with a device that can suspend a town in time, can you?”

“Do you even have a plan?” Alina asked.

“Oh, there’s a plan,” Motega said, but she was ignoring him.

“Or were you just going to run in there pretending *you* are Dravin?” She looked out the window as the world went by in a blur. “This is so like you, Motega, so focused on what you have to do, on your work, that you miss what’s right in front of you.”

“What are you talking about?” Motega said, slowing down a bit as the facility became clear in the distance. “You aren’t talking about the device.”

“Oh, now he notices,” she said. She rolled her eyes and wiped a tear from her face, watching the rain on the window stream by in diagonal streaks. “The invitation, Motega, for the job at the University. I didn’t tell you because I wanted you to be happy for me. I told you because I wanted you to stop me, to actually want me to stick around and be with you. Instead you were just eager to get rid of me.”

“I can’t believe this,” he said. They were almost at the facility now, but he pulled the car to a stop on the side of the road. “It wasn’t to get rid of you,” he said, speaking quickly and angrily. “I was happy for you because your career was progressing, because I want the best for you, but mostly because I wanted to be with you.” He ended almost yelling, but what he said took her aback and she didn’t respond.

Calmer now, Motege drove slowly toward the facility, coming up just on their right. He came to a stop in the parking lot and turned off the car. “We’re here.”

“So you think there’s something here that will give us a hint to where the bomb is going to go off?” Kevin said. Kevin, Eric, and Heaven crouched in the shadows in front of the library entrance. It looked so dark inside, closed for the weekend. Eric cursed himself, wishing now that he had kept his materials in his backpack. Instead, they were now destroyed in his house in the tornado.

“I had been researching The Mapiya Event for a school project,” Eric said, looking out at the road nervously. Any minute someone could pass by and see them talking, huddled suspiciously by the library’s glass door, and bring an end to their quest before it began. They had left Kevin’s car parked on the street out front and went around to the entrance by the parking lot in the back, safer from street lights and passing cars.

“They’ve got books, newspaper articles, lots of information about what happened,” Eric explained. “Actually, I don’t know where to find the newspaper articles. The librarian had to grab some macrodisks from the back and those were in my house when the tornado took it, but I know where the books are.”

“They know what happened,” Kevin said. “But how

do they know what's going to happen?" Eric could tell the Sheriff didn't like this plan, but frankly, he didn't either. They didn't have many options, though, or the town could go up ten times worse than Hiroshima at any moment.

"The disaster that happened to the town, that's *going* to happen to the town," Eric said, trying to explain. "When the device was turned on the particles from South Mapiya were switched with particles from South Mapiya about eight minutes in the future, after the bomb went off. So we've already seen what the town will look like."

A car passed by quietly, and Eric instinctively drew back out of fear, but it didn't slow down to come back to them, so he relaxed a little. "In some of these books there are overhead maps of the town. We can see the shape of the explosion."

"We can use that to pinpoint where it originated from," Kevin said.

"Exactly."

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Heaven pressed.

"When we do this, we're not going to have a lot of time," Kevin warned. The Sheriff looked around again, to make sure no one would see or hear what they were about to do. "You take me to the books and we get out. I'm not on good terms with Sheriff Joshua, so if we get caught it's over." He turned to Heaven. "You keep lookout. Warn us when they're coming."

"And what if Motega's plan works? What if he turns on the machine and you disappear?" Eric said.

"Then it's up to you," Kevin said, putting a hand on Eric's shoulder. "You'll need to spread the word and get help. Then get someone to turn the device back off so you can stop the bomb once and for all." He looked through the window of the library once more. "Ready?"

"Ready," Eric said. Heaven nodded.

Kevin swung back, catching the glass door with the back of his elbow. It wasn't very strong glass; it shattered

with the first hit. He pushed the pieces of glass in and stepped through the door. Either breaking the glass, crossing the threshold, or some motion detector surely tipped off the security company to their breaking in, though no alarm sounded in the building. It was only a matter of time now.

“Come on,” Kevin said. “Lead the way.”

They walked quickly back to the stocks, to the few physical books still left in the library. Past the main counter, take a left, then all the way down, third aisle from the end.

Eric heard a phone ringing at one of the desks. That meant that, detecting a break in, the security company didn't immediately call the police. First they would call the library to make sure whether it was a false alarm or not. A library employee could have come in and forgot the password or accidentally tripped the alarm. They'd then have a vocal password, or probably a voice identification system, that the library staff could use to tell them everything was okay.

Eric was tempted to answer the phone and try to fake his way through it, buy them some more time, but he had no idea what the keyword was and the voice identification was very good these days. He'd probably only waste more time. He scanned the books on the shelf with his finger as the phone rang again.

“Here it is,” he said excitedly, fumbling for the book now that he found it. He pulled the book off the shelf and thumbed through the pages as the phone rang a third time. He tried to hurry up. They didn't have enough time. “Here,” he said, holding the book out for Kevin.

The book contained a two page spread of South Mapiya after The Event, looking very much like a nuclear warhead had gone off. Kevin looked it over for a moment. “Oh, no.”

“What is it?” Eric asked.

“If I'm right, the bomb definitely went off, or would

have gone off, in South Mapiya, right here,” Kevin said, putting his finger on the page. It was in the eastern half of town. It looked like a crater with concentric circles of destruction and debris radiating out from that point.

“Where is that?”

“Shem Sweeny’s house,” Kevin said. “Why didn’t I think of this sooner? There was a break in at South Campus just before The Event. A science classroom and one student’s locker was broken into.”

Eric glanced impatiently at the door. The phone had stopped ringing and he heard a police siren in the distance. They had to get out of there, and soon.

“The locker belonged to Jack Sweeny, Shem’s son. I went over to Shem’s house after The Event and he was acting very strange, very cautious. His son wasn’t there, or so he claimed, and Shem wouldn’t let me in, or even let me see inside the house. He’s hiding the bomb there. He has to be.”

The sirens were closer now. Eric saw the distinctive red and blue lights of a police car out front. “We’ve got to get out of here,” Eric said, and they turned to leave out the back when he heard Heaven’s voice outside.

He glanced back at the entrance to see Heaven standing there, acting like she had just broke in to the library and was walking away with some macrodisks. She screamed as the police grabbed her and fought with her, but Eric knew exactly what she was doing. She was sacrificing herself, giving them a way out. “Come on,” Kevin said, and they refocused on escaping, making their way to the entrance on the other side of the library, leading out to the street.

“What about Heaven?” Eric asked when they were outside. He wanted to go back for her, protect her.

“Don’t worry,” Kevin said, pulling him along back to the car. “She’s a minor. She’ll get off pretty easy, at least if the laws are still anything like they were in 2012.” Eric wasn’t so sure, with her previous visit to the police after

the IIA agents came and snatched her. “We’ve got something more important to deal with right now. We’ve got to stop Shem.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Elko

There were only a few cars in the parking lot this late at night, and not a person was in sight. It was a single building even now after all these years, but large enough, about the size of the High School. Security cameras covered the entrances, but mostly the security was on the inside, not the grounds. Key cards like the one Motega stole restricted access.

Motega and Alina got out of the car, immediately accosted by the rain. Alina started walking towards the building, but she noticed Motega turn back to get something out of the trunk. “What are you doing?” she hissed in a low voice. The open trunk blocked her view of Motega.

“I just have to get something,” he said. He closed the trunk and she turned back to the building when Motega grabbed her arm, stopping her in her tracks. He whispered into her ear. “Side door.”

This had to work, she thought, nervously looking over her shoulder. It just *had* to. Though it did briefly cross her mind that none of her family and friends would be killed if the nuclear bomb was allowed to go off, since they were all long dead. She wasn’t sure that was any consolation, however.

They finally reached the side door and the small overhang provided no protection from the rain. Motega held up his card to the reader on the door. It flashed green with a beep and the door clicked open.

Dravin rubbed his neck, sore from straining over the Quantum Entanglement Device all day. Now that it was in his hands he did not intend to rest, perhaps a bit overconfident in his victory. After walking down a couple hallways toward the main entrance his hand tingled as his phone rang. It was starting to become second nature, now, squeezing his hand correctly to activate the phone and holding his fingers near his ear and mouth.

“Agent Davidson,” a voice rang in his ear.

“What is it?” Dravin said, not slowing down in his march.

“You told me to call about any disturbances.” It was one of the guards at the security monitoring room.

“Yes, I did. So tell me,” Dravin said, coming to a stop.

“Someone just entered the facility,” the guard said. “Using your key card. Since you haven’t checked out yet, I thought I’d double check with you.”

“What?” Dravin exclaimed. “I’m still inside the building. Who is it? What does he look like?”

“Oh, bringing up the camera now,” the guard said. *Absolutely worthless, these people*, Dravin thought. “A man and a woman. The man looks to be Native American, long hair. Should I call for backup and apprehend them?”

“No,” Dravin said, a smile spreading across his face. “I know them.”

“What should I do?”

“Let him in,” Dravin said, spinning around now to go back the direction he came, to the device. “Meet me at my office.” His office bordered the QED room; he didn’t want Motega to know he was waiting for him. *The mouse comes right into the lion’s claws*, Dravin thought to

himself, grinning wide. “We’ll be waiting for him.”

As soon as they entered the building Motega shrugged off his now soaking suit coat and Alina tried to squeeze some of the water out of her hair. “How are we supposed to find the QED in this building?” Alina asked as water pooled at her feet. It was a decently large complex; they could find it, but it would take time.

“Have a little faith?” Motega said. He looked around, trying to recall the floor layout. “I’ve been here before.”

“You have?”

Motega nodded. As they approached an intersection in the hallway he stopped and leaned up against the wall. “Do you have a mirror on you?” Alina pulled out a small compact mirror for makeup. “That’ll do,” he said, taking the mirror. He held it out and extended it around the corner so he could see down the hallway. There was no one there.

“Come on,” he said, leading the way. “When we were first approved for this project a couple of FBI agents brought me to this facility. Dravin wasn’t on the project then; he probably hadn’t found out about it yet. They showed me around, wanted me to work on the QED here, but I didn’t want to always have the government looking over our shoulders.”

Alina held her lips tight. “So, let me get this straight, you pushed me away because you wanted to be with me?”

“Is this really the time to be having this conversation?” Motega said, turning a corner. He forgot to look this time first, though, and quickly backed up. His eyes darted back and forth, betraying the problem. There was someone coming, a white man in a black suit and tie. He waited several beats before extending the mirror.

They were in the clear.

“I wanted to date you for—” Motega said, walking on again, but he cut off quickly, coming face to face with a white man in a black suit. He looked more surprised to see them, though, and Motega took advantage of the delay, immediately slamming his head against the other man’s forehead. The man crumpled to the ground.

Motega rubbed his forehead where he hit the other guy. “Remind me never to do that again.”

“Oh my goodness,” Alina said, holding a hand to her chest. “What do we do?”

Breaking and entering, sneaking around, head-butting federal agents. This wasn’t the kind of thing he had experience in. “Quick, help me out here.” They bent over and pushed the man backward, into the room he had come out of. Motega shut off the lights and closed the door. “Let’s go. We’re almost there.”

“You didn’t finish,” Alina pressed as she followed.

“I wanted to date you for a while now,” he said. “But it would have been weird, and maybe a little wrong, to date my assistant, especially since I paid your check from the grant money. But if you were working somewhere else — and this job was still in the cities, close by — then we could.”

“I.. I didn’t know,” Alina said. “I always just assumed you didn’t notice me.”

“Back to business, now,” he said, coming up to the door that should hold the QED. Motega tried to prepare himself mentally for what was about to happen. They needed to find and activate the machine, hoping that that made 5,000 people disappear so that a nuclear warhead wouldn’t wipe out many more people. Failing that, he had to destroy it. They had to destroy a machine that stood as the culmination of his life’s work and research. His progeny was too dangerous to be invented.

They entered the lab and Motega took a step back. “They’ve dismantled it,” he said with a gasp.

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” Alina said. “We can put it back together.”

Motega examined the situation. She was right. The core of the machine sat at the back of the room underneath a large mirrored pane of glass, one of those one way windows. It was even plugged in. The casing and gel packs on top had been removed, placed on a nearby table, and a panel on the front of the machine was open, a few pieces removed from the interior.

“Sure, sure,” Motega said. “Just give me a minute.” He stared at the pieces, horrified, the anxiety in his chest rising a few notches. He had hoped it would be as simple as walking in and flipping the switch. “Okay, we can do this.”

It really hadn’t been as bad as he thought. The casing on top fit back together fine, though he wasn’t sure that was important for the effect of the secondary field that originally suspended them in time. There were three major pieces taken from inside the device, but the tools used to take it apart were still here. Without a word, they got to work reassembling the device. He checked that the power to the machine was good, then they stood in front of it.

“Ready?” he said.

Alina nodded. “As I’ll ever be.”

Motega pressed the button.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

It All Falls Apart

Dravin waited at his office for the guard to arrive. He motioned for the guard to keep quiet as Dravin listened to the hallway.

“What are you waiting for?” the guard whispered. “We should secure the device.”

Dravin shushed him and listened carefully. A moment later he finally heard footsteps and two voices carrying down the hallways. “They’re coming,” he said in a hushed breath. “Let them get into the room first. Then we can corner them.” The guard nodded; he understood.

They waited until he heard a door open and close, then he motioned the guard to follow him. They left his office and walked around the corner. The door was closed. He could hear Motega and Alina’s muffled voices from inside. A trail of water droplets led from down the hallway right up to the door.

“When I disappear,” he told the guard. “I need you to prop this door open and go in and turn off the machine.” He had figured out, as well, what would happen if the machine turned on again. In all likelihood he’d disappear again, but so would Motega and Alina.

“Wha— What? When you disappear?”

“Just do it,” Dravin said, annoyed. “Any minute now they’re going to get that machine back together and—” Dravin cut off when he suddenly blinked out of existence.



Bored of sitting by herself at a table eating cake, Chevelle

got up and made her way over to the punch bowl. The infamous punch bowl. No matter what social class you were in, you met here; they were all equals. She grabbed a glass of punch and continued moving, limping along on her big cast extending down from her shin and wrapping her ankle.

The stars and the moon decorations glittered throughout the school cafeteria, like the future hung just before them all. Ironic, she thought. In 2099, when everyone was looking forward to the future, the turn of the century, here in Mapiya a piece of the past came back to join them. Chevelle wound her way between the tables. The DJ put on another fast song from the past. Something from Britney Pear or some other girl who had long ago crawled into the grave.

But she was getting tired of party, especially since she couldn't dance much with her cast. Eric was nowhere to be seen, probably spending more time with his new girlfriend. It made her sick. She wanted to find somewhere else to go.

She strode right out of the cafeteria and into the hallways. The lights were all out, encouraging the students to turn back, but she had to get out of there. She walked into the darkest hallway she only to find it already occupied by two teenagers making out.

Chevelle swung back around the corner, hoping they didn't see her, but something stood out to her about them. She noticed one of them was on the football team; he wore a letter jacket. Blayze had worn his letter jacket to the dance, as well.

She peeked around the corner again, just far enough to see. It was Blayze, making out with Jodie. That was classy, she thought. So cliché. Not that it mattered anyways. He was like all the other boys, a distraction. Someone to bide the time.

Forgotten in her purse, her phone buzzed with Eric's incoming call to warn her.

Don't we need a plan?" Eric asked as they sped over the bridge into South Mapiya. "What are we going to do when we get there? How are you going to stop him?" His heart was going a mile a minute. They were in a rush to take out a man, and possibly defuse a bomb, by themselves, and the man could either have his finger on the trigger right now or have ditched the bomb and the whole idea of ever blowing up the town.

"There is no plan," Kevin said. "There's me and this gun." He tapped the nine millimeter at his hip. "You are underage and are going to stay out of the way while I take out the bomber. Got that?"

Eric wished Heaven was there with them. She gave him strength. Without her or without Chevelle, he was nothing. He was Eric, not even a very good wide receiver on a high school football team. And here he was with a Sheriff 87 years in the past about to try to take out a terrorist.

"You expect me to just watch?" he said.

"Just, stay out of danger," Kevin said, finally slowing to a stop in the dirt driveway of a small, run-down house.

Kevin held his pistol in front of him as he approached the house, Eric waiting by the car. "Shem?" he called out in a loud voice. "Are you there?" There was no response from inside. "It's me, Kevin," he said, walking slowly towards the front door. "I'm going to come in now. Okay?"

He jiggled the door handle but it was locked. Eric watched as he stepped back, lifted his left leg and kicked in the door, followed immediately by stepping into the house, holding his pistol and flashlight in front of him. "Eric, come take a look," Kevin said.

As he jogged toward the house he heard a loud *click*,

click, click noise from inside. Just inside the doorway, Kevin turned to face the noise when there was a small explosion. Fire cracked through the door and sent Kevin flying to the right. When Eric made it inside Kevin was crumpled against the far wall, his face burned.

“Are you all right?” Eric said, immediately at his side.

Kevin groaned. “Yeah, I think so,” he said. “Face hurts. With that hit, I probably have a concussion.

Eric glanced around. There was no one there, and Shem booby trapped a bomb to the door to disable anyone coming in. The room was dark, but Eric could see some bomb making materials in the living room here: wires, duct tape, wire cutters, various prototype detonators. Somewhere in a back room a TV was playing. “Where could he be?” Kevin wondered.

“You don’t think he’s just, you know, out, do you?” Eric asked.

Kevin shook his head, then held a hand to his forehead with a groan. “No, I think he took that bomb somewhere. He changed his plan after The Event. He took a few days to see what’s different, then changed his plan.”

“Then where?”

“That’s the real question, isn’t it?” Kevin said. Then, he disappeared.

Kevin disappeared, along with the house. Eric looked around. Shem’s house, the road, the car, the grass, all of it vanished. “It worked,” Eric muttered. Motega’s plan had worked. He turned the device back on, suspending the town again.

Things were different this time, he noticed. The town still looked like it had been destroyed, but the arrangement was different. Part of Shem’s house still stood, a small concrete section of the east wall. Against the wall some piping stood out from the ground, the image of the piping indelibly burned on the concrete

behind it.

Eric walked up the hill on the street, then ran up to the top. The hill was still the same. This was the same geographical location, but the mapping of the blast was different. Something had changed about where and how the bomb had gone off, or will go off, rather. At the top of the hill he stood and gaped.

Down the hill, around some buildings and a few trees half a mile distant, would have sat Mapiya's South Campus High School. The trees and the building were gone or laid flat, so he could see, even from this small hill, that the blast had spread out towards him from the direction of the school.

"Oh, my," he said to himself. "He went to the school." The school had been one of the few buildings that still stood after the blast the first time. Now it was gone. The Sheriff had turned the South Campus into a temporary shelter. Shem went to where there were the most people... and took them all out.

Motega pressed the button and waited for a second. "Nothing happened," he said. Weren't they supposed to disappear? Maybe the original field stayed in Mapiya and a new set of particles was entangled. No, that was too far of a stretch. He looked at the button again. He had pressed it, but it was flipped back into its original position. In fact, the first time they were suspended, he realized, they didn't even notice anything had changed; they just continued where they left off when the machine was turned off. "Alina, someone else pressed this," he said, spinning around.

"It was him," Dravin said, standing in the entrance, pointing at the guard that was with them. Dravin leveled his pistol at Motega and fired into his abdomen.

The pain shot through his belly and he vaguely noticed Alina screaming, though it seemed far away at first. She fell over him, lifting him up to a sitting position before he even knew he had fallen to the floor.

He heard the guard objecting and Motega realized his eyes were closed. "This isn't right. They're unarmed." Another gunshot echoed through the room, but Motega didn't notice any new sources of pain. Just the same sharp throbbing in his belly. Motega opened his eyes as he felt Alina checking his throat for a pulse. He was still alive, for now. He saw the guard lying in a pile, facing away from them.

"You can't do this," Alina said, scowling at Dravin.

Dravin shrugged. "Two people broke in to a secure military research complex. When I discovered them they attacked, taking out the guard with his own weapon." Dravin tossed the guard's gun to the ground. "I was forced to fire upon them to contain the situation. One of them, the female, escaped in the commotion."

Alina looked up at Dravin in horror. "The story could be different," Dravin said, slowly pointing his pistol in Alina's direction. "The two intruders wouldn't cooperate. I had to kill both of them in self-defense."

"You wouldn't," she said, almost daring him.

"This project was supposed to be *my* life's work," Dravin said. "There's no way I'm letting you two mess everything up."

"You don't know what you are doing," Motega said, grunting as he tried to pull himself up. Alina continued kneeling over him, mostly blocking him from Dravin. "The citizens of Mapiya, maybe all of the Twin Cities, are in danger. We have to turn the machine on."

"You can make up whatever story you'd like," Dravin taunted them. "It won't work. I'm the one in power now, and you're mine. Say goodbye to your girlfriend."

Motega reached into his pants pocket and pulled out the grenade, holding it between him and Alina to show

her. "Go on, get out of here, Alina."

Alina shook her head. Tears streamed down her face now. "Never," she said, putting her hand on his cheek. "Motega, I... I..."

"I know," Motega said. "I love you, too." Motega pulled the pin from the grenade and dropped it on the ground next to them. Dravin's eyes widened when he saw the grenade roll out and he dove for the door.

The explosion of the concussion grenade resounded throughout the complex.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Restitution

Heaven fought with the police as much as she could as they dragged her into the back of the squad car, doing anything she could to give Eric and Kevin more time to get away, time to stop the bomber. She hoped, feared really, that despite the cash from the casino back in 2012 they'd go easy on her as a minor.

She shivered in fear, the reality of what they had done finally settling in on her. They destroyed a window, ruined a library. For a good cause, of course, but it still felt so wrong. The bike? That wasn't a joy ride for her; she did it out of necessity. She stole the food and the money because she had to keep going.

Well, there was a thrill to stealing, she would admit, but she tried to justify it in her mind out of some sort of need. Even when she was back in foster care and would steal a mini skirt or a video game, she told herself that somehow she needed those things. That the system was providing her with substandard care and a disgusting living environment so she had to make up for it with some luxury items. Knowing real necessity, though, especially today, her shoplifting seemed so petty.

But they did break in out of necessity. Who knew how long before the city was destroyed, again. She repeated that to herself when the Sheriff of the future pulled her out of the car by her arm and pushed her on into the police station.

He led her back into the jail cells at the back of the station, around the corner from the front desk. Some drapes across a barred window high up sat still. They

brought her to the same cell the IIA agents had almost kept her in. She looked back at the Sheriff with a slight snarl as he got his keys ready to lock her in. Suddenly, he disappeared.

It wasn't just the Sheriff, either. The other officers were gone. Things were subtly different. The door to the cell was still open, but now it was halfway closed. The drapes over the window had shifted, as if from some wind that had never blown. She could hear the voices of the Sheriff and his officers down the hall.

It worked. Motega must have found the QED and shut it off again, though not for very long. Just long enough for the Sheriff and his officers to wonder at the disappearance of the kid they just arrested, then walk out to the front of the police station. Motega would have disappeared when he flipped the switch, too, so someone else must have turned it back on.

Heaven was ready to take advantage of a piece of good fortune, though. She stepped out of the cell and walked to the hallway, carefully peeking around the corner before continuing on. She saw the Sheriff close the door behind him as he left the station. If she waited just a bit longer, perhaps he'd be gone and she could get out of here. Then she noticed the keys one officer had left behind on his desk.

It was the strangest thing, that girl just disappearing like that in his jail cell, Joshua thought. It must have something to do with that experiment, he figured, like how South Mapiya disappeared the first time. He wasn't going to waste much time over it, though. He turned and walked away from the cells.

"Sheriff," one of his deputies called over to him as he came to the front of the police station. "We just got a hit

on the fingerprints from the murder weapon at the library.” He handed Joshua a folder.

Joshua opened it and scanned the contents. “Shem Sweeny?”

The deputy nodded. “From an old military database at the beginning of the century. Looks like he is a 2012 citizen.”

“We should have checked them out first,” Joshua said, kicking himself. He had been too short sighted to put much effort into this case. “Do we have an address?”

“Second page, sir. It’s in South Mapiya.”

Joshua flipped to the second page, scanned down to the address, and then handed the file back to his deputy. “Let’s go. We’ll take him in.”

Eric surveyed the wasteland that was once again South Mapiya, wondering what to do next. He saw some people in the distance, where the school should have been. They were probably like him, people from North Mapiya, from the future, who were staying at the school because their home had been destroyed by the tornado.

In an instant it all came back. He couldn’t see the school anymore between the trees and other buildings. The road came back under his feet. Eric turned to see Shem’s house pop back into existence.

Eric ran back down the hill and burst into the house. “What happened?” Kevin asked.

“It worked. Motega switched on the device and South Mapiya disappeared again. You disappeared.”

“For how long?” the Sheriff asked. “What are you still doing here?”

“Not long,” Eric said. “Not long enough. Something must have happened with Motega.”

The Sheriff sucked in his breath. “So Shem is still out

there somewhere.”

Eric nodded. “I think I know where he is.” He paused in anticipation, wishing it weren’t true. Of all the cities in all the world, why Mapiya? Why even Minnesota? As the world encountered disaster after disaster, it had always been out there somewhere. Bad people were here, too, but somehow the really tragic things, cities being wiped out, were always elsewhere. “I think he’s at the school,” Eric said.

“How do you know?” Kevin wondered.

“When South Mapiya switched back it was different,” he explained. “The crater was no longer here at Shem’s house. I walked up the hill and I could see the whole city. It came from the school.”

“What’s that noise?” Kevin said, finally noticing the TV in the other room. His hearing had been impaired by the booby trap, no doubt.

“Television?”

Kevin looked like he was about to shake his head again, but thought better of it after the pain it caused last time. “No. The signal transferred in 2099 can’t be picked up by 2012 television sets. Help me up.”

Eric held up a hand for the Sheriff, to get him on his feet. Once up, he steadied himself against the wall. “Yeah, this isn’t good,” he said, holding his head again. “Come on.” Eric followed Kevin as he limped across the house to the bedroom in the back.

There were three televisions set up, and a camera on a tripod. The TVs were all playing the same thing, an image of Shem Sweeny, dressed in a military uniform, with an American flag behind him. Eric looked at the wall to the left as they walked in, a large American flag draped across it. The video was recorded in this room.

The video played in a loop, Eric noticed as the loop started over. “America used to be great,” Shem said on the TV, sounding very depressed. “It stood for something. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Rights that belonged to each and every one of us.

“Then those rights were being taken away. And the government doesn’t even provide for its own, for those who were unlucky enough to fight and not die for them.” Shem shook his head. “It’s all worthless. Then I look up. The night turns to day and I wonder if this is a sign. Maybe it’s all cleared up. Maybe things will get better.

“But a hundred years later and nothing is better. It’s gotten worse.” He started to sound angry now. “You took the name and flag of America and you threw it in the sewers. North American Coalition?” Shem chuckled, a bit like a mad man. “All that came of it was more government control. Fewer liberties.

“So if we’re not even allowed liberty and happiness, then let’s get rid of life, too,” he said, and spat to the side. “If I could do this across the world, I would, but I am giving my life to destroy my little section of this craphole. Goodbye America.” With that, the video started playing over again.

“This is why he had a satellite,” Kevin said.

“What?”

Eric followed as Kevin started walking away from that room. “When I visited Shem after The Event, I noticed he had a nice new satellite dish set up outside. It seemed out of place. It must have been for this. He was going to transmit a message to the world before he blew himself up.” Kevin limped to the doorway and slid to the ground on the porch. “It probably doesn’t work with 2099 technology, but it was part of his plan so he recorded a message anyway.”

He looked to Eric, standing over him, fierceness in his eyes. “You have to go.” He reached in his pocket for the car keys. “You have to get to the school and stop him. You’re our only hope.”

“No. You have to come with me,” he objected.

“I can’t. Eric, I can’t. Look at me,” he said. “I have a limp and most likely a concussion. I can’t drive, let alone

run to stop a bomber. You have to do it. I need you.”

“Then someone else,” he said again. “I’m just a kid.”

“There is no time for anyone else. There’s only you. Now take them.” Eric grudgingly accepted the keys. “I know you can do it.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Confrontation

Kevin's keys in hand, Eric spent a frantic minute looking for the start button, before cursing himself and trying to remember how they started cars at the beginning of the century. He found a slot to the right of the steering wheel and tried fitting the key into it. Turn and hold, and the car started right up.

Cursing himself again for not paying closer attention when they drove down here, he remembered Kevin had used the stick in the center console. He tried pulling it down at first — R must mean Reverse, D for Drive — but it wouldn't move. There was a button on the side, but even pressing that in wouldn't work. Eric looked at his phone for the time, the seconds seeming to slip away. If he died in a nuclear blast, at least he wouldn't have long to feel regret over not learning how to drive this car earlier.

Then he noticed a sign on the dash that told him to push the brake in to shift. Foot on the brake, he tried pressing the button in again, and this time the stick moved. He put it in reverse to get out of the driveway, then came to a stop and shifted into drive. Maybe he could do this after all.

"I know you can do it," he muttered to himself. The words weren't encouraging when you knew that the Sheriff had only said them because he was their only chance.

Only moments later he drove into the school parking lot and pulled to a stop. Someone wandered by in the night, oblivious to the danger upon them. *Now where*

could he be? Eric thought to himself as he got out of the car and looked around frantically. *Come on, just give me some kind of clue.*

That's when he saw a man climbing up the fire escape on the side of the building. It was hard to judge at this distance, but the silhouette of the man looked big. *Like he's carrying a nuclear warhead?*

Eric raced to the fire escape.

Joshua increased his speed as far as he dared without turning his lights on. When he came to Shem Sweeny's house he didn't want the man to have run, alerted to the police. He imagined what South Mapiya, several blocks ahead, had looked like before it came back, with nothing there. After he crossed past the swamp, a person stepped out into the street in front of him. Joshua swerved, narrowly missing the pedestrian.

He turned left, to Shem's house in the east.

When they arrived at the house, his deputy following close behind, there was a man slumped up against the front of the house, the front door wide open. Joshua was out before the car hovered down to the ground. He pulled his gun and jogged closer.

He noticed Kevin as the lights hit him. Joshua kept his gun aimed inside the house until two deputies came up behind him and entered the house to do a clean sweep. He knelt down next to Kevin. "What are you doing here?" he demanded. He noticed Kevin was hurt. "What happened to you? Were you listening to the radio again?"

"No," Kevin said, not moving his head at all. "Shem—" Kevin blinked, looking as if he wanted to fall asleep. Joshua put a hand on his shoulder.

"Shem's prints came back on the murder weapon from the library. He killed those two," Joshua said.

“It’s worse. He has a nuclear warhead, from the old armory. He’s going to detonate it, maybe tonight.”

“What? How do you know?” Joshua didn’t want to believe him, but as much as it felt like Kevin was getting in his way, he was sure Kevin wouldn’t lie, not about something like this.

Kevin explained as quickly as he could, leaving out the science. Just the facts to convince Joshua. “He had the door booby trapped when I entered. I think I have a concussion.” He hesitated. “I just want to get to sleep.”

“No, stay with us.”

“Eric, the kid that turned the device off, he’s out there, at the school,” Kevin said. “Please, help him.”

“We have to get you to a hospital.”

“No,” Kevin insisted. “Help him.”

One of the deputies returned, letting Joshua know it was all clear. “Stay with him, deputy. Call an ambulance and get him to the hospital.” He motioned for the other officer to follow him. “We have to get to South Campus.”

Heaven pulled to a stop at the intersection of Dennis and Main. A car crossed in front of her. She recognized it as Kevin’s squad car, so she turned to follow.

She drove her stolen squad car from the future into the school parking lot. When she shut it down, she noticed a figure run off to the left, to the side of the school. Briefly, she wondered who it was, Eric or the Sheriff, and which of them had been left behind.

She got out and followed.

As Eric climbed to the top of the fire escape, Shem swung around to face him. He stood at the edge of the

roof, the bomb strapped to his back in an over-sized pack. "Who's there?" he demanded.

Eric swallowed nervously. This was the man they were after. "I'm just a kid," Eric said. "My name's Eric."

"Don't come any closer," Shem said, holding out his left hand. Eric barely noticed that he had been walking towards Shem and stopped. "This is a dead man's trigger. If I die and let go, the bomb goes off." Eric could see the trigger in Shem's left hand. He held his thumb down tight. There was a small lid that had previously been holding the trigger down. Now, Shem had slid the lid off, replacing it with his thumb. If his thumb let off the trigger without replacing the lid... *Boom!*

"I just wanted to talk," Eric tried to assure him. "That's it. I was at your house. I saw your message."

"I'm through with talking," Shem said in a slow sort of a drawl. Eric thought he might be drunk, too, and wondered how he could reason with him. "That's all anyone ever does is talk. That's all the President ever did. A lot of talk. But I've seen the future now, and my worst dreams have come true. America is gone, and everything it ever stood for."

"So you're a real patriot, is that it?" Eric said. *Just keep him talking. Stall him until someone can get here*, he thought. *If anyone is even coming*. He vaguely noticed someone come up the fire escape behind him, but he didn't have time to take his eyes off Shem.

Shem shook his head, his face twisted in sadness and anger. "Don't patronize me."

Eric held up his hands. "I'm not," he yelled back. "I know what it's like to see your world spinning out of control, and whatever you do you can't—" His voice cracked as emotion welled up inside of him, a mixture of sadness, anger, fear.... He didn't have time to sort it out. He lowered his hands and clenched his fists, looking for the right words. "I lost my mother, five years ago. My dad has been struggling with encephalitis and he just died

in the tornado on Wednesday. To top it off, I think I just lost my best friend in the world, for life. So I know!”

His face was wet with tears, but he went on. “And it’s all confusing. Where do I go from here? What can I do? I don’t know.” He shook his head. “I don’t know. It’s like the tornado is still spinning around me.” He knew he was getting off track, but if he could just keep talking, keep Shem distracted. “Whatever you do,” he said again. A picture of his dad flashed in his mind again, lying dead in the tree just after the tornado. “Believe me, I know.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Shem said.

“The world can be an ugly place,” Eric said, continuing on. “And it can seem like it is all stacked up against you, that the only way out is to... to...” He left the thought hanging in the air, not wanting to say it out loud.

“They’ll never learn,” Shem said, sounding a bit less intense now. “If something doesn’t wake them up, nothing will ever change. It will just get worse. It always gets worse.”

“This isn’t the way.”

Shem looked down at his hand holding the trigger, and it looked as if there might be a chance. He might choose not to let go. But Shem shook his head. “It doesn’t matter anymore,” he said. “It’s all over.”

At that moment Heaven ran in from behind him and dove at Shem, grabbing on to his hand just before he could release the button. The momentum carried them over the balcony ledge, but Heaven held on as they fell. They fell hard onto the concrete below, Shem breaking her fall.

When Eric made it back down the fire escape and over to Heaven and Shem, she still hadn’t moved, frozen in shock and fear. She stared into Shem’s now lifeless eyes, continuing to hold onto his hand, the fear of what could happen, what almost happened, etched into her face. A police siren sounded in the distance; help would

have been too late. Eric took her hand and carefully slid the lid back in place over the trigger. "It's okay," he said then, helping her release her hand from the trigger. He held his thumb over the lid for a moment more, making sure it wouldn't release. "It's okay."

He helped her get to her feet and wrapped her in a big hug. She held on so tight. "You're all right," he said, letting her sob into his shoulder. "We're all right." He held her tight as she shivered from the fear and excitement. "Everything is going to be okay."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

What They Do Then

“We’ll need to get statements from both of you.” Eric looked up at Sheriff Joshua. After Heaven’s daring leap, he had checked Shem for a pulse and found nothing. The several story fall, and no doubt a hard crack of his head on the concrete, had killed the man. So he and Heaven left Shem where he was and waited on the steps for the police. No one else had come by before Joshua; the doors at the far end of the building, by the hippodrome, was the main entrance.

Before long there was a crowd of people and flashing red and blue lights. The police took care of crowd control, surrounding the area with classic yellow police tape. Joshua instructed the other officers not to touch Shem until a State team with bomb experts could come to help. They had found a blanket for Eric and Heaven. Eric held his arm around her. “You did a good thing today,” Joshua said with his hand on Heaven’s shoulder. “Both of you did. I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

They nodded and the Sheriff walked off to handle other matters. “What happens now?” Heaven wondered.

“Everything goes back to normal?” Eric suggested. “No more town disappearing, or exploding.”

“And what is normal?” she said, putting her face in her hands. “Especially in this town.”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do, with my house destroyed and my dad gone. It’s a different world now.”

Heaven pulled her head up and looked into the distance at nothing in particular. “I think I’m going to

leave,” she said. Somehow Eric had known this was coming, though he hadn’t consciously faced it. At first he felt hurt, but he wasn’t sad, he realized. Heaven looked to him. “This thing with us,” she said. “It was nice, for a while, but we both know it wasn’t meant to last. I’m not the one for you.”

Eric nodded. “Where would you go?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “To the Black Hills still, I think, and from there, who knows? I just... I can’t settle down yet. There’s so much out there for me to see and do. I can’t stay here in Mapiya.”

“I understand,” he said with a smile. “I suppose it was a little awkward, us dating. It helped, with the disaster and my dad, to forget things for a while.”

“I just, I didn’t want to hurt you.”

“I meant what I said, though.” He looked in her eyes to emphasize his statement. “I will be here for you, if you ever need me. You can count on me as a friend.”

“Thanks,” she said, returning his smile.

“But you can’t leave.” He let the thought hang in the air for a moment, as if he would stop her, then he grinned. “Your bike will barely make it past the Twin Cities. There’s no more gas; you have no way to refuel.”

Heaven dropped her face back in her hands. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Take my bike,” he suggested, pulling out his key chain.

Her head snapped back up. “Are you sure?”

“It’s the least I could do. I lost my dad and my home this week, and maybe my best friend, but you... you lost so much more, I can’t even imagine.” He shrugged and grinned again. “Besides, this way I get to keep your motorcycle. That thing is an antique.”

They laughed together and Heaven finally nodded. “Okay, it’s a deal.” Then, more quietly, “thanks.”

“You’re always welcome back here, you know,” he said.

She nodded. "I know."

Sheriff Kevin Hunter sat in a hospital bed, a cold compress strapped to his head. The doctor treated his burns, had his leg that hurt scheduled for exams — they had something new, called an RIT scan — and wanted to keep him overnight for observation with his concussion. The booby trap bomb blast really messed him up, but it was worth it if they stopped the bomber. Since they were still here, no explosion, he assumed they must have.

The hospitals of the future didn't seem too terribly different than the hospitals of 2012. Each of the doors here now slid into the wall. The bed and sheets were the same, or similar. He checked the tags; there was a new kind of plastic, presumably not made from oil, in the material. They felt softer.

He lay back against the upraised bed. He wanted to turn the TV on, but the controls were just out of reach and they had taken his holophone off his hand. They still had a little red button to call the nurse, but he felt silly pressing it to just watch TV, so he just sat there.

The door to his room slid open. "So, are you getting along well in here?" Sheriff Joshua Hunter, his great grandson, stepped into the room.

"Fine enough, I guess," Kevin said. "For a man who had just been blasted by a bomb."

"Concussion grenade, actually," Joshua said. "A small one. At least it wasn't the nuclear warhead that blew up in your face, right?" There was a hint of a smile, but it didn't take and he returned to a flat, expressionless face. "Listen, I think we started off on the wrong foot. I think I just didn't know how to react to the whole situation. You know, my great grandfather, come back from the past to take over as Sheriff again. So I lashed

out.”

“Well, maybe I shouldn’t have been as forceful, too. It’s hard coming to grips with suddenly being 90 years in the future. And I’m sorry about breaking into the library.”

“That was you?” Joshua said, eyes widening.

Kevin nodded and took the cold compress off his head, setting it down on the table next to him. “Yeah,” he said, and explained how he, Eric, and Heaven had all gone there together, to find out where the bomb was supposed to go off in 2012. “The internet was locked down and the library was the only place where we knew where the information was. It was urgent, so we broke in.”

“Do you expect me to let you off easily?” Joshua asked.

“I was hoping the fact that we stopped a nuclear warhead from taking a chunk out of Minnesota would factor into my favor a bit.”

Joshua grinned and put a hand on Kevin’s shoulder. “Don’t worry about it. The kids already told me about it when they gave their statements. You guys did very good. I have something for you.” Kevin wrinkled his brow and Joshua pulled out a badge. “A job, if you’ll have it. I know for a Sheriff the rank of Deputy might be a bit of a slap in the face, but we’ve all got to start somewhere and, well, that’s all I have at the moment. It would be nice to work with you, though, get to know you a bit here, in our home town.”

Kevin smiled and took the badge from Joshua. “Deputy, huh?” He calculated in his head for a moment. He figured he’d go through the ranks in no time and have Joshua’s job in under five years. He chuckled. Well, maybe not. “What’s going to happen to South Mapiya?”

“There has been some word on that, actually. The government is stepping in. The state of Minnesota is making it into a tourist attraction.”

Kevin’s eyes went wide. “What for?”

“Think about it. A city preserved exactly as it was 87 years ago?” He held up his hands to stave off objection. “The citizens will be taken care of. They’ll be finding good homes for them. Effort will be put forward to find them jobs and re-integrate them into society. Some may even be able to stay in South Mapiya and help maintain it.”

“Well, it’s better than some alternatives,” Kevin figured.

Joshua held out his hand and Kevin shook it. “Welcome to the force.”

By the time Eric remembered to call Chevelle, just when the excitement of Heaven’s rooftop jump was fading, she was on the freeway halfway into St. Paul. *She listened to me*, he thought with a smile. He told her the crisis was averted; they could turn back and sleep in their own beds tonight. When she pressed for more information he assured her that he was okay and he would explain it all when they were back and the police let him go.

Joshua took their statements himself, then left. He had told them about finding Kevin back at Sweeny’s house and that he was going to check on him at the hospital. The state bomb squad had arrived so there was nothing more they needed him here for.

Eric watched Heaven drive away on his bike. He chuckled silently to himself again, how they still called it a bike when it had no wheels. After Heaven disappeared down the freeway he silently wished her well. He also transferred a few thousand dollars into the line of credit Heaven had received when Chevelle’s mom fitted her for a holophone the other day.

Chevelle and her parents were waiting up for him when he finally arrived home. They weren’t going to let

him do anything until he explained everything. So he sat down and told them how he and Motega had figured out what it meant that South Mapiya had looked like ground zero for the last 87 years, and the Sheriff from the past had figured out that the nuclear warhead had been stolen from the 2012 armory.

He tried rushing through the part where they broke into the library and evaded the police, but Chevelle's dad made him slow down and tell it all. They nodded along when he told them about the town disappearing again; they had seen some evidence of that themselves. Chevelle looked like she was about to rattle him when she told him about trying to talk the bomber down on the roof of the school, and having failed that how Heaven rushed him.

When he was finished, Chevelle's parents left them alone and encouraged them to get to bed; they were going to do the same. So it was just him and Chevelle sitting alone together on the living room sofa.

"Listen," he said, avoiding her eyes and looking at her fingers. "I have to apologize—"

"No, Eric," she said, cutting him off. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that to you like I did, telling you I liked you. It wasn't fair to you, especially when you have a girlfriend."

Eric's mouth went flat. "So that's it, huh? Just like that, you don't like me anymore? You know, I mean, like me like that." It felt awkward, dancing around the word, neither one of them wanting to say, *love*, especially if the other person didn't feel the same.

"What do you want me to say?" she said, eyes down, and for a moment Eric's heart sunk, thinking it was true. They were back to the torture of being 'just friends'. But then— "Of course I still like you, Eric. But you were right, back at the hospital. I haven't treated you right."

Eric smiled, and before she could say another word he wrapped her in a great hug. "I love you," he whispered in her ear, and the nervous feeling in his chest came back as

he wondered whether he was pressing too much, until she echoed the words in his ear. Still wrapped up in the hug of a lifetime, each of them cried a little.

They let go. "But friends first," Chevelle said, tears welled up in her eyes. "That's so important to me. I thought I lost you."

And he had thought the same, the fear now washed away. He smiled. "Friends always."

"You failed me."

Rohon's words echoed in Dravin's ears. When Dravin dove away from the grenade, he narrowly avoided the brunt of the explosion. The two IIA agents assigned to watch over him immediately got on a plane with him back to Washington. His face didn't even yet feel cooled from the burns. They marched him up to the Director of the IIA, Rohon Church, and he asked for a moment alone with Dravin.

"He brought a grenade, sir," Dravin explained. "He had stolen a key card and knew his way right to the device. Security wasn't tight enough there."

"So the whole thing is destroyed?" Rohon sat back in his comfortable leather patio chair, making Dravin stand.

"The device is gone," Dravin said. "Moteaga and Alina are dead. But we have his notes. The woman I brought, Cecilia, was the lab tech for their experiment. And you have me." Dravin paused. Rohon didn't look up from his scotch. "We can rebuild this thing." *We can have the power.*

Rohon nodded. "And we will."